As Sales Lag, Stores Shuffle the Calendar

By STEPHANIE CLIFFORD

When is the final Saturday before Christmas? Don’t bother consulting a calendar if you’re shopping at Macy’s, Sears or J. C. Penney.

They’ve moved it forward a week.

A sharp drop in shopping since Thanksgiving weekend has prompted worried retailers to slash prices, extend specials, stay open later — and rewrite the calendar.

Usually one of the most heavily discounted shopping days of the year, the Saturday before Christmas — it falls on Dec. 24 this year — is too crucial to retailers’ holiday sales to be left in the hands of procrastinating Christmas Eve shoppers. Instead, many of the promotions pegged to “Super Saturday,” as the day is known in the retail industry, are now scheduled for this Saturday — a full eight days before Christmas.

“If you wait until the 24th, you have no time to recover,” said Michael McNamara, vice president of research and analysis for MasterCard Advisors SpendingPulse, which tracks consumer spending.

But not all stores are making the switch. And that is creating a good amount of confusion in the retail world.

“It’s chaotic,” said Dan Biederman, president of the 34th Street Partnership, an organization in Midtown Manhattan that will help market the Saturday promotions for retailers. “The world seems to be split.”

Mr. Biederman’s organization was set to do its marketing on Dec. 24, including putting up an oversize digital sign that counts the number of shopping bags people in the area carry on the all-important Saturday. Then the group learned that about half of the national chains represented on 34th Street, like Macy’s, J. C. Penney and Aéropostale, would hold their big sales this Saturday, while the other half, including Skechers, Victoria’s Secret and Mango, were leaning toward Dec. 24, said Tricia Lewis, director of digital media for the partnership.

Even within companies, there is discord: Gap Inc. said its Old Navy and Gap stores would do their big promotions this weekend, with its Banana Republic division focusing on the 24th. “It obviously confuses a bag count,” Mr. Biederman said.

Martine Reardon, executive vice president of marketing at Macy’s, said the 17th “just happens to fall on the calendar very nicely.” Like other retailers, Macy’s will be open on the 24th, but its major promotional push will occur a week earlier.

The dueling Saturdays might seem like a lot of consternation about nothing to consumers weary of faux shopping events: Black Friday, Sofa Sunday, Cyber Monday, Red Tuesday, Mobile Sunday, Green Monday and Free Shipping Day (Friday this year, for those keeping track).

But the worries are real for retailers who are seeing the season slip away from them, and the potential effects on the economy are considerable.
After a Thanksgiving weekend that set records in terms of sales, in-store shopping has dropped significantly in the two weeks that followed. The cumulative drop from Thanksgiving-week sales in those weeks, of 2.4 percent, was the biggest since 2000, according to the International Council of Shopping Centers. The Commerce Department said this week that retail sales in November, including online sales, came in lower than analysts had expected, rising just 0.2 percent to $399.3 billion, the smallest increase in five months.

“That suggests we may not get quite as much momentum in the holiday-sales season as people were expecting,” said Peter Buchanan, an economist at CIBC World Markets. Given that consumer spending makes up the majority of the gross domestic product, he said, “the chances of having a really decent recovery are rather limited if consumers continue to hold back.” Almost 40 percent of Americans said they were done with their holiday shopping as of last week, according to a survey from America’s Research Group and UBS, suggesting there may not be too much spending left to do. Still, the National Retail Federation, the main retail industry group, remains optimistic, and on Thursday raised its holiday forecast to 3.8 percent growth for the season, up from 2.8.

“With a stronger emphasis on Black Friday, the more the industry pushes, it works, but the price of that is this lull,” said Michael P. Niemira, chief economist for the International Council of Shopping Centers.

That lull makes the final days before Christmas especially important this year. Stores including Sears and Target are staying open until midnight in some markets in the run-up to Christmas. Toys “R” Us is staying open for 112 consecutive hours in the days leading up to Christmas, and Macy’s will keep more than a dozen stores open for 83 hours straight.

And all Saturdays are important. “December Saturdays are the highest volume days of the year,” Mr. McNamara said. But none more so than the last Saturday before Christmas — or, this year, the competing last Saturdays — which is sometimes bigger in overall revenue than the Friday after Thanksgiving. Retailers tend to offer deep, cross-category discounts on that day, rather than the limited-quantity specials they offer after Thanksgiving.

J. C. Penney, for instance, plans to offer 60 percent off toys, women’s and men’s coats and luggage sets, and 65 percent off fine jewelry. Sears will give away diamond earrings with $199 jewelry purchases, along with offering 75 percent off most of its jewelry and 65 percent off sweaters. Adding to the confusion, Wal-Mart, which will run a Dec. 17 sale with its lowest prices of the season on items like toys and bikes, says it will not call the day “Super Saturday” — it used that term back in November.

The goal of the Saturday discounts is to get as much Christmas merchandise as possible out the door. And by moving the promotions back a week, retailers will have more time to sell languishing inventory when there is still some demand for it. “The discounts will be deeper, because as they draw nearer to the end of the season, there is merchandise they have to move,” said Kathy Grannis, a spokeswoman for the National Retail Federation.

As for the 34th Street Partnership, it will be out in full force this Saturday — in addition to the digital sign, it will blog about deals and coordinate security and sanitation crews. Mr. Biederman said his staff would also provide the security and cleaning help on Dec. 24, but it was still puzzling over whether its shopping bag count could be compared to Super Saturday of last year.

“What’s the real day?” he asked.