

# Cars, gasoline lead the charge as retail sales bounce back

COMBINED NEWS SERVICES

Retail sales posted a surprising rebound in January after a dismal December, although much of the strength reflected rising gasoline prices. Economists saw the increase as a temporary blip rather than a sustained recovery.

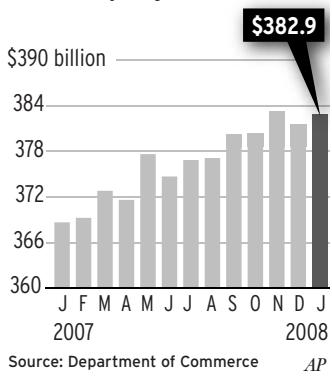
The Commerce Department reported Wednesday that retail sales rose by 0.3 percent last month after having fallen by 0.4 percent in December as retailers suffered through their worst Christmas shopping season in five years. The increase was led by higher demand for new cars and a big jump in sales at gasoline service stations that primarily reflected rising pump prices.

On Wall Street, the better-than-expected reading on retail sales helped lift spirits by easing concerns about the severity of the economic slowdown. The Dow Jones industrial average rose 178.83 points.

But the positive retail number did little to change the view of economists who are forecasting the economy could fall into a recession in the first half of this year. They said the slump should be shorter and milder given that Congress

## Retail sales

Total monthly retail sales, seasonally adjusted



Source: Department of Commerce AP

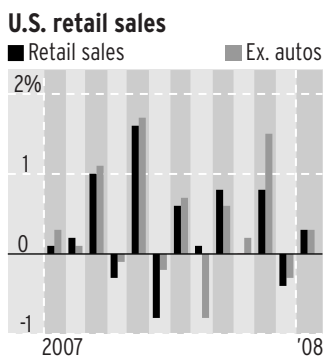
quickly passed and President Bush signed on Wednesday a \$168 billion stimulus package designed to jump-start growth by showering consumers with rebate checks starting in May.

The January gain in retail sales came as a surprise after reports from the nation's big retailers that January had been a disappointing month. Wal-Mart had said strapped consumers were using their holiday gift cards to purchase basic items such as diapers and laundry detergent rather than iPods and the latest DVDs.

Economists had predicted a 0.3 percent decline in January sales. They noted that without the big jump in gasoline, sales

## Retail Rebounds

Retail sales in the U.S. unexpectedly rose in January as Americans spent more on cars, clothes and gasoline.



Source: U.S. Census Bureau Bloomberg

would have risen by a much smaller 0.1 percent. They pointed to a number of areas connected to the troubled housing industry where sales took a tumble, including declines at furniture, hardware and appliance stores.

Given all the troubles facing the economy from a prolonged slump in housing to rising food and energy costs, job losses and turbulent financial markets, analysts said it was not surprising to see lackluster retail sales. Consumer spending is closely watched because it accounts for two-thirds of economic activity.

# EARNINGS SNAPSHOTS

## DirecTV Group

The satellite TV operator said higher interest payments on its debt sent fourth-quarter earnings down 2 percent.

The company earned \$348 million in the quarter compared with \$356 million a year ago. Per-share income rose to 30 cents from 29 cents because the company had more shares outstanding in the latest period. Revenue rose 17 percent to \$4.88 billion, exceeding Wall Street's estimate.

## Coca-Cola Co.

The world's biggest beverage maker said fourth-quarter profit rose 79 percent on a double-digit increase in sales as it benefited from growth in key soft-drink brands and in its water, sports drink and orange juice categories.

The company said it earned \$1.21 billion, or 52 cents a share, compared to a profit of \$678 million, or 29 cents a share, a year earlier, when the company took a big impairment charge at its largest bottler. Revenue in the quarter rose 24 percent to \$7.33 billion, compared to \$5.93 billion recorded a year earlier.



Associated Press file photo

Coca-Cola bottles are displayed as a customer shops at Andronico's Market in San Francisco. The world's biggest beverage maker said Wednesday its fourth-quarter profits rose 79 percent.

## Vonage Holdings

The company that provides phone service over broadband lines reported a narrowed fourth-quarter loss as it scaled back on marketing and cut other costs.

Vonage's fourth-quarter loss totaled \$11.1 million, or 7 cents per share. In last year's fourth quarter, the company lost \$117.1 million, or 76 cents per share. Revenue rose 19 percent to \$215.9 million, which was short of analyst estimates.

## Deere & Co.

The world's largest manufacturer of agricultural machinery said its first-quarter profit rose 55 percent, beating Wall Street's expectations as

lofty crop prices stoked global demand for its equipment.

The company said profit rose to \$369.1 million, or 83 cents per share, compared with \$238.7 million, or 52 cents per share, during the same period the previous year. Revenue period grew 18 percent to \$5.2 billion from \$4.43 billion last year.

## Waste Management

The nation's largest garbage hauler said its fourth-quarter profit rose 26 percent.

The company said earnings rose to \$309 million, or 61 cents per share, versus \$246 million, or 46 cents per share, a year earlier. Revenue increased to \$3.36 billion from \$3.28 billion.

## Dating safety

# To background check, or not, is online love's latest question

True.com advocates criminal checks, but other say it's not enough

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK — With Valentine's Day here, all is not lovey-dovey in the high-stakes online dating industry.

The contentious issue of the moment — pitting one of the three biggest companies, True.com, against its major rivals — is whether online dating services can enhance their clients' safety by conducting criminal background screenings of would-be daters.

Last month, New Jersey

became the first state to enact a law requiring the sites to disclose whether they perform background checks. True.com — the only large online dating service that already does such screenings — was elated by its successful lobbying and hopes other states will follow suit.

"The online dating industry tends to get a real bad rap, because of criminal activity," said True.com's founder, Herb Vest. "If we were to clean up, there's hordes of off-line singles who'd come online to find their soul mate."

The pitch appeals to women such as Jayne Hitchcock of York, Maine, who was victimized by three years of online



True.com CEO Herb Vest, left, says, "If [online dating services] were to clean up, there's hordes of off-line singles who'd come online to find their soul mate."

DONNA McWILLIAM The Associated Press

harassment and cyberstalking in late '90s after someone assumed her identity and sent sexually explicit messages. When Hitchcock later decided to try online dating, she turned

to True.com.

"There are people out there looking for a site where they'd feel a little bit safer," said Hitchcock, who recently met her fiance on True.com.

However, Vest's many critics in the industry say he is acting out of self-interest. They contend that True.com's screening method — running names through state databases of criminal records — is incomplete and too easily thwarted, potentially creating a false sense of security for customers.

"It's so superficial that it's worthless," said Braden Cox, policy counsel with NetChoice, a coalition of e-commerce companies that includes Yahoo, AOL and other major players in online dating.

Match.com, one of largest dating services, said it had been assessing online

background checks for six years and concluded they offered no extra protection.

There are no authoritative national statistics on serious crimes arising from online dating, but such cases periodically make headlines. A Philadelphia man, Jeffrey Marsalis, was accused of raping several women he met through Match.com, and was sentenced in October to at least 10 years in prison.

An online dater in New York City, actor-musician Franca Vercelloni, said background screenings "couldn't hurt matters" but should not be a reason for dropping one's guard.

## Office dating isn't the no-no it once was

> Continued from C1

men are more apt to play cupid than women aren't clear, the tendency for matchmaking at work is inevitable, say some experts.

"We spend so much time at work that it's only natural that relationships will start to develop," said Tom Musbach, managing editor of Yahoo! HotJobs (www.hotjobs.yahoo.com). "Thirty-eight percent of people met their significant other at work, and 55 percent have an office romance going on."

McCarthy speculates that the high numbers are because of changing fraternization policies at companies, but both career experts have some

## Tips for a successful office relationship

- > **Keep it professional.** You don't want to bring your relationship into the workplace. If you're fighting, leave it outside of the office.
- > **Resist the urge to talk at the office.** Gossip is big in offices — keep that at bay.
- > **Don't seek out joint projects or travel opportunities.** It can look like misuse of company funds.
- > **Talk about the "what ifs."** What if you break up? Be prepared to handle consequences.
- > **Remember other relationships in the office.** You don't want to neglect other co-workers or burn bridges.
- > **Avoid relationships between senior and lower-level employees.** It's a danger to those involved and it ruins credibility.
- > **Find out about your employer's policy** on dating in the office.

cautionary advice for those who choose to engage in an workplace relationship.

"Sometimes it's a good idea to wait three to six months to see if the relationship goes anywhere, but you don't want your boss to hear about it

through the grapevine," said Musbach, who advises that couples disclose relationships to supervisors immediately, but not to co-workers.

That's what Claudia and Travis Gneiting did. The pair met while working at a

financial institution in Salt Lake, and they waited about six months to tell co-workers about their relationship — until the day before their wedding.

"I try to keep a professional representation of myself in the workplace. Perception is very important," Claudia Gneiting said.

Although she is pleased with her experience, she said there are many difficulties in having a relationship with a coworker. After they got married, Travis went to work for another company. "I think it had negative impacts on my work," she said. "It's just kind of weird to have a meeting, and your husband is there."

A change of atmosphere also worked for Terry and Danielle Holton, who met six years ago while working for ARUP Blood Services of Salt Lake City. The two were arch-rivals in the workplace but found that they were romantically compatible outside of work.

"Truth be told, I couldn't stand her when she worked

## Critic advises comparison shopping

> Continued from C1

individual drugs. But their officials insist that the plan provides real savings on a wide variety of drugs.

Included on the list are popular drugs such as Warfarin, a

generic form of the blood clot-prevention medicine Coumadin, and Albuterol, used by people with asthma.

"This is not an obscure list [of drugs]," said Smith's spokeswoman Marsha Gilford. "These are widely prescribed generics. And this is a significant, across-the-board savings."

Gilford said more than half of the company's customers are taking one or more drugs on the \$4 list.

There are plenty of critics of \$4 drug plans, which are

touted for their benefits to people with health insurance coverage and who have to pay cash for their drugs.

Independent pharmacists such as Kort Delost, owner of Medicine Shoppe pharmacy in Bountiful, said customers shouldn't automatically assume the program offers savings on prescriptions they take.

For example, Delost said he charges \$10 for a 100-day supply 10mg Amitriptyline, a generic form of the antidepressant Elavil.

Under the Smith's plan,

consumers would pay more at a Smith's pharmacy to get less of the drug: \$12 for a 90-day supply.

It is a different matter for Levothyroxine, a thyroid medicine. A 30-day supply for 200 mcg Levothyroxine would cost \$12.95 at Delost's pharmacy, \$4 at Smith's.

But Delost warns that to make up the losses on some drugs, Smith's, Wal-Mart and Target could charge higher prices on some other generics not on the \$4 list or for brand-name drugs.

## Valentine's Day office etiquette

- > **Give cards to everyone in the office.** If you buy the inexpensive kind schoolchildren exchange, your coworkers will enjoy it and won't feel bad if they didn't bring you one.
- > **If you decide to exchange cards or gifts** with only some people at work, be discrete.
- > **A card for your boss is welcome,** but avoid any expensive gifts. Ask colleagues to chip in on a group present, such as candy or a potted plant.
- > **Be sensitive to your co-workers.** You might be sharing the cubicle with a person who has never received anything on Valentine's Day. Many people dread this day.

Source: Colleen A. Rickenbacher, author of *Be on Your Best Business Behavior*

there," said Terry Holton, whose wife has moved on to another job. "It was really just a surprise, because out of work she was great."

It's a good idea to spend a lot of time together, said Yahoo's Musbach, just not at work. "You might find that someone acts differently outside of work."

Although the Don'ts list is much longer on the Dos and Don'ts of office dating, it

shouldn't deter you from making your own matches at work.

"If you have a co-worker who's a good friend and know someone who's perfect [for him or her], you can make an impact in their lives. There's the downside of the love connections that don't work out, but it's up to you to take the chance," SnagAJob.com's McCarthy said.

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"They've got to make money somewhere," Delost said. If they are taking a loss on some generics, they're going to have to charge more for brand names and other generics not on the list. Or they'll have to make it up in another area of the store."

But such programs have their fans — the most ardent of whom are people who don't have health insurance coverage and are paying more for the same drugs that now will cost \$4.

Brenda O'Neal, who fills

her prescriptions at a Smith's location in Midvale, said some of the drugs she and her husband take aren't on the \$4 list. But some, such as those for asthma and heart problems are, which should save her more than \$200 a month in prescription costs.

O'Neal is on medical leave from work, so the couple cannot afford health insurance coverage at the moment.

"This is awesome," she said. "This means we can buy more food every month."

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