

Breaking out the Santas and snow globes

Stuart Elliott

They're off! Although trick-or-treaters are still days away from ringing doorbells, the nation's retailers are already starting their mad dash toward the Christmas finish line.



Queen Latifah in a holiday commercial for Macy's, with a girl portraying Virginia, author of that famous letter to Santa. The ad campaign is to begin on Nov. 6 with a Web site and the TV spots.

The efforts to stimulate holiday feelings ahead of schedule are, of course, a result of the dire economy, as retailers remain anxious about the parsimonious mood among shoppers. The National Retail Federation predicts that Christmas sales will decline 1 percent from Christmas 2008 — not as bad as last year, when retail holiday revenue fell 3.4 percent from 2007, but still not in positive territory.

So stores are already stocking shelves with Christmas gifts, dusting off the decorations and outlining marketing plans. And like last year, when the financial crisis brought forth a flood of retail campaigns with retro-traditional themes, ads for Christmas 2009 will be chockablock with Santas, reindeer, candy canes, family gatherings and snow globes.

The idea is that those verities resonate more in hard times among a worried public. For instance, the Macy's unit of Macy's Inc. will urge consumers to "Believe" with an emotional campaign that reprises elements from Christmas 2008 like donations to the Make-A-Wish Foundation and mailboxes in stores where letters to Santa can be deposited.

New aspects include sending the Macy's Santa on a tour of 25 cities in 25 days and an animated special on CBS, sponsored by Macy's, to be broadcast on Dec. 11, which the retailer is calling "an honorary National Believe Day."

A rival of Macy's, the J. C. Penney Company, is preparing a campaign that carries a theme with a timeless tack: "Joy of giving." The theme, returning from last year, will be front and center in advertising for the metropolitan New York market, tailored to promote the new Penney store at the Manhattan Mall in Midtown.

The Gotham-centric Penney ads, scheduled to begin on Monday, will remind potential customers concerned about the economy that holiday shopping can be brought in on a budget.

"Merry Christmas to all, and to all a great price," one ad proclaims. "Give like Santa, save like Scrooge," another says. "Give N.Y.C. style at J.C.P. prices," a third ad asserts.

Although "we're still waiting to see" how enthusiastically consumers will spend for Christmas, Mike Boylson, executive vice president and chief marketing officer at Penney, said in an interview at the Manhattan store, "we're going to fight for share of market."

For example, the Penney campaign for metropolitan New York will be "very aggressive" in media like outdoor advertising, he added. The focus on value is motivated by research that indicates shoppers intend to buy "more practical gifts, more stocking stuffers, more things that

are affordable," Mr. Boylson said, and by indications "they're not going to go back to the way it was before" the bubble burst in fall 2008.

"Even if you have money," he added, "it's no longer cool to show off."

The Penney holiday ads — created internally and by Saatchi & Saatchi in New York, part of the Publicis Groupe — "will have a very upbeat tone," Mr. Boylson said, to reflect that "Christmas is even more important" in times like these.

Macy's will also take that approach, said Martine Reardon, executive vice president for marketing at Macy's, despite being unable to forecast "what the mood is going to be like" among shoppers.

"Believing in a very special time of year and a person who personifies the wishes people make," Ms. Reardon said, referring to Santa Claus, "goes back to the DNA of our brand because our brand is embedded in tradition."

As it was last year, the "Believe" campaign will be centered on the letter written by Virginia O'Hanlon to The New York Sun in 1897 and the reply by an editor, Francis Pharcellus Church, that has become known by a line he wrote: "Yes, Virginia, there is a Santa Claus."

The 2009 campaign is to begin on Nov. 6 with a section of the Macy's Web site and a television commercial featuring a contemporary version of Virginia getting a hand in mailing her letter to Santa from a Macy's spokeswoman, Queen Latifah.

Macy's will again donate a dollar to the Make-A-Wish Foundation for each Virginia-esque letter to Santa deposited in the mailboxes in its stores (up to \$1 million). The donation last year totaled \$1 million, Ms. Reardon said.

The animated TV special, titled "Yes, Virginia," is being produced by Macy's and its creative agency, JWT New York — part of the JWT unit of WPP — along with the Ebeling Group and MEC Entertainment, part of another WPP agency, Mediaedge:cia.

"The country does need to believe again," said Matt MacDonald, a creative director at JWT New York who worked on the campaign with Wayne Best, an executive creative director. "We need faith in ourselves."

"We wanted to tell richer, deeper stories this year about what it means to believe in something," Mr. MacDonald said, "something you can't prove" — another reference to Santa Claus.

Speaking of whom, Ms. Reardon says the Santa tour is planned to begin on Nov. 28 in South Portland, Me., and conclude on Dec. 22 in Metairie, La. Stops will include Macy's stores in Arizona, California, Florida, Idaho, Ohio, Tennessee and Virginia.

(Yes, Santa Claus, there is a Virginia. And he is to visit West Virginia, too.)

"We give him dinner" after the Thanksgiving Day Parade, Ms. Reardon said of the Macy's Santa, "and then he gets started."

New York Times, New York, Oct. 26th 2009, Media & Advertising, online.