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## Winter Wonderland

By Robin Goldwyn Blumenthal

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WEATHER THIS YEAR COULD HELP PUT the "black" into Black Friday, the unofficial start of the holiday shopping season that comes at the end of this week.

Last year's colder-than-average temperatures and a snowstorm in the Northeast and Midwest the weekend before Christmas really dampened already-soggy sales. This year some predictions are calling for warmer to more normal temperatures in the weeks leading up to the holiday. Last year, retail sales fell 3.4% from 2007 in the holiday season, the worst showing in more than a decade.

This November was warmer than usual, following one of the coldest Octobers on record, which could hurt seasonal purchases and thus retail sales for November when they are reported next month.

But as December arrives, "the winds of change will begin to kick in again," and key Northeast markets

will turn colder, though they'll be "much warmer" than last year, says Paul Walsh, senior vice president of Atmospheric and Environmental Research, a weather consultant based in Lexington, Mass.

Moreover, this year Walsh is forecasting a lower probability of bad snowstorms during the key shopping period, which should help store traffic, especially at mass merchants, malls, electronics superstores and toy retailers. Sales comparisons to last December, which clocked the fourth wettest December in more than 100 years of record-keeping, should be much easier.

But the forecast isn't great for all retailers, Walsh says. Online and apparel-related stores could feel a chill.

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