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Nov. 11, 2012

Attention shoppers: There are still 43 days until Christmas, but retailers already are on the move.

All Things Grand owner Charlie Rogers decided to get ahead of the holiday sales rush by holding an open house last weekend to attract new customers. All Things Grand is a home decor and accessories store with locations inside the Gryphon Building on Joplin's Main Street and on the Carthage square.

Rogers said this is the time of year when many businesses kick into high gear, and retailers work to accommodate not only their loyal customer base but also to lure new shoppers.

Debbie Wilson is one of those returning shoppers Rogers hoped to bring into the store with the open house. Wilson said she has shopped at All Things Grand since the opening of the store's first location in Carthage.

"Joplin needs a store like this, and that is why we come in here," Wilson said. "The store's open house is just another reason for us to come here and to see what is new for the season. This isn't a mass-produced type of store; everything here is unique. This is where someone can find something truly one of a kind as a perfect gift."

Rogers said that during the holiday shopping season, the store expands its hours and accessibility for customers, and the open house is a way to get the word out about those changes.

Last week, Wal-Mart Stores Inc., the world's largest retailer, announced that it will

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that matter to its customers, he said.

The stepped-up strategy comes as Wal-Mart, based in Bentonville, Ark., is counting on keeping its momentum going at its U.S. stores. The momentum started building back late last year after the company struggled during a more than two-year slump.

Wal-Mart's strategy raises the competitive stakes for the holiday season, which accounts for as much as 40 percent of a retailer's annual sales.

Many retailers have increasingly expanded their hours on Black Friday to get ahead of the competition, and now the kickoff is creeping further and further into Thanksgiving Day.

Also last week, Sears said its customers can shop the store's "doorbuster" discounts online starting Nov. 18 — five days before Black Friday.

Whenever the shopping season begins, the National Retail Federation, the nation's largest retail trade group, projects that sales during the traditional holiday shopping period (defined as November and December) will rise 4.1 percent, to \$586.1 billion. That rate is higher than the 10-year average holiday sales increase of 3.5 percent, but lower than last year's growth of 5.6 percent.

Matthew Shay, the group's president and chief executive officer, said a number of variables, including the presidential election, the impending federal "fiscal cliff" and concerns relating to future economic growth could affect consumer spending.

For Ozark Hearth and Home co-owner Gary Stubblefield, this holiday season will be his first as a retailer. The store was born out of the remnants of Carver's Candles in Joplin, which was hit by the May 22, 2011, tornado.

Stubblefield wanted to revive the candle line as a private label item to be sold in

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out," Stubblefield said. "It's a community store, and our product line shows some of the most talented people in the area."

Local shoppers turned out on Saturday, Nov. 3, to support the business in addition to several other Carl Junction stores in a "shop and hop" event.

"It occurred to me Saturday when I saw people walking down Main Street with bags from local stores that there is money being made in our community and then going right back in toward local retail," Stubblefield said. "That's the main thing that people have to remember as they shop local. That money doesn't just serve the owners, but it goes back into the community as sales tax. Saturday showed what we could do if more people shopped local."

A solid holiday season would go a long way toward helping Ozark Hearth and Home gain a foothold in the area, but is not critical to its long-term success.

"We're new, and we are expecting Christmas to be good for us, but we are going to be long term in our growth," Stubblefield said. "We're new and we can only go up, and that's what this time of year can do for us. New customers will bring us new word of mouth. That's what we are counting on."

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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