

December 6, 2005 Tuesday
Home Edition

SECTION: NEWS; Pg. 1A

LENGTH: 917 words

HEADLINE: Happy holidays? The flap over Christmas;
As retailers debate what to call this season, reactions range from thrilled to indignant to 'What's the big deal?'

BYLINE: BILL HENDRICK

BODY:

It looks like Christmas, smells like Christmas and feels like Christmas, but major retailers are shying away from the word and substituting "holiday," leaving shoppers confused, angry or pleased.

This year, the long-simmering debate over the secularization of Christmas has sucked in cities, states and the U.S. Capitol, with some Christian groups shouting humbug for weeks over what they call a retreat from the very foundation of their faith.

And the whole push-pull over marketing "Christmas" versus "holidays" has retailers scratching their heads about what to do next season.

Among dozens of people responding to an informal e-mail survey by The Atlanta-Journal Constitution, most said they understood the retailers' motives and didn't object. Some were angry, and many characterized the flap as an overreaction. A few were shocked that it's become an issue at all.

Diane DeVore, 62, of Roswell, is just plain offended.

"I am tired of the subtle and not so subtle ways that are being used to

persecute Christians for their beliefs," she said.

But Rusty Tanton, 27, of Decatur, a Christian, applauds the broader approach.

"I think it's great that companies are referring to this time of year as 'holiday season' rather than 'Christmas season,'" Tanton said. "The nauseating, shopping bender that coincides with this time of year seems contrary to what Jesus was supposed to be about."

In an era of low profit margins, the business world has no choice, says R. Keith Tudor, chairman of marketing at Kennesaw State University.

"It's political correctness to the max," he said Monday. "Business can't afford to offend anyone. Now it's always 'happy holidays' in ads and signs in stores and everywhere, newspaper, radio, TV. It's OK to use red and green and play Christmas tunes without the words and sell Christmas trees and not call them that, but no one can afford a boycott."

The Rev. Jerry Falwell calls the "holiday" trend a disgrace. He says his followers have sent more than 500,000 e-mails urging them to "resist bullying tactics" of anyone being a "Grinch" and trying to "steal Christmas." Donald Wildmon, president of the American Family Association, said 2.8 million e-mails have been sent to businesses he considers "offenders."

Jim Heavener of the Georgia Retail Association, which represents 70,000 establishments, said he had heard of no complaints made by customers, though many stores "are being inclusive."

Among the retail developments:

* Lowe's home improvement chain removed banners reading "holiday trees" and replaced them with new ones reading "Christmas trees."

* Target stores are still being criticized for refusing to change their current "Gather round" theme. Last year, the chain banned Salvation Army bell-ringers, a decision that still stands, said spokeswoman Carolyn Brooker.

* Even Wal-Mart, the nation's largest retailer, has drawn the wrath of Falwell and others by making "Home for the Holidays" its seasonal

theme. The chain also told employees in general to greet customers with "happy holidays," giving them permission to use the word "Christmas" --- when they think it's appropriate.

"Our people are urged to be smart," said Wal-Mart spokesman Dan Fogelman. "If they see Christmas goods in a basket, they can say 'Merry Christmas.' If they see a menorah, they can say 'Happy Hanukkah.' Same for Kwanzaa."

Wal-Mart was the target of a short boycott a few weeks ago because visitors to its Web site could not search for Christmas items but could find Hanukkah and Kwanzaa gifts. The company quickly fixed the site to allow "Christmas" searches.

* Macy's flagship Atlanta store at Lenox Square sports a 70-foot, 14,500-pound white pine laden with 4,000 red and green lights --- but it's called Macy's Great Tree, not a Christmas tree, said spokeswoman Ellen Fructman.

"You will see the word Christmas and Merry Christmas in holiday items at every register," she said. "Nobody has complained about the name of the tree."

Locally and nationwide, governments, too, have struggled with the issue:

* In Atlanta, Gov. Sonny Perdue's office did a quick-step reversal last Friday, sending out a release saying he would light Georgia's "holiday tree" at the Governor's Mansion. But that "news" was quickly changed to say he would actually light a Christmas tree.

* At City Hall, Atlanta has a 15-foot tall "Christmas" tree, decorated with thousands of traditional lights and ornaments.

* In Boston, the parks department was excoriated for advertising the lighting of a "holiday tree." So many complaints flooded in that Mayor Thomas Menino said he considered it a Christmas tree.

* What was billed as the "Capitol Holiday Tree" in Washington was renamed last week the "Capitol Christmas Tree" at the order of House Speaker Dennis Hastert (R-Ill.)

Similar squabbles have popped up in Reno, Nev.; Prairie Village, Kan.; and numerous small towns.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State, a group of liberal activists, has pulled the White House into the debate, asking Falwell why he isn't blasting President Bush for sending out a "holiday" card. This year's version reads, "With best wishes for a holiday season of hope and happiness."

Some Atlantans claim the fuss is taking away from the real meaning of Christmas.

"I'd prefer that a corporation not cheapen my experience by profiting from the birth of my savior," said Philip Herold, an energy analyst.

Tanton, of Decatur, offers his own solution: "You want to show some Christmas spirit? Try volunteering at a homeless shelter."

GRAPHIC: Photo: BILLY SMITH II / STAFFParry Birbrager of Roswell shops at the Marietta Wal-Mart under a banner for the store's "Home for the Holidays" seasonal slogan --- and plenty of red and green signage.

Photo: BILLY SMITH II / StaffSymbols of Christmas --- both secular and religious --- line shelves at a Marietta Wal-Mart. The chain is advising its employees to default to using "holiday" in greetings.

Photo: BRADLEY C. BOWER / Bloomberg News. Last year's holiday season controversy was ignited when Target stores banned Salvation Army bell-ringers.