

Big-Ticket Gifts Carry Day for Many Moms in Mexico

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MEXICO CITY - Housewife Estela Colona, 54, said all she wanted this Mother's Day was a hug from each of her eight children. But she and her daughter-in-law, Norma Valdez, 28, spent Friday afternoon at Elektra, looking at the major appliances.

After returning home, Colona planned to drop hints to family members about what refrigerator, oven or television was on sale at the retail giant.

Mother's Day is the only day of the year when the matriarchal head of a Mexican family can count on receiving a big-ticket gift. For Christmas, moms usually receive small presents because that holiday is focused more on children.

Families revolve around mothers here, so giving her a gift is almost an obligation.

That's why weeks before Mother's Day and the actual holiday marks the year's second-busiest shopping season for Mexican retailers. Stores such as Elektra, which sells everything from blenders to sofas, do more than 20 percent of their annual sales in the weeks up to and around May 10, and most of those sales are for Mother's Day gifts.

"It's crazy in here on the 10th," said Filiberto Jimenez, director of store operations for Elektra. Many stores hire clowns and mariachis to entertain shoppers looking for gifts for mom.

While Americans celebrate Mother's Day on the second Sunday of May, Mexicans celebrate Mother's Day every May 10. When that day falls on a weekday, many Mexicans leave early from work to spend time with their mothers or buy them last-minute gifts.

"It's really a woman's holiday, but it's a pretext for men to say, 'I'm going to take off work early and go celebrate with my mother,' " joked Brenda Haro, 34.

Mexican immigrants who live in the United States usually send money home.

Haro and her mother, Berta Estrada, 72, visited an Elektra store Friday afternoon to pick up the \$500 payment wired to Estrada from her daughter who lives in Los Angeles and couldn't make it.

Wal-Mart began offering money-transfer services from all U.S. stores to all its Mexican stores last year on May 9.

"We know that our customers want to get home and want to see their mothers, but they can't," said Chet Putnam, Wal-Mart's product manager of money orders and transfers in Houston.

"The easiest way is to send mom money so she can get what she wants for Mother's Day."

This year, the company launched a publicity campaign in Houston to build demand for Mother's Day money transfers to Mexico.

"For the first time, we have direct money transfers from a city with a lot of publicity, which makes us think that we'll be very successful and there will be a lot of transfers," said Mercedes Aragones, vice president of corporate public relations for Wal-Mart de Mexico.

People who pick up money in Mexico also receive \$4 coupons off merchandise in these Wal-Mart stores in April and May, twice the usual coupon.

Those children who live in Mexico buy gifts for their mother like a new dress, a cellular telephone, a sofa or serenades by mariachis.

Retailers, airlines and restaurants advertise Mother's Day specials.

And, like in the United States, families crowd into restaurants on Mother's Day as children splurge on meals so their mothers don't have to cook.

At Elektra, the most popular gifts for mom are appliances such as washing machines and microwaves.

"The mother is in charge of the house, so a lot of gifts are for making her life easier," said Jimenez, who bought his mom a refrigerator for Mother's Day.

The second most popular purchase at Elektra between April and May is furniture for the living room or dining room.

"It's a point of pride to show your friends that your children gave you new living room furniture," Jimenez said. "And the dining room is very important because that's where mothers drink coffee and gossip with their friends."

Cristina Vazquez, 32, browsed at an Elektra store with her mother, Leonor Ramirez, 58, and whispered that she only spent about \$20 on clothes for her mother and said that Mother's Day had become extremely commercial.

"Now all the shopping centers have these signs about sales," said Vazquez, who said she hoped her husband would buy her a small gift for Mother's Day, because her two children are just toddlers and won't be shopping.

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MEXICAN MOTHER'S DAY

It always falls on May 10.

For retailers, it's the second biggest holiday of the year for sales.

Typical gifts to mothers include appliances, living room furniture and money wired from the United States.