Trump says he and Xi will sign China trade deal

REUTERS, *Palm Beach*

US President Donald Trump said on Tuesday he and Chinese President Xi Jinping will have a signing ceremony to sign the first phase of the US-China trade deal agreed to this month.

"We will be having a signing ceremony, yes," Trump told reporters. "We will ultimately, yes, when we get together. And we'll be having a quicker signing because we want to get it done. The deal is done, it's just being translated right now." United States Trade Representative Robert Lighthizer said on Dec. 13 that representatives from both countries would sign the Phase 1 trade deal agreement in the first week of January.

Speaking in Beijing on Wednesday, Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang said both countries were in close contact.

"Both sides' economic and trade teams are in close communication about detailed arrangements for the deal's signing and other follow-up work," Geng told a daily news briefing.

He did not elaborate.

Beijing has not yet confirmed specific components of the deal that was released by U.S. officials. A spokesman for China's Commerce Ministry said last week the details would be made public after the official signing.

US President Donald Trump

Gauging retail performance in an online world

REUTERS, *New York*

Marshal Cohen has religiously visited the same stores every holiday season since 1999.

But rather than snapping up bargains and favorite gifts for friends and family, the chief retail industry adviser is there to scrutinize the purchasing habits of others as online shopping upends the retail business.

Major shifts in consumer behavior and preferences have forced Cohen, who works for market research firm NPD Group, and other retail analysts to approach their jobs very differently than two decades ago.

"If you were to try and replicate research methodology, or even store observation, in today's world, you've got a problem," Cohen told Reuters. "It's no longer good enough to just look at store traffic or parking lot counts." Cohen and his peers need to get it right because their insights, reported to investors and retail clients, influence marketing, move share prices and guide investment decisions.

A record number of U.S. consumers spending more online, coupled with a condensed holiday shopping season and year-round discount wars among retailers, has forced analysts to get creative, with many shifting away from old-school tactics to measure a company's overall performance.

Instead of simply asking shoppers why they left a store empty-handed, analysts are probing the effect of online giant Amazon.com Inc, asking whether customers started Christmas shopping in July on Prime Day, now a major event in the annual retail calendar to rival Thanksgiving weekend's Black Friday.

Calculation of sales per square foot is giving way to a tally of how many Instagram-native, exclusive and private fashion brands are offered on a retailer's sales floor and website, and analysts -- rather than simply seeing how many bags a shopper leaves with -- are now counting how many younger millennial and Gen Z shoppers frequent a store and whether they make a purchase.

Craig Johnson of Consumer Growth Partners says that traditional metrics such as foot traffic, average selling price, and average basket size can often still be highly indicative of what's happening in stores.

But other retail analysts said online shopping and a slew of services like "buy online, pick up in-store" can hinder the ability to estimate a retailer's conversion rate - a traditional measure of the proportion of visitors who make purchases.

Brian Field, senior director of global retail consulting for ShopperTrak, part of retail data firm Sensormatic Solutions, said it was particularly difficult to figure out if traffic reported by retailers came from people buying items in-store or shoppers picking up online orders.

"It is kind of synonymous with the fact that retailers are reporting blended sales, which include sales online and sales in-store together," Field said.

"I think what it really boils down to is the customer journey has changed - it can start anywhere, in-store, online and end anywhere." When Marie Driscoll, Coresight Research's managing director of luxury and fashion, received an email from Saks Fifth Avenue less than a week before Black Friday alerting her that several small leather designer goods such as wallets were on sale, she took note.

The department store, she thought, might have been struggling to sell such items, which are often given as gifts. Saks, owned by Hudson's Bay Company, disagreed.

"It would be flawed to gauge category performance based on customer emails, as the majority include personalized recommendations derived from a client's shopping preferences," a company spokesperson said.

Consumer Growth Partners' Johnson keeps close tabs on how many fashion brands born on Instagram are on the sales floor when he visits Nordstrom Inc these days. That tells him whether the retailer is catering to young shoppers who search for labels on their smartphones.

A source with knowledge of the matter said Nordstrom looks for opportunities to launch new brands and expand existing partnerships with limited distribution and emerging brands to differentiate their product line.

US holiday retail sales during November and December are expected to increase by around 4 percent from 2018 to as much as $730.7 billion, according to the National Retail Federation (NRF) - a percentage rise dwarfed by the 13.6 percent annual jump Adobe Analytics has already seen in online sales between Nov. 1 and Dec. 19, to $125.6 billion. Smartphones accounted for 35.3 percent of that revenue.

REUTERS/FILE

Shoppers clutch their Nordstrom bags as pre-Thanksgiving and Christmas holiday shopping accelerates at the King of Prussia Mall in King of Prussia, Pennsylvania, US.

Nissan's No.3 to quit in blow to revival efforts

AFP, *Tokyo*

The senior executive in charge of plans to revive crisis-hit Nissan has decided to quit just weeks after taking the job, sending the carmaker's stock plunging more than 3 percent on Wednesday.

Jun Seki, 58, number three at Nissan, had informed them of his decision to leave and the company had accepted it, the automaker said in a statement.

Seki, currently executive officer and vice chief operating officer, is expected to become president of major electric components maker Nidec, according to a source close to Nissan.

Ashwani Gupta, chief operating officer and number two at Nissan, should take the responsibility for the recovery plan instead of Seki, the source told AFP.

Struggling to rebuild itself after former chief Carlos Ghosn's financial scandal, Nissan just started its new management under chief executive and president Makoto Uchida on December 1.

The company said Wednesday it "has been on a steady path to regain trust, restore the company's performance and work on its business transformation, and is already seeing progress." "Under the new top management, Nissan will continue to focus on these key areas, which remain our highest priority," it said in the statement.

But investors were not convinced.

Nissan shares plunged 3.09 percent to 633.4 yen on the Tokyo Stock Exchange.

Makoto Sengoku, market analyst at Tokai Tokyo Research Institute, said Seki's resignation came at "an impossible timing." "He was the No.3 andwas supposed to be a central figure to drive the reform. It was inevitable that such a man's departure spawned caution towards Nissan," Sengoku told AFP.

"It's an urgent task for Nissan to revamp itself but there is a doubt over how stable its leadership is," he said.

Nissan, in a three-way alliance with Mitsubishi Motors and France's Renault, last month slashed its full-year forecast for both sales and profit as it struggles with weak demand in Japan, the US and Europe, as well as fallout from the arrest of Ghosn.

Ghosn was arrested for alleged financial misconducts in November 2018 and is awaiting his trial which may start around April.

His former right-hand man, Hiroto Saikawa, resigned in September as the chief executive after an investigation prompted by the Ghosn scandal revealed that he was among Nissan executives who received excess pay by altering the terms of a share price bonus.

Jun Seki

Aussie near 4-1/2-month peak on positive risk sentiment

REUTERS, *Tokyo*

The Australian dollar held firm on Tuesday near a 4-1/2-month peak on optimism about U.S.-China trade relations, while the British pound was on the defensive as worries resurfaced about a chaotic departure from the European Union.

The Australian dollar fetched $0.69175 flat in Asia but within striking distance of its Dec. 13 peak of $0.6939, its highest level since late July. The currency has gained over 1 percent in the past four sessions.

China said on Monday it will lower tariffs on products ranging from frozen pork and avocado to some types of semiconductors next year as Beijing looks to boost imports amid a slowing economy and a trade war with the United States.

"It is possible to view this news as supporting the Aussie dollar, but considering that the Aussie has been strong since last Thursday, we should probably think that it reflects waning concerns over geopolitical risks," said Tohru Sasaki, head of research at J.P. Morgan.

Other risk sensitive currencies were also generally well-supported.

The New Zealand dollar stood at $0.6625, just below a five-month high of $0.6639 hit on Monday, while many emerging market currencies, including the Mexican peso, the Indonesian rupiah and the Russian rouble, held near multi-month peaks.

The British pound, however, slipped to three-week lows as the market braced for more uncertainty after the United Kingdom officially leaves the European Union in January.

As Prime Minister Boris Johnson has made it illegal to extend trade talks with the EU beyond the end of next year, investors fret the country could crash out without any trade deal.

Other major currencies moved little in holiday-thinned trade on Tuesday.

The euro stood almost flat at $1.1087 while the yen was little changed at 109.40 yen per dollar.

The dollar index stood at 97.689, off Monday's high of 97.820.

The dollar showed a limited response to a soft reading in new orders for key U.S.-made capital goods.

Orders for non-defense capital goods excluding aircraft, a closely watched proxy for business spending plans, edged up just 0.1 percent in November, slightly below market expectations.

U.S. capital expenditure is likely to stagnate in coming months after Boeing announced last week it would suspend production of its best-selling 737 MAX jetliner following two fatal crashes of the now-grounded aircraft.

The firm's failure to resolve its crisis led it to oust Chief Executive Dennis Muilenburg on Monday.

Australia's Cotton On probes Chinese supplier amid forced labour fears

REUTERS

Australian clothing retailer Cotton On Group on Tuesday said it is investigating a Chinese supplier after British supermarket operator Tesco PLC suspended ties with the same supplier due to fears of the use of forced prison labour.

Tesco launched an investigation into ties with Zhejiang Yunguang Printing after media reports of a customer finding a message inside a Christmas card produced by Zhejiang and bought from one of Tesco's stores saying the product had been packed by foreign prisoners.

"On becoming aware of the issue the Cotton On Group has launched an investigation into the supplier," said Greer McCracken, communications general manager at Cotton On.

Cotton On said it takes a zero-tolerance approach to any form of modern slavery, including forced labour.

Tesco said the Christmas cards were produced at a Zhejiang Yunguang Printing factory, about 100 km (60 miles) from Shanghai Qingpu prison.

Zhejiang Yunguang Printing did not respond to a Reuters request for comment. China's foreign ministry on Monday dismissed accusations of forced labour at the Shanghai prison.

ABC News on Monday reported that Zhejiang Yunguang Printing also lists U.S. firms Walt Disney Co and Big Lots Inc among its international partners.

Neither Disney nor Big Lots responded to Reuters requests for comment outside of regular business hours.

Uber co-founder Travis Kalanick severs last ties to company

AFP, *New York*

About a decade after co-founding Uber, Travis Kalanick on Tuesday severed his last ties with the ride-hailing giant, announcing he would exit the board of directors at the end of 2019.

Kalanick, who was pushed out as chief executive in 2017 amid revelations about the controversial business practices that accompanied the company's stunning rise, will resign from the board of directors effective December 31 "to focus on his new business and philanthropic endeavors," Uber said in a statement.

"Uber has been a part of my life for the past 10 years. At the close of the decade, and with the company now public, it seems like the right moment for me to focus on my current business and philanthropic pursuits," Kalanick, 43, said in a statement released by the company.

"I'm proud of all that Uber has achieved, and I will continue to cheer for its future from the sidelines." In March 2018, Kalanick announced the creation of a new investment vehicle, 10100, that will focus on both for-profit and non-profit ventures. The key areas of focus for the fund include real estate, e-commerce and innovation in China and India.

Among his most recent ventures, Kalanick has developed the so-called "ghost kitchen" company, CloudKitchens, which will rent communal kitchens near population centers that can prepare food for delivery services.

Even before Tuesday's announcement, Kalanick had taken steps to further distance himself from Uber, selling a large portion of his shares in early November.

The youthful Kalanick has been the personification of the go-go Silicon Valley disruptor associated with visionary entrepreneurship that upends traditional businesses, accompanies by unfettered growth. Kalanick and fellow Uber co-founder Garrett Camp got the idea for Uber while visiting Paris in December 2008 when they were unable to find a taxi.

UberCab launched in July 2010 in San Francisco. The company name was shortened in October to Uber.

The venture has grown rapidly since then, with operations in 700 cities in 65 countries at the time of its initial public offering in May.

Kalanick resigned from Uber in June 2017 amid heavy pressure following a series of disturbing reports about a cutthroat workplace culture, harassment, discrimination and questionable business tactics to thwart rivals.

The company appointed former Expedia chief Dara Khosrowshahi as chief executive later this year. Khosrowshahi has taken steps to clean up the company's image, including as upgrading its rider safety programs and disclosing figures on sexual assaults.

But the company also still faces plenty of challenges as critics complain of excess traffic, aggressive labor practices and other ills. A regional court in Germany last week barred Uber from offering rides through car hire firms.

Wall Street analysts have also questioned the company's long-term profit prospects.

Khosrowshahi said Tuesday that "very few entrepreneurs have built something as profound as Travis Kalanick did with Uber." Board Chairperson Ron Sugar thanked Kalanick for "his unique expertise, honed over 10 years building Uber from a scrappy startup into the global public company."

AFP/FILE

Uber Co-Founder Travis Kalanick, *left*, walks the floor during the IPO of the ride sharing company at the New York Stock Exchange.