

Retail Rebounds at Stylemax Trade Show

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October Stylemax

Photo By Courtesy Photo

CHICAGO — If the Stylemax show was any indication, retail appears to be rebounding in the Midwest.

The women's apparel trade show, which ran Oct. 23 to 26 at the city's Merchandise Mart, was one of the busiest in years, with attendance noticeably higher and some specialty store owners and brand representatives reporting stronger-than-expected sales.

“We haven't had this good of a market in seven years,” said sales rep Shane Limbacher. He estimated

his sales force met with more than 100 retailers, many of whom responded to Limbacher's new assortment of lines.

"We've shifted gears in how we do business," Limbacher said, noting he has incorporated newer, younger and, in some cases, cheaper lines into a mix that includes Three Dots, Bailey 44 and 525 America. Peddling cheap chic is working for Alyson Garland, owner of Dotdotdash, a two-year-old women's specialty boutique in St. Louis.

"We had a catchphrase: We're the cheap boutique," she said. "We ran with that. From the beginning, we looked for pieces with clean styling at a popular price. We wanted to be comfortable, casual and affordable."

When the recession hit, "We didn't have to change anything," Garland said. "It was just sort of perfect timing for us."

A private label cotton wrap top retailing for \$32 has proved so popular there's a waiting list for certain colors, and Garland has also found success offering a bangle bar where customers can choose as many as 17 different styles of bracelets for \$35.

Garland said sales are up 30 percent from last year. "We're buying more than we did last year and building on the lines we know," she said.

At the market, Garland ordered gray and black cashmere capes from Herman Waitz, a ruffled jacket from Inside Out and tunics to wear over leggings from Nally & Millie.

For spring, baby-doll, tank and peasant dresses from Zen Knits in aqua, ocean, cobalt and tie-dyed hues caught her eye, along with long cotton scoop-neck tanks with ruched sides and long-sleeve T-shirts with asymmetric draping from Lola & Sophie.

Mallory Ulaszek, owner of Cityblue Apparel & Denim, a men's and women's specialty store along

Chicago's North Wells Street, said the market "definitely seems more relaxed, but I'm not sure if it's because I'm more relaxed," noting that her business is up 25 to 35 percent from last year.

The retailer ordered lighter washes of wide-leg and flared denim from Seven For All Mankind and cotton T-shirts and fitted dresses with cap sleeves and belts in shades of gray and blush from Nation. For men, she opted for Christopher Fischer cashmere sweaters and scarves, as well as cardigans and long-sleeve T-shirts from Fluxus.

Ulaszek said her store counts Seven, Splendid and Citizens of Humanity among its best-selling lines.

The last year taught her to avoid overly trendy denim, noting that customers want a range of basic solid blue denim at starting price points of \$120 and \$150.

"In the Midwest, people want comfort, fashion and functionality," she said.

Although market organizers would not release specific attendance figures, Susan McCullough, executive vice president for apparel for Merchandise Mart Properties Inc., said "It's way over a double-digit increase.

"Finally everyone feels the worst is over," she said. "I don't think anyone's buying like they did, but they're still buying, and price matters more than it used to."

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