

Stylemax in Chicago Sees Positive Indicators

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Shopping the Stylemax show.

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CHICAGO — Signs pointed toward a turnaround at Chicago's Stylemax market, with some retailers making purchases for new locations and others boosting inventory to prerecession levels.

"I think people are feeling more confident and are more comfortable spending," said Teri Ann Zide of Teri Ann's in Marietta, Ohio. "It's 92 degrees and I'm selling winter product. People have been shopping and haven't been hesitant about spending."

"I feel we need to be ready for it," said Zide, who completed a fair amount of spring buying at Stylemax, which ran Aug. 7 to 9 at the Merchandise Mart here. "I have returned to close to previous inventory levels." Buyers and vendors said the market, which showcased holiday, resort and early spring merchandise, appeared more upbeat and busier.

"I definitely felt a confidence in buying that I haven't felt in a long time," said Amy Conrad, owner of Scout Showroom in Chicago. "I was shocked that my two highest-price-point lines sold the best."

Those lines, Eva Franco and 2love Tony Cohen, are dressier and last year buyers were more conservative, worried that their customers would not be going out as much, Conrad said. This year, however, retailers wanted to be prepared with novelty dresses for holiday and New Year's parties, she said.

Zide also noticed a difference in the market's mood. "This August market was night and day from last year," she said. "This year people were there and they were spending. The energy was different."

More buyers attended this edition of Stylemax, said Susan McCullough, executive vice president for apparel for Merchandise Mart Properties Inc., which runs the show. The market saw a double-digit increase in attendance compared with last year, although she would not disclose exact figures.

The trade show, housed on the Mart's 7th floor, played host to a children's segment called Kidz at Stylemax and to the National Prom Market Chicago. The accessory component to Stylemax also has grown by about 15 percent over last year's August market, she said.

"I don't think business has turned around radically," McCullough said. "But the stores have settled into a new reality."

Although ordering closer to season with an eye on price, buyer Samantha Lurie said the economy has not greatly affected her business at Enaz, a specialty store with two locations in the Chicago suburbs of Highland Park and Northfield. Enaz opened the Northfield store less than one year ago.

"People just want something new every season," she said.

Lurie added that price plays a key role in her buy. She tries to ensure customers can shop at a variety of price points, with the store carrying T-shirts retailing from \$20 to \$165 and fake leather handbags for less than \$100.

"We're more conservative on how many colors we buy, and we try not to be repetitive," she said. That means if Lurie notices other area stores are buying flowy tops or skinny cargos, for example, Enaz will look to stock the trend at a cheaper price.

Sales at the Highland Park location are up from last year, and Lurie is optimistic about the fall. "We're in Chicago, so fall is a huge season," said Lurie, who ordered silk shirts from Central Park West and beaded wrap bracelets from Nakamol at Stylemax. "We have a lot to look forward to."

Key Trends

- **Shine:** Often created by smaller, matte sequins, shine was apparent in tops, dresses and accessories.
- **Blurry prints:** This trend, which is evident in tops and dresses, will continue through spring.
- **Burnished metallics:** Bronze tones can be seen as trim on handbags, in jewelry and in belts.
- **Handcrafted details:** Scalloped edges, embroidery and punched-out leather details were obvious in both accessories and ready-to-wear.
- **Jersey sweaters:** These feather-weight knits allow for easy layering.