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Strong Indicators at Stylemax

Posted FRIDAY APRIL 15, 2011
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CHICAGO — Signs are pointing toward a slow recovery in the Midwest, with attendance increasing at the area's largest women's apparel market as new retailers open stores and others expand their footprint.

"I'm hearing that business is better," said Susan McCullough, senior vice president for apparel for Merchandise Mart Properties, which operates Stylemax at the Chicago Merchandise Mart. "People seem a little more positive but they are still buying cautiously."

Energy at the fall Stylemax show, which ran April 2 to 5, seemed strong, with McCullough reporting a high-double-digit increase in attendance. She would not release exact figures.

At the market, housed on the seventh floor of the Merchandise Mart, buyers shopping for fall goods encountered the strong presence of fur, which appeared on outerwear, vests, sweaters and accessories, and the continuation of skinny denim and jeggings paired with longer cardigans and sweaters, some of which possessed a bohemian or hippie influence.

Melanie Thomas, who plans to open a specialty store called Comfort Me in the city's Lincoln Park neighborhood in June with two of her daughters, picked up denim from David Kahn, black robes with lace trim from Only Hearts, loose-fitting knits from Fluxus and basic T-shirts, tanks and loungewear from Alternative Apparel.

Thomas' boutique will focus on comforting apparel, accessories, gifts and home furnishings that she hoped to order at The Chicago Market: Living & Giving gift show that ran during the same time at the mart.

Another new merchant visiting the market was Katie Yoder, who opened a specialty store called KEY Boutique eight months ago in Nappanee, Ind. Her store carries items priced less than \$100, including handmade jewelry from local designers and apparel from such lines as Mystree, Tulle and Sisters Knits.

Yoder shopped the market looking to find dresses and ended up ordering classic peacoats, an orange and brown cropped jacket from Tulle and scarves from Pretty Persuasions that wholesale for less than \$10. Her boutique retails the scarves for \$30 and regularly sells out, she said.

The retailer said her new venture turned a profit in its first five months, although the last three winter months have been slower, but she is looking for a turnaround.

"As soon as the sun comes out, people get the fever to come out and buy," she said, noting that the small town, which is known for its Amish population, also attracts a fair amount of tourists during the summer.

To counter the economy and changes to her local retail environment, Sandra Panuce, owner of Avenue Fashions in suburban Lincolnwood, came to Stylemax to shop for a new larger location in Deerfield opening May 1. In recent years, more of her affluent customers have moved north.

"We're moving to where our customers are and introducing a new division, Avenue Contemporary, for younger customers," Panuce said. "We wanted to move forward to where there is more excitement. We're going after the young bar mitzvah mother."

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The retailer has catered to women looking for mother-of-the-bride and special occasion dresses, with gowns ranging from \$800 to \$3,900. At Stylemax, she mostly ordered immediates and early fall sportswear, choosing dresses, coats and sweaters from Katherine Barclay, blazers, white jeans and sequin tops from Cartise and dabbled a bit in the line Joseph Ribkoff.

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Steven Ettinger, co-manager of Schneider & Ettinger Associates, reported business was up about 10 percent from last year's March Stylemax. The company, which sells the lines Nomadic Traders, Samuel Dong and Nic+Zoe, picked up more than 20 new accounts.

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"We had a very busy show," Ettinger said. "That said, business is still challenging. The stores are saying one day (customers) are buying this and the next day they are buying that. There is no consistency."

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