

## Stylemax Buyers Seek Affordable Fashion

by Beth Wilson

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**CHICAGO** — Price remained a driving force at the Stylemax show, as some retailers said they had been successful stocking lower-priced apparel.

“There’s still a lot of price resistance at retail,” said Susan McCullough, senior vice president for apparel for Merchandise Mart Properties, which runs the event. “There’s push back.”

One line drawing interest in that mode at the summer-fall preview market was Ya Los Angeles, a contemporary line that showed some 600 styles of mostly cotton and polyester tops and dresses wholesaling at \$13 to \$26. Suzy Hwang, who supervised sales for Ya, said the trip to Chicago proved worthwhile for building clientele.

“It was successful for a beginning,” she said, noting that the trade show, which ended its three-day run on Jan. 31, represented the line’s second trip to Chicago’s Merchandise Mart.

About 80 percent of her business at Stylemax came from new accounts, said Hwang.

Kristin Dean, owner of The Serendipity Shop, a 2,000-square-foot specialty store in Libertyville, Ill., liked the look and price of items from Ya, scooping up off-the-shoulder and shorter print and solid dresses. She also shopped Stylemax for denim from Go Jeans, vintage lockets from Studio B and vintage style rings from Ollipop.

“This is way busier than it used to be,” she said, adding that buyers are less hesitant to order because customers are more willing to buy. “You can only hold off for so long,” she said of shoppers pent up demand, noting her January sales were three times better than last year.

Penny Zuidema, owner of a new specialty store called Uptown Girl in suburban Wheaton, said reasonable prices may be at the root of her early success. Zuidema, who attended Stylemax with her store’s buyer, Debbie Graham, said women venturing into the store are pleased to find distinctive items that fall within their budget.

“Most people leave with three or more pieces,” Graham said, adding that most apparel is priced under \$100, excluding winter jackets which sell for \$130 to \$150, representing the store’s highest price point.

At Stylemax, the retailer ordered strappy cotton stretch dresses and lightweight sweaters from RYU in peach, gray, mocha and cream, as well as dresses and ruched T-shirts from Mystree in bright orange, peach and gray.

The store plans to continue on with the longer top and legging trend, opting for ruched asymmetric bright orange tunics from Ariella paired with shorter leggings and bras from Coobie. After opening six months ago, Graham said, "Every month is better than the last."

Price has played a key role in another suburban retailer's expansion. Owner Jill Card opened Jeans and a Cute Top Shop in Wheaton in March 2009, followed by a second suburban St. Charles location in May 2010 amid the ailing economy.

"We probably opened up at the worst possible time," said Card, explaining that her store's location, focus and price helped boost business. "Wheaton was starving for this kind of shop. Women were getting tired of chain stores and seeing the same thing."

Prices range from \$23 to \$75 for tops and \$62 to \$135 for denim. "I made sure my price points were affordable and they wouldn't scare anyone away," she said.

Card spent two years researching denim, choosing to carry Miss Me and Silver jeans among other labels, and gives employees store discounts for each pair of jeans they try on so they adequately understand the fit.

"We're already sold out of Capri jeans in key sizes and it's January," she added. "I feel positive going into this year."