

# Accessories, Moderates Lead Stylemax

By Beth Wilson

**CHICAGO** — Looking for recession-friendly finds, Midwest retailers sought eye-catching accessories and lower-priced fashions at the Stylemax show.

“Even in the worst times, women will buy something,” said Donna Stone, owner of Discoveries, a 1,200-square-foot specialty store in Louisville, Ky. “Earrings are the things that pay my bills,” adding that she carries earrings priced \$42 to \$100.

At Stylemax’s fall market, which ran March 20 to 23 at the Merchandise Mart here, Stone shopped for bold pieces, opting for jewelry from Chan Luu, Nakamol and Avant Garde. She also likes to keep her clothing moderately priced, with everything less than \$300. Stone ordered coats and capes from Relais, chunky neutral-colored sweaters from Chaudry, and dresses, jackets and striped sleeveless vests from Pete & Greta.

Stone’s price-conscious strategy has paid off, with March sales up 22 percent from a year earlier. The retailer said she was being particularly choosy with her fall buy.

“I’m a little more cautious,” she said. “My racks are not quite as filled and I like that. Everything shows better. I think we’re doing better by being a little leaner. I’d rather reorder than get carried away.”

Bekah Hale, assistant buyer for Vintage Charm, a 4,000-square-foot specialty store in suburban La Grange, Ill., said clothing had to be clearly right for the store and well-priced for her to place an order at Stylemax.

“We try to buy pieces that are recession-friendly, cute but not too expensive,” Hale said.

As a result, she ordered wool blend shift dresses from Theme, handbags from Big Buddha, racer-back tanks with ruffles from Mystery, and camisoles and lace bandeaus by

Wish. Hale also focused on more immediate purchases rather than fall buying.

Jeni Bartoszewicz, buyer and manager for Urban Laundry in Wauwatosa, Wis., stocked up on denim that has proved to move well despite the economic downturn.

“No matter what the economy is like, people still buy denim,” she said. “I can sell denim all year round.”

She loaded up on skinny, boyfriend and boot-cut styles, as well as denim leggings from CJ by Cookie Johnson, straight leg looks from David Kahn, and distressed and embellished styles from Miss Me. Bartoszewicz also liked trouser-cut black and gray denim that she believes her clients could wear to work on Casual Fridays.

For her three-year-old specialty store, where many moms and daughters shop together, Bartoszewicz also ordered basic cashmere cardigans and V-neck sweaters from Oats and dressier knitwear from Lola & Sophie. She also banked on sweater dresses and ruched dresses from Suzi Chin, Maggy London and London Times.

For tops, Bartoszewicz liked layering T-shirts from Three Dots, tanks and ruched turtlenecks from Splendid and Ella Moss.

“I saw a lot of things with staying power,” said

Bartoszewicz, citing boyfriend blazers and fur vests. “We’ve been very lucky. Each year we’ve been up [in sales].”

Susan McCullough, senior vice president for apparel for Merchandise Mart Properties, which produces the show, said the mood at the market was better than last March.

“Everyone’s a little more positive than last year,” she said, noting that attendance also was up from 2009, although she did not release exact figures. “A year ago, it was not fun. [But] stores are still being cautious. No one wants to overbuy.”



Accessories were key items at Stylemax.

