

## Retailers Cautiously Optimistic at Class

by Andrew Asch, Retail Editor

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Retailers are still suffering under the weight of a harsh economy, but vendors and retailers reported being bullish about sales during the **Class** trade show, held Feb. 2–3 at the **Santa Monica Civic Auditorium** amid balmy 80-degree weather in Santa Monica, Calif.

“The holiday is over, and everyone is being cautiously optimistic,” said Don Zuidema, partner in the high-profile West Hollywood, Calif., boutique **LASC**. The retailer said Class represented an opportunity to take a few risks on new, smaller men’s lines after toughing out a harsh winter holiday season. Zuidema wrote orders for **Comune** of Costa Mesa, Calif., which debuted in August, as well as emerging lines **Bjorn Borg** and **Future Heretics**.

For James Hammonds, men’s buyer for the pioneering **American Rag** boutiques, buying at Class—or any other trade show during this season—represents a tight balancing act.

“It is not the best time to be taking a ton of risks,” he said. “We’re getting what people expect us to have. We’ll take a few calculated risks with things we found extra-special. You don’t want people to think your store is boring and predictable,” Hammonds said. He reported being impressed with Los Angeles contemporary line **Ever** and accessories brand **Tsovet**.

Overall, Class vendors reported having a good show. Jade Howe, founder and creative director of Gardena, Calif.–based men’s label **Howe**, said his label doubled the business it did at Class in the previous year. A.J. Jacobson, sales manager of **Post’age Denim**, did not register high sales. “But I got [Post’age] in front of the right people, so it was a success,” he said.

Retailers shopping the show included **Saks**; **Nordstrom**; **Ron Robinson**; **The Closet**; **Planet Blue**; **Sy Devore** of Studio City, Calif.; **Villains** of San Francisco; **Avedon** of Los Angeles; and **Neighborhood** of Los Angeles’ Venice neighborhood. Other retailers included **Got Style** in Toronto; **Blake** of Portland, Ore.; **Kuhlman** of Seattle; and **Vinnie’s Styles** of Brooklyn, N.Y.

Class founder Jason Bates started the show in February 2008 as a place for **Fred Segal**–style boutiques to find the newest fashion brands in a relaxed but playful atmosphere. The core of Class’ vendorship represents boutique men’s lines, but it also hosts a few women’s lines, including **Odd Molly**, beauty labels such as **Osea** and homeware by artist Caleb Siemon.

Approximately 127 vendor booths did business at the most recent Class, which represented 12 more booths compared with the August Class show. Bates estimated more than 1,000 attendees visited the most recent show. Attendance increased 30 percent on the first day of the show compared with the first day of the February 2008 show. Attendance for the second show was flat compared with the same time in the previous year.

### Bringing Class to ASR

Class will be expanding to a satellite campus. On Jan. 22, activewear trade show **Action Sports Retailer Trade Expo** announced Bates will produce **Class @ ASR** for the ASR show scheduled Sept. 10–12 at the **San Diego Convention Center** in San Diego.

Bates said more than 100 brands will exhibit at Class @ ASR. It will feature fashion labels with roots in skateboard culture such as **Comune**, **Insight** and **WeSC**. The sub show will offer resort-friendly labels, including women’s fashion swimwear. A typical 10x10 booth at the show will cost \$2,000. A 10x10 booth at Class costs \$3,500.

Class @ ASR will benefit Bates’ entire trade-show organization. He said his five-year licensing agreement with ASR will cover the production costs for his upcoming shows. Bates declined to state the amount of the licensing fee. The next Class in Santa Monica is scheduled for Aug. 27–28 at the Santa Monica Civic Auditorium.