

DOMESTIC TRADE SHOWS

Change Agents

Markets add events and adjust dates to accommodate buyers.

By Anne Riley-Katz

LOS ANGELES — Los Angeles' trade show and market week organizers remain determined to hang tough as retail sales continue to tank and buyers hold off on writing orders and scale back inventory.

With business slowing, competition for buyer dollars is on the rise, with some shows moving up dates, hosting special events and undertaking renovations to keep attendance up.

The California Market Center and Class shifted to earlier dates for their respective regional shows this year to get out ahead of the competition, with CMC's market moving from April to March and Class shifting from March to February.

"Timing is everything right now. I need to get orders from major players in earlier," said Jason Bates, who organizes the Class trade show and owns the L.A.-based showroom Derelict. "Often times Vegas [shows] are late for me now. If I do go there, it's to clean up at this point. I see my top 30 to 50 accounts early these days — I have to get the volume of my business done early."

CMC charges just \$500 to exhibit at the temporary shows that come around during the year — one way to appeal to exhibitors looking to trim expenses.

"These are really tough times. Anyone who says they're not concerned about the economy and business is lying," said Joanne Lee, senior vice president of the CMC, which is the site of Focus, Transit, Gift & Home, L.A. Fashion and ENK's Brighte Companies markets.

The CMC will host an Australian contemporary designer showcase in January, sponsored by the Australian Trade Commission. Approximately 15 designers from the country will travel to Los Angeles for the market and shows, held from Jan. 13 to 20, something CMC reps said they hoped would be a big buyer draw. The center



Madison Marcus' silk dress and blazer at October's Downtown at Dusk fashion show in Los Angeles.



Betsy Johnson's strapless dress at Downtown at Dusk.

PHOTOS BY MARK WAZ



Nanette Lepore's dress at Downtown at Dusk.

also recently completed a patio makeover, glass-door replacement and has plans to replace some flooring in the building and remodel the first-floor bathrooms.

Cost cutting at the shows themselves has become a priority: Designers & Agents will no longer print and send five separate mailers promoting the show, a six-figure cost savings for the organizers.

"We're not contributing to our pension next year, and we're eliminating a lot of travel," said Ed Mandelbaum, who organizes the show with co-founder Barbara Kramer. "We're tightening up and trying to stay strong through whatever 2009 may bring."

Some shows took the opposite tack, taking on additional expenses in hope of drumming up business and encouraging buying.

The upstart Class show covers the travel expenses of 100 top retailers, chosen in consultation with the show's vendors. Class, which made its debut last March at the Santa Monica Civic Center, will now run from Feb. 2 to 3 and feature contemporary designers and denim lines like WeSC, Edun and Linda Loudermilk.

"I think at the shows in New York and even [Las Vegas] people are just not spending money — more and more it's turning into a preview show where people are looking but not spending actual dollars," Bates said. "It's this wait-and-see kind of thing."

Bates is trying to keep booth costs down for exhibitors, too, and hasn't yet raised his prices from the \$3,500 flat fee for a 10-foot-by-10-foot booth, a price that includes racks, signage, tables and chairs.

"All exhibitors have to do is bring the clothes and the other merchandise," he said. "We really try to make this cost-effective, and L.A. is very accessible to buyers from Asia, not to mention the entire Western U.S. We want to attract emerging talent that may not be able to afford the high prices of Vegas, especially with union labor on top of show costs."

It's not all bad news, though. In spite of rampant recession worries, the shows do go on, with reported attendance mostly steady at recent markets, and

international traffic up.

Another upside is that the continued weakness of the U.S. dollar has made Stateside buying more attractive — both the Class trade show and CMC reported a spike in international attendance for both exhibitors and attendees, with buyers from 34 countries visiting the CMC during the October market, 23 percent of them first-time attendees. Class saw a high percentage of Asian and Canadian buyers, in addition to attendees traveling from Guam, Brazil and Australia.

And though fewer merchandise orders were written this market, Designers & Agents posted a 10 percent increase in foot traffic over the previous show — some 2,500 buyers and 230 vendors between D&A and D&A's Green Market, which grew from a small section of the show earlier in the year to cover an entire separate floor in the New Mart, across the street from the CMC.

"The green fashion movement has really picked up steam over the past two years, and it's bigger than ever — it's a big bright spot for us right now," Mandelbaum said.

Though CMC wouldn't release specific attendance figures, representatives did disclose that exhibitor numbers were fairly stable at recent markets, with about 80 vendors at Brighte Companies, 150 at the Transit shoe show and more than 50 at Focus.

Class is anticipating 300 exhibitors for the February show and already has more than 150 vendors signed on for the two-day event — already an increase over the last show. About 500 buyers attended the most recent show.

A number of smaller specialty shows have taken root recently in Los Angeles, including the Boutique Lingerie Show and maternity-oriented Mom2B.

Larger regionally focused events are coming, too — IDG's Reveal, a show specifically geared to Los Angeles-based fashion and designers, will make its debut in March, with dates yet to be finalized. The inaugural event will be followed by a show in October 2009, and Reveal will be held semiannually thereafter to coincide with L.A. Fashion Market Weeks.