

FN Platform Buyers Seek Uniqueness

BY JOCELYN ANDERSON

LAS VEGAS — Retailers attending the recent FN Platform show said they wanted newness and color for spring '13.

Although the economy is still a cause for concern, most buyers said fresh product is the only way to battle tough times.

"People are tired of gray and brown and are looking for something more exciting," said Tarek Hassan, co-owner of The Tannery in Boston. "Look at what Nike did at the Olympics with the neon yellows and greens. It showed men can wear color. That was a great move."

Indeed the major statement at the show across categories was color, with an added emphasis in the men's market shown through bright soles, pop uppers and even floral prints. Hassan said Cole Haan and Thoro-craft (at the nearby Project show) looked especially strong for spring.

Ron White, owner of Ron White Shoes based in Toronto, Ontario, said freshness was his focus as he shopped the show. In fact, the assortment at his six stores will get a major overhaul in the coming seasons, in response to the slowing Canadian economy and an influx of new chains moving into the country.

"We have dropped more brands

than ever in our company history," said White. "And we've also added more than we've ever added at one time coming into fall and spring. We are doing a major rip apart and putting it back together."

Among his fall additions are Seven for All Mankind, Boss women's and Taryn Rose, while Paul Green women's would debut for spring.

"I'm really optimistic about fall because we are rolling out a number of these new brands — and then again for spring," White said. "When things don't sell and then you go to see them as a buyer and they've just updated the lasts and patterns, it makes it fairly easy to walk away or take a break."

Ed Habre, president and CEO of Portland, Ore.-based Shoe Mill, was also upbeat heading into spring. "Manufacturers are getting really creative with product and teasing customers with eye candy they can't resist," he said, adding that the season will be dominated by pops of color, leather treatments and detail work.

Habre aimed to take chances on new brands at the show, as well as buy merchandise that would round out his seven-store chain's product mix. "We came to the show with some open-to-buy dollars," he said. "We bought light enough for spring that we could make onsite decisions."

Kalleigh Drake, owner of Shoe-fisticated in Hartselle, Ala., was also making last-minute buys at FN Platform and gravitated toward her tested labels. "I most definitely tend to navigate to the tried-and-true brands. My favorites are 80%20, which is funky yet practical, and OTBT, which is earthy and contemporary," she said.

To discover new brands, Shelly Besikof, owner of Bay Street Shoes in Minneapolis, attended Project the day before heading to FN Platform on opening day. She was looking for at-once product for her two stores, thanks to an especially hot summer that has affected her fall needs.

"I've managed to pick up several lines [here]," said Besikof, who named Ted Baker as a favorite. "For spring, we are looking for the wedged tennis shoe and a lot of color. We are definitely buying more color. It's just very important."

Weather was also a big concern for Danny Wasserman, owner of Tip Top Shoes in New York. "There is plenty of merchandise to go around, so it's



Buyers scoured the floor at FN Platform

mostly a weather issue for us," he said. "We need the weather to break in October/November, and we need snow in December/January for fall business to be strong."

Even so, he said he is optimistic about spring. "Spring will be better because manufacturers have reacted to our needs more. They're not going crazy. They are realizing what they missed this year," said Wasserman.

The retailer also is keeping a close eye on the competition. "DSW continues to move into New York, and Macy's expanded its floor," he said. "Everybody is jumping on the hot footwear bandwagon. That means we have to be sharp and know what we're doing. It's not getting any easier." — *With contributions from Neil Weilheimer*