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Front Row
Eric Wilson

Braced and Eager for Impact



MOBBED Opening Ceremony, above, was full at Fashion's Night Out 2009.

WITH the second installment of Fashion's Night Out just around the corner — subtitled the Anna Wintour Shop-A-Thon to save retail — readers are being reminded almost hourly by blogs, newspapers and even banners hanging from light posts that it is safe, once again, to spend.

At the same time, they may have noticed a rash of news suggesting the opposite: consumers are cutting back, paring their wardrobes, paying off their credit card debt and generally hunkering down in fear of a renewed recession. In one typical example of mixed messages, the big reveal for the Fashion's Night Out Sept. 10 party lineup (celebrities and events galore at hundreds of stores staying open until 11 p.m.) appeared in an issue of

Women's Wear Daily that was otherwise dedicated to a theme of fashion frugality. "Mindless excess is over," the trend forecaster Faith Popcorn said; right there on its front page.

Shop less!

Shop more!

Shop smarter!

Oh, why did Cathy Guisewite have to pick this moment to announce she was giving up her "Cathy" comic strip? Who's going to make sense of these bipolar retailers now?

Twelve months ago, Ms. Wintour's call to arms, and gloves and shoes and handbags, resulted in a shopping spectacle so bonkers that a few retail ex-

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Fashion's Night Out: Eager for Impact

From First Style Page

enthusiasm, including the chiefs of major department stores, were caught off guard. Tens of thousands of customers swarmed aisles, clogged escalators and grabbed at pop stars, and that was just at Saks Fifth Avenue. Internix was at capacity. There was a giddy mob on the trail of Michael Kors. It looked as if a year's worth of pent-up shopping frustrations had been released on the streets of SoHo. Nobody ever got this worked up about Restaurant Week.

"All of us were amazed at the excitement and enthusiasm you saw across the city," said Stephen I. Sadove, chairman and chief executive of Saks Inc. "It was energizing. People were having fun."

But they were not necessarily buying much. Even as retailers prepare for a second Fashion's Night Out, there has been only anecdotal evidence that the original event affected sales in a meaningful way. As a result, the priority

this year appears to be shifting from selling expensive merchandise to creating upbeat experiences for consumers, making them feel as if they are personally consulting with fashion designers — and Fashion Week, which begins in New York at the same time.

"I have five pages of events printed out in front of me," said

Aime Keating, a senior vice president at Bloomingdale's. That includes personal appearances by Mr. Kors, Lela Rose, Carmen Marc Valvo, John Varvatos and Tadashi (who will be teaching cookie decorating); a casino night on the men's floor with actors from the HBO show "Boardwalk Empire"; and a party with CQ to introduce a collaboration between Levi's and Billy Reid.

"Customers like the idea of the designers, who are busy doing their shows, taking time to go to department stores," Ms. Keating said. "People want to have direct access to fashion, and they want it at the same time as everyone else."

The events announced thus far would seem to have designers stretching themselves that, at least if they haven't yet finished their collections. Elie Tahari will be giving dance lessons at Saks, while Simon Storer and Ed Westwick play darts. Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, with Jack McCubough and Lazaro Hernandez of Proenza Schouler, are judging karaoke at Barney's. Thakoon, Georgina Chapman and Reem Acra will model with their dogs at Bergdorf Goodman.

There also appears to be an unusual convergence of designer table-tennis games, with matches planned at Barney's, Bloomingdale's and the Street Weitzman store on Madison Avenue.

Still, there will be products to buy. Several stores are working with designers to create exclusive, usually inexpensive, items this year. Jason Wu, for example, made a \$150 doll for Bergdorf.



BY THE LINE: JASON WU

CHARACTERS Savannah College of Art and Design and D&B on Mulberry Street did T-shirts featuring fashion insiders like André Leon Talley (\$200).

with bad press. The year at Bergdorf Goodman last year was such a crush that there were reports of trays of crystal glasses smashing on the floor and broken glass when security was overwhelmed. Nevertheless, Terri Turner, a consultant for the store, was keeping details close to the vest. She refused to divulge the catering plans, but she said bite-size treats were being considered.

And for the crystal? "We will not be using plastic cups," she said.



FOOT KEYS has made toile and striped sneakers (\$100) for Opening Ceremony.

Opening Ceremony has recruited designers to work at an indoor flea market at the Ace Hotel, selling mostly items for under \$100. Rodarte will have a pop-up booth selling vintage gowns. David Chang, the Momofuku chef, is creating a gold-dusted cookie and T-shirt combo.

"The idea is to make this night special and make it an event," said Humberto Leon, an owner of Opening Ceremony, who is planning food carts on the neighboring streets so that people can still participate even if the hotel becomes too crowded, as his store on Howard Street did last year.

Many stores hope to avoid the mistakes made last year. Regardless of whether they are actually generating sales with Fashion's Night Out, some want to lose money or, worse, wind

up with bad press. The year at Bergdorf Goodman last year was such a crush that there were reports of trays of crystal glasses smashing on the floor and broken glass when security was overwhelmed. Nevertheless, Terri Turner, a consultant for the store, was keeping details close to the vest. She refused to divulge the catering plans, but she said bite-size treats were being considered.

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MINI ME Jason Wu has a limited edition doll dressed from his recent collection (\$150) for Bergdorf Goodman.



BY THE LINE: BILLY REID

NOTABLE PAIR Billy Reid's jeans (\$178), made in collaboration with Levi's, will be introduced at Bloomingdale's.

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