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FRONT ROW

'Fashion's Night Out' Gets Overhaul in New York

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 executives, including the chiefs of major department stores, were caught off guard. Tens of thousands of customers swarmed aisles, clogged escalators and gawked at pop stars, and that was just at Saks Fifth Avenue. Intermix 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 connecting 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 Anne 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 GQ 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 thin, at least if they haven’t yet finished their collections. Elie Tahari will be giving dance lessons at Saks, while Simon Spurr and Ed Westwick play darts. Mary-Kate and Ashley Olsen, with Jack McCollough and Lazaro Hernandez of Proenza Schouler, are judging karaoke at Barneys. 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 Barneys, Bloomingdale’s and the Stuart 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. 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 prom booth selling vintage gowns. Christina Tosi, the Momofuku Milk Bar, is creating a gold-dusted cookie and T-shirt combo with Band of Outsiders.

“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, none want to lose money or, worse, wind up with bad press. The scene at Bergdorf Goodman last year was such a crush that there were reports of trays of crystal glasses smashing to the floor and bruised egos when security was overwhelmed. Nevertheless, Teril 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.

An earlier version of this story, citing information from Opening Ceremony, incorrectly stated that David Chang is creating the gold-dusted cookie and T-shirt combo. Christina Tosi, the chef for Momofuku Milk Bar, is making them with Band of Outsiders.