

# Men's Stores Play it Safe at Chicago Collective

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Posted TUESDAY FEBRUARY 23, 2010

From [WWD.COM](http://www.wwd.com)

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**CHICAGO** — Despite a lift from holiday sales, men's wear retailers spent carefully as they shopped the Chicago Collective.

"The rule on this trip is to trim the fat," said Matthew Long, a manager with J. Longs, a 7,000-square-foot family-owned specialty store at River Hills Mall in Mankato, Minn., south of Minneapolis. Long and assistant manager Aaron Jones said they were not taking as many risks on potential new lines. "We don't go with singles or doubles," Jones said. "We're going with the home run, easy stuff you know is going to sell."

During the market, which was held Jan. 31 to Feb. 2 on the 8th floor of Chicago's Merchandise Mart, they ordered bowling-style silk shirts and lightweight sweaters from Nat Nast, shirts with embroidery detail and multicolored inner cuffs and collars from Robert Graham and polo shirts from Miami-based Stone Rose. The pair did stretch a bit to try out some knit ties from J.S. Blank and men's denim from Seven For All Mankind.

The past two years have been an "up-and-down roller-coaster ride," Jones said, adding that best-selling lines include Tommy Bahama, Ben Sherman, Austin Reed and Hart Schaffner Marx. "One year ago, it was worse."

The Minnesota store lowered its price point to ensure no sweaters retailed for more than \$175, compared with \$250 previously.

Todd Meyer, owner of Jason Louis in Green Bay, Wisc., which generally caters to men ages 25 to 60, said his business has bounced back. He carries pieces ranging from \$65 shirts to \$200 sweaters with suits averaging \$495. Best-selling lines include Tommy Bahama, Thomas Dean, Tallia and Cutter & Buck.

In addition to checking out new collections with Tommy Bahama, Meyer said he walked the Chicago Collective scouting for denim lines that were "new and different, to keep the younger guys interested in the store." He was pleased to see Thomas Dean add jeans to its assortment and planned to place orders.

The economic downturn forced Meyer to alter his buy (ordering less up front) and work the floor himself. "We know our clients really well," he said.

The Chicago market packed extra international oomph, with a prominent display of six Scottish vendors.

One manufacturer, Harris Tweed, made the most of its first visit to the Chicago market, meeting more than 50 retailers, opening new accounts and even scoring an off-hours sale during a dinner at Gibsons Steakhouse.

"We wanted a trade show where it's cold," said Lydia Walton, director of public relations for Harris Tweed. "The Windy City seemed like the perfect place. There's been a steady stream of people. We couldn't believe it."

The brand's top seller was a handwoven black-and-white herringbone jacket wholesaling for \$120 that could be worn with jeans or to work, she said.

Bruce Schedler, vice president of men's apparel for Merchandise Mart Properties Inc., said buyer attendance for the market's first day was up 15 percent. "We're pulling from all over the country," he said, adding the show, while not garnering a large collection of West Coast labels, added 35 lines to the mix.