

# Multi-Purpose Items Find Fans at Chicago Collective

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Posted WEDNESDAY AUGUST 25, 2010

From [WWD ISSUE 08/25/2010](#)

**CHICAGO** — With less panic in the marketplace, some men's retailers who shopped the Chicago Collective reported stronger sales than last year, adjusting to the new economic climate by keeping an eye on price and versatility.

Kirk Haines and James Newman, owners of Service Menswear in Austin, Tex., said sales for every month this year (excluding June) were up from last year. "We've actually having a good year," Newman said, noting the 1,000-square-foot store has dropped brands that haven't evolved. "We've eliminated the fluff."

Chicago retailer Carrie Bowers, who also shopped the Chicago Collective, which ran Aug. 8 through Aug. 10 at Chicago's Merchandise Mart, also cited stronger sales for June and July. Bowers who owns Stellar26, a men's and women's specialty store in the city, said the new economic climate has led her to buy more basic styles with multiple purposes.

"It's so easy to purchase a simple basic in this economy because you can usually wear it for three Chicago seasons if not all four," she said.

Haines and Newman have always tried to be price-conscious, with their store carrying several different styles and washes of Levi's Jeans generally retailing for \$55 to \$78. The partners also attribute their success to the fact that they were cautious about their buy even before the recession and are in tune with their customers, who are generally aged 20 to 40, Haines said.

For example, the store, which opened in 1993, pre-washes most of its merchandise in hopes of giving men a true idea how a garment will look and fit. Haines noted the store's hangtags indicate items that are pre-shrunk, an important aspect when men are trying on fitted shirts.

With an eye out for value and logo-less merchandise, the pair found the men's market, which spans the eighth floor of Chicago's Merchandise Mart, to be both relaxing and fruitful. With all the show's resources showcased on one floor, the market seemed more comfortable and less harried than New York or Las Vegas, Haines and Newman said. As a result, they had more time and energy to scout for newness.

The retailers picked up polo shirts, short-sleeved henleys, woven shirts and shorts from Benson, looked at reasonably priced men's dress shoes (under \$200 retail) from Johnston & Murphy and ordered micro polka dot shirts from Ben Sherman.

Bowers shopped the Chicago Collective for new lines as well, picking up bright plaid woven shirts from Voodoo Guru and vintage-inspired and graphic T-shirts from Retrobrand. The retailer also expressed excitement about leather wallets, leather belts and canvas belts from Original Penguin that she plans to sell as holiday gifts.

The store, which opened in May 2007, boasts Original Penguin, Quiksilver, Reef and Element as its best-selling lines.

Although sales for June and July were strong, early August business seemed to slow, Bowers said. She hopes the fall and holiday season will provide consistency.

Lately, "it's like a roller coaster ride," she said. "Some weeks are really good and some are really bad."

Planning special in-store events for this fall and holiday season, Bowers said she is optimistic such promotions will attract more customers. "I definitely think it [this fall] will be better than last year," she said.

Sebastian Leta, executive vice president for merchandising and sales for Luigi Baldo, said he pitched his line to retailers at the Chicago Collective as possessing Italian quality at an affordable price. Many buyers responded, he said, as they looked for unconstructed, gently washed, softly tailored pieces.

Top sellers, Leta said, included a slightly distressed short-sleeved 100 percent cotton polo shirt in orange, citron green and soft lavender wholesaling for \$69 and more relaxed dress pants, without creases, made of 98 percent cotton and 2 percent stretch and wholesaling for \$75, and washed linen long-sleeved shirts wholesaling for \$55.

Bruce Schedler, vice president of men's apparel for Merchandise Mart Properties Inc., said buyer attendance for the market was up 19 percent, following aggressive marketing efforts in which Schedler and his team went on the road visiting stores from Minnesota and Nebraska to Houston and New Orleans. "It's all about breaking the habit," he said of encouraging retailers to visit the Chicago show rather than attend the same markets they have for years.

Overall, many retailers seem cautious yet hopeful, Schedler said. "It's still tough," he said, "but everyone is glad to have last year behind them."