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## Retailers Buoyed by Strong Father's Day

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Accessories from the Saks Fifth Avenue Men's Collection performed well for the holiday.

Photo By Courtesy Photo

Shoppers turned out for Father's Day, lifting the spirits of retailers and affording them the opportunity to meet or exceed plan. Tailored clothing and dress shirts, along with knitwear, were among the bestsellers for most stores, stoking further confidence that the upcoming fall season will be healthy.

"It was a little better than we anticipated," said Lou Amendola, chief merchandising officer for Brooks Brothers.

"Business was strong during the week leading up to Father's Day and much stronger than in the past when it has been a Friday to Saturday event." The bulk of the business came from the stores rather than the Internet, he noted.

Among the top performers, he said, were tailored clothing and neckwear, both of which posted “nice increases over the previous year.” Although ties are an expected gift item, the strength of clothing was unusual. “It was a bit of a surprise,” he said. Knitwear was also a standout.

Although its semiannual sale kicked off Monday, Brooks Bros. ran some one-day specials in the weeks before Father’s Day to draw traffic. “It wasn’t about the item that was on sale,” he said. “It was more of a way to draw them into the store.” And the strategy worked. “Customers did come out and shop,” Amendola added. “We exceeded plan, and in this day and age, that’s exactly what we want.”

As a result, he is optimistic about the future. “It tells me consumers are interested in shopping again. They’re still uncertain, but unlike before, when they were unwilling to shop, now, when it comes to the 11th hour, they’ll get out and shop.”

For fall, he expects some new items and categories such as the back-to-college collection, to lure customers to the cash register. “Our inventory levels are so low and in control, there’s no reason to panic. We’ve been able to predict the business and we’re on plan. Our fall projections are not overly optimistic, so they should be achievable,” he said.

Michael Celestino, executive vice president of stores for Barneys New York, was also upbeat. Noting that Father’s Day “took more of a traditional vein” this year, Barneys did well with shirts, ties, briefcases and watches. But some “quirky” things also performed, such as \$24 World Cup-themed flip-flops, the top sellers of which were the U.S. and England.

“The men’s business has been impacted by the recession, and to see men purchasing dress apparel is encouraging,” he said. “At some point, that means they’ll start buying clothing again. They’re heading back to a more dressed-up [mode] and that’s good for all of us.”

Tom Ott, senior vice president and general merchandise manager of men’s wear for Saks Fifth Avenue, reported, “Over Father’s Day, we sold buy-now, wear-now and pre-fall well. Top categories were dress shirts, knit shirts and men’s accessories. Our own brand, Saks Fifth Avenue Men’s Collection, led the way, and we were very pleased with new categories of business being rolled out, most recently shoes and accessories. We expect the trends that have emerged thus far in spring to continue for fall — with particular strength in tailored clothing, shoes and accessories.”

Jonathan Greller, senior vice president and general merchandise manager of men’s wear for Lord & Taylor, said, “The total men’s business continues to see positive growth. However, this past week we saw midsingle-digit growth through Sunday versus the double-digit increases we had been seeing.” Although the volume remained strong, the final percentage gain was “less than we would have liked.”

He noted the consumer continues to look for value, with the biggest increases coming from short-sleeve Ts, short-sleeve sport shirts and shorts. Also strong were Black Brown 1826, Tommy Bahama, casual and tailored contemporary and denim collections. However, the store was less promotional than last year, which was a positive.

"We won't sell merchandise below cost," he said. "We have to stay the course. We feel positive that we can get the momentum back."

Although he remains cautious in this "volatile" environment, Greller said he was "excited for fall to come. The merchandise looks great and we know we can do better. This past week was just a blip."

Neal Black, chief executive officer of Jos. A. Bank Clothiers, said promotions are fueling sales right now. "I think things are no longer getting worse, but they are not getting better yet," he said. "We're at the bottom and it is still taking a lot of aggressive promotional activity to motivate the customer to buy. I don't see that changing before the end of the year. Customers are cautious and they want good value and they want their purchases to be a good investment. We'd like to be a little less aggressive, but I don't see that happening this year."

Tom Whitney, general merchandise manager of Darien Sport Shop in Darien, Conn., said sales were up in the double digits over last year "on much less stock." He cited clothing, particularly sport coats, as a standout, along with dress shirts. Knits, which have been good all season, continued to do well from Johnny O and Collared Greens, as well as technical golf shirts from Peter Millar and Bobby Jones.

Also leading to his optimism is the fact that the store was able to sell at full price. "Overall, we're very happy and optimistic about the balance of the year," he said. "We've found that the customer is responding to new brands and new ideas so we have to give that to them."