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WSA Buyers on the Hunt for Newness, Color

By Barbara Schneider-Levy

LAS VEGAS — Retailers at last week's ENKWSA show here acknowledged that rising costs will cut into margins next spring, but many were still optimistic and planned to boost their buys for the season.

"2012 has to be better," said Robert Schwartz, president of the New York-based Eneslow chain. "There is a pent-up demand out there. Consumers aren't buying until they need it, and now they need it."

Schwartz said his three stores would be stocking more for next spring, partly due to product carry-over from this season, but also due to a 2 percent to 3 percent increase in orders.

On the trend front, Schwartz said higher-end fashion-comfort sandals should continue to perform better than core styles.

And he is banking on the minimalist trend to continue for another season or two. "It will go on at least until next spring and summer," he said.

John Luck, president and merchandising manager at Fairlawn, Ohio-based Lucky Shoes, also was expecting a strong performance from minimalist looks, citing Vibram FiveFingers and the New Balance Minimus line as leaders in his store.

However, Luck was still seeking new styles and brands at the show. "You always have to be fresh, and that's what we're looking for here," he said. "We need to know about what we're not carrying."

Luck said he likely will up his spending by 5 percent for next spring, but plans to keep the number of units flat. "We'll be buying about the same as last year in the number of pairs, but with the price increases, that will [affect] the amount we spend."

Corinne Jackson and Lindsey Mitchell, co-owners of LuLu's Shoes & Accessories, a new store in Oxford, Miss., said they would increase their spend by about 5 percent for their second spring season.

The duo said they aimed to find trendy styles for college-age women because their boutique is located near The University of Mississippi.

"We're looking for lace-up sandals that are 1970s inspired, as well as wedges and chunky heels," Mitchell said. "We're really excited about the color-blocking [trend], and we already really like the flatforms."

Jackson said the store's fashion-forward consumer should not be impacted by price increases. "If a college girl loves the shoe, she doesn't care that the shoe used to cost \$4 less," she said.

But other retailers said rising prices were forcing them to rely more on proven sellers.

Dave Levy, owner of Shelton, Conn.-based of Hawley Lane Shoes, said, "I'm not buying less, but I'm only buying those [brands] that are working well. I'm more focused."

Speaking more generally about next season, Rick Ravel, president of Austin, Texas-based Karavel Shoes, said it will be hard to top spring '11 sales, which jumped 15 percent over the previous year.

"It [will be] difficult to keep that up," he said.