

of Titan Industries. Colorful printed fabrics and feminine ribbon laces winterized Elizabeth Brady's flirty collection as well.

On the men's front, color-rich lace-up boots in blue and oxblood piqued retailers' interest at Ted Baker, along with distressed boots with tweed panels and boots with ultra-thick soles. Modern cap toes, wingtips and sleek monk straps were bestsellers for Hugo Boss, especially styles with easy-to-wear, flexible rubber bottoms. —*Angela Velasquez*

Rocking at Outdoor Retailer

THE BUZZ COMING out of the Outdoor Retailer Winter Market in Salt Lake City, UT, was strong across all fronts. Record attendance of more than 21,000, as well as a record amount of exhibitor space (of which 258 were footwear brands, accounting for nearly a quarter of all exhibitors), proved that OR is no longer a niche shoe show for specialty dealers. In fact, OR's growth mirrors the growing popularity of the outdoor lifestyle from both end-use and fashion perspectives. The show's only blemish was the weather—a snowstorm in the Pacific Northwest prevented people in that region from getting to the show on time. And, ironically, the overall lack of snow nationwide this winter caused many retailers to pull back on their weather-related purchases for Fall '12. Not to mention, the slowly recovering economy still had an impact.

"Cautious optimism seems to be the best word to use," says Georgia Shaw, marketing manager for Vibram FiveFingers, in describing the general mood of buyers. "Everyone recognizes that the economy and mild weather conditions have affected sales, but most retailers are expecting a busy spring season to work through inventory." In particular, Shaw says buyers seemed willing to try new items to keep their sales floor fresh and drive business.

Ian Jackson, vice president of sales for Cloven Footwear, concurs that many buyers were hungry for fresh styles, adding that traffic was solid throughout the show. "The buyers were really excited to see new products," Jackson says. Specifically, he notes the brand's Camp boot and Bostonian hybrid casual sneaker showed well.

First-time OR exhibitor Primigi USA experienced a similarly strong reception of its children's shoe offerings. Bill LaRossa, president, says while OR is definitely not a "children's shoe show," the brand's Gore-Tex collection fits right into the mix. "Our Made in Italy Gore-Tex boots were well received," he affirms. "Buyers were impressed by how lightweight and easy-to-pack they are, which was a key selling point with this customer base." LaRossa notes that the designs were also a fresh alternative to the traditional hiking silhouettes found at the show. "These are customers that we don't see anywhere else and who could end up being a significant portion of our business," LaRossa says, adding that the brand plans to exhibit again at the show.

Kenji Haroutunian, OR show director, attributes the increasing popularity with footwear brands and retailers to OR being fully merchandised. "Footwear is seen in the context of the outdoor lifestyle and the activities it is designed for," he says. "Retailers are networking for intelligence from adjacent categories that they then apply to their business." He adds, "Intelligence gathers, and is gathered, at OR."

Trend-wise, the runaway footwear theme was minimalist constructions. Vibram FiveFingers, VivoBarefoot, Rockport's Tru Walk Zero collection, the New Balance Minimus line, Skechers' Gorun debut and Merrell Barefoot were just some of the latest natural motion products on display. Category creator Vibram FiveFingers continued its push into year-round product offerings with the debut of its Lontra and Speed XC models. Both styles incorporate a water-resistant fabric and taped seams. "For years our consumers have been asking for a water-resistant model," Shaw says. "We did extensive R&D on these styles to make sure that we could offer water resistance without sacrificing flexibility and ground feel."

For VivoBarefoot, its Gobi desert boot received a strong reaction, according to Michelle Hinsvark, U.S. marketing manager. In women's, popular colors included aubergine and purple in both performance and lifestyle collections. Hinsvark adds that after the success of the Ra, a men's dress casual shoe that debuted last season, retailers were excited to see the full range of casual products. The trend mirrors the natural motion category's expansion into an everyday lifestyle option. "We believe the category will continue to grow and change the shape of the footwear industry," Hinsvark maintains.

Another popular trend at OR was the barrage of slippers, spanning from classic indoor styles to campsite-friendly after-sport designs. Bearpaw, Cloud Nine, Staheekhum, Acorn, Haflinger, Baabaazuzu and Giesswein were some of the brands offering slippers. Scott Prentice, executive vice president and director of Haflinger USA, reports buyer traffic was great all the way through Sunday at noon. "Our slippers, clogs and after-sport shoes have been selling well at retail and buyers came to see our latest updates," he says. Additional Haflinger standouts, Prentice adds, were wool clogs with whimsical designs and new colors in its best-selling styles. "The more intricate the design and more colorful, the better they sold," he says.

Despite the mild winter, Bogs President Bill Combs says the brand is weathering the lack of weather with its three-season product positioning. It doesn't have to snow; it just has to be muddy and wet, he says. As such, Bogs' new women's Plimsoll collection, the next generation of its Classic printed boots, was well received thanks to a sleeker look (built on a slimmer last), new handle treatment and modern prints and colors. "Our new Baby Bogs (for infants and toddlers in sizes 5 to 10) also received a positive response, but the biggest surprise was the interest in our basic black farm and agricultural utility boots, which is what we're really known for," Combs says. —*Greg Dutter*



Bogs



Taos



Palladium