

AFM Tête à Tête: In Her Shoes

Written by Interview by Corbin Chamberlin

Newly appointed to the helm of The Neiman Marcus Group, Karen Katz rules the retail kingdom with ahead-of-the-curve marketing ideas and knows her customer with laser-point accuracy. Katz started with Neiman Marcus as a merchandise manager and then rose through the ranks to her current position. AFM sat down with the CEO and discusses—what else?—fashion.



AFM: Clothing with longevity seems to be the hottest trend at the moment. Which designer do you feel makes the best timeless clothing?

KK: At Neiman Marcus, we are believers that women should buy clothes that they can keep for many seasons. There are some women who want to maintain a classic and season-less look and some who want a different look season to season. There are many designers who create fantastic classic clothing; it's hard to pick just one.

AFM: When buying a collection for Neiman Marcus, what do you consider most?

KK: We take many things into account when buying a collection. We buy from some collections because that designer set the tone of the trend that season, and some designers have great items that we don't want to miss out on. Also, there are designers with fantastic quality, and the garments are made so exquisitely that there is nothing like it on the market. We want them in our stores. There are many different levels when buying.

AFM: Fashion Week showed collections that were less than economically responsive with furs and other expensive materials. Was this optimistic choice from designers a good or bad call?

KK: What was best in the collections that were shown was that there was a lot of newness, and that is most important to us. We are always trying to keep our customers happy with fresh new products.

AFM: In a market of tight wallets and sealed bags, how do you inspire people to shop?

KK: Great new fashion seems to have brought customers out again. Whether it be a change in proportion, wonderful new shoes or the safari-chic trend, [the customer] seems to be willing to spend money selectively again.

AFM: What makes the Neiman Marcus customer different from the rest?

KK: The woman buying from Neiman Marcus has very high expectations. She demands the best in quality, the best trends of the season and the most excellent customer service. She wants to shop in an environment that is interchanging and calming all at the same time. We strive for the best of everything: merchandise, customer service and environment.

AFM: Any new young designers we should keep our eyes on?

KK: There is tons of new talent. A few years ago, there was a discussion of the aging of designers such as Armani and Lagerfeld. Who would replace them? But there is so much talent. There are so many different young designers. We feel really good about the future of the industry.

AFM: You are responsible for bringing Prada to Neiman Marcus. When were you first introduced to the Italian house, and how did you know that your consumer would take such a liking to the product?

KK: On one of my first trips to Milan, we went to see a collection of black-and-navy nylon bags called Prada. For some reason, the bags resonated with me. We first tried them in three stores: Chicago, Westchester, N.Y., and Dallas. It took many, many seasons of nurturing this brand for the customer to understand why these nylon bags were the same prices as leather bags from Italy.

AFM: Your position requires you to be responsible for merchandising, advertising and marketing of Neiman Marcus. This demands inspiration and creativity. How do you meet these demands?

KK: I surround myself with very creative people. I travel to different kinds of places and those travels inspire me. And I love art and architecture.

AFM: What are some trends you never want to see again?

KK: Rompers for grown women [and] anklet socks with shoes.

AFM: While in Arizona, where are some of your favorite places to visit?

KK: [I] love Sedona and the colors and richness of that area. But mostly I love the people. They seem so similar in attitude to Texans: friendly, warm and independent.