

Macy's Fetes Incubator Designers

By DAVID MOIN

MACY'S ISN'T ENTIRELY about promoting big brands and the department store proved it Tuesday when 18 emerging designers came to the Herald Square flagship to show their latest merchandise.

The designers dined with Macy's Inc. chairman and chief executive officer Terry J. Lundgren in the boardroom, met with Calvin Klein's Francisco Costa, mingled with Macy's merchants and marketing executives, as well as media, in the makeshift showroom on the 13th-floor corporate office and mentioned how their collections and their own business skills reached a new level, thanks to Macy's Designers-in-Residence of the Fashion Incubators program.

Macy's, in collaboration with the cities of Philadelphia, San Francisco and Chicago; academic institutions including The Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania; industry organizations, and apparel firms, provides a select group of designers with work space and guidance for a year. They're mentored; take business courses, and meet industry experts who can help in various facets of the business, from marketing and manufacturing to establishing business plans. The fashion incubators program started at Macy's State Street flagship in Chicago in 2008, grew to Macy's Philadelphia and Macy's San Francisco a few years ago, and will be expanded to other major cities, according to company officials.

"One of the key challenges for these designers is the workspace," said Lundgren. "Pulling one together sounds simple but it's difficult. We provide the cutting boards, patternmaking tools, sewing machines and some of the technology associated with CAD," said Lundgren, referring to computer-aided design.

"They have the ideas and the talent but not necessarily the ability to make things happen," Lundgren added. "We provide them with the exposure and the tools. After a year, they've got to move on."

At his luncheon with the young designers, "I told them they should not go in with expectations that Macy's is going to buy them," said Lundgren. "Going from a start-up business to selling Macy's is practically impossible. They wouldn't move the needle for us. I didn't want them to be confused about the goal of the

program. The goal is for them to find their own way."

Macy's has yet to buy merchandise from any of the designers that are in or have gone through the program, though in Chicago, Lundgren noted, some samples were once sold. So what's the benefit to Macy's aside from the goodwill generated? "The number-one benefit is fostering new creativity and innovation in the fashion business," he said.

For the program's participants, the benefits are multifold. "It's helped me figure out who my customer is, select a showroom in New York and build relationships with stores. We're selling Paul Stuart now," among other retailers, said Lagi Nadeau of Chicago, among the 18 young designers at Macy's Tuesday. She said she has been in business for two years designing "feminine women's clothes with an edge."

"It's not a design program. It's a business program perfectly tailored to what I needed to learn," said Annina King, who two years ago started a ready-to-wear collection called Granaté Pret, which she described as "artisanal" in character considering the handwork involved.

Sarah Liller, a designer from San Francisco, said she creates for career women who like to have a good time. "The focus is on fabrics. Everything is washable. There's stretch and the silhouettes are very comfortable," she said. Among her products: skirts with Lycra and ponte biker jackets. "I really needed help to get into factories, with the production, the sales and marketing," she said. She credited the Macy's program for helping her find a factory in San Francisco to manufacture for her spring line, and for helping her expand her distribution by connecting her to four stores that decided to buy her line.

The Senpai + Kohai collection, which features vintage Indian embroidery, patchwork dresses and hand-woven fabrics from a Burmese weaver in Philadelphia, was launched in 2012 by Pia Panaligan and Melissa Choi. The partners acknowledged the line was launched via a Web site and they were virtually clueless about how to build a real business. That's where the Macy's program came in. "It's helped us to learn a lot about public relations, marketing and sales and definitely how to develop a solid business plan," said Panaligan.