

# Simply Vera Vera Wang Kicks Off at Kohl's

By WWD Staff

Kohl's Corp.'s nationwide launch Sunday of its new Simply Vera Vera Wang line was low-key at best — although early sales are anything but.

The Menomonee Falls, Wisc.-based retailer ran ads for the collection in *Vogue*, *In Style* and *Cosmopolitan*, trumpeted Simply Vera on its Web site, hung banners over store entrances and received plenty of editorial play, but crowds never materialized.

The company actually put Simply Vera into stores early last week, which might have stolen some of the official launch's thunder. Sources close to the retailer said sales were trending four times ahead of expectations and added Simply Vera Vera Wang was selling five times better than Chaps, which Kohl's launched in 2005.

At a Kohl's location in the West Hills community of Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley, shoppers benefitted from a roll-out earlier in the week. The store prominently showcased the line, displaying the collection at the front of the store in the Misses section and gave it corner play with three mannequins wearing a purple scoopneck tank dress, a lavender beaded shell top and bubble skirt and a purple ruffle blouse and black ankle pants.

A sales associate said the collection was selling well, from blouses to coats. Smaller sizes were sold out in some styles, such as the long one-button, short-sleeve coat in ash and black; the white, button-down shirt, and long-sleeve, crewneck T-shirts in lavender, ash, white and black.

Because the store was in the midst of inventory week, "Do Not Inventory" signs were plastered on mannequins throughout the collection, prohibiting associates from selling items from the display. That left one customer who couldn't buy the long coat on the mannequin disgruntled and she left empty-handed. The sales associate said those items would be available Sept. 17.

A handful of customers stopped by the store to see the line. Diann Karnitsky, an advertising sales representative from the Lake Balboa, Calif., neighborhood, planned to try on at least half a dozen tops, including a white beaded shell blouse. But, she expressed concern about the fabrics and prices.

"Some of the fabrics seem a little cheesy and some of these pieces are high-priced for Kohl's," she said. "I like the long coat, but I don't know if I want to spend \$128 on a coat at Kohl's when it may go on sale in one week."

The line had cross-generational appeal for the Wheeler family, who drove about 30 minutes from Pacific Palisades. Lynn Wheeler hoped to buy a pair of basic black jeans (\$50) and a white sweater with buttons (\$58). "The pictures in the ads looked really cute," Wheeler said. "I hope I can get some 'mom' clothes and get some dresses for my [11-year-old] daughter."

At the Nanuet, N.Y. store, the Simply Vera collection was sandwiched between racks of apparel by AB Studio, Nine & Co., Stamp 10 and Access. While a display with three mannequins wearing styles from the collection had a bit of breathing room, the Simply Vera fixtures were so close to racks holding the other brands it was hard to tell things apart. Four shelves with scrunched up Simply Vera sweaters occupied one corner of the display and tops were hung with skirts that didn't match.

During a two-hour period Sunday morning, only four women visited the display.

"They did a terrible job of promoting [Simply Vera] and it's not merchandised particularly well," said Amy Nadel, who traveled from northern New Jersey "where everything is closed on Sunday."

Nadel, who heard about the launch on the Internet, said she was surprised more shoppers hadn't shown up. However the jackets, pants and sweater she saw in a *Vogue* ad and came to buy were nowhere to be found. Nadel was also disappointed the store didn't have the shirred flyaway jacket in her size. "Considering that over half the women in America are a size 14 and above, they should have more sizes," she added. The line goes from size 4 to 16.

"When I see Simply Vera at Kohl's, I'm like, 'Wow,'" said Mary Lynch. "I can say, 'I'm wearing Vera Wang.'" Lynch, who was shopping for her son, continued: "I didn't hear about [the launch.] I wouldn't necessarily look at ads, but I'd notice it walking by." Picking up a camel-colored long textured coat for \$128, she said, "This is adorable. It's cute stuff. What I like about it is that it's not everywhere. I think it will last."

Christine DiRese made a special trip to Kohl's expecting the lines and chaos that



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A Simply Vera Vera Wang rack in Los Angeles.

sometimes attend designer introductions at moderately priced stores. "It's definitely not Vera, Vera Wang," she said. "But it's nice. The dresses look nice and I like the pintuck tops. I shop at Neiman Marcus and Nordstrom. The short sleeve black coat is beautiful. The prices are very affordable. She has a few very nice staples for working women. They're all chic."

But, said DiRese, the clothes still had to pass the litmus test — fit.

At the Kohl's unit on North Elston Avenue in Chicago, there were no lines, but a steady stream of curious customers did come by to check out the collection.

"We're here for this," said Susan Morocco, referring to Simply Vera. She arrived at the store at around 9:15 a.m. with friend Alex Mikos. "I had it on my calendar."

"I'm surprised," Mikos said, noting the lack of crowds. "We were expecting a huge line." Mikos, who was wearing a black puffed-sleeve blouse from the Libertine collection for Target's Go! International series and jeans, said that most of designer introductions at downtown Target locations sell out so quickly she has to call on her mother to scout suburban locations.

Morocco, who saw early images of Simply Vera in fashion magazines, recalled thinking that "it was gorgeous — simple and romantic with classic Vera Wang cuts. And I loved the rich jewel tones."

"I love the ruched belts," said Mikos.

Morocco bought a black skirt with satin pleats at the hem, a black satin topper coat, a white blouse with Empire waist, a sleeveless teal pleated top and a pair of black jewel-embellished flats, all for about \$400. "I spent more money than I thought possible," she said. "All the little details seemed to be there. I was impressed. We'll see how it wears."

At Kohl's at the Medallion Center near downtown Dallas, the Simply Vera Vera Wang display near the front of the store and the beauty department was empty of shoppers at 10 a.m. Sunday. Some time later, a shopper was browsing the styles. "I like the sophisticated colors and feminine styling that thankfully doesn't include a lot of loud prints," said the shopper, who declined to give her name. "The home selection is very Upper East Side with all the muted tones of purple, vanilla and gray."

Michael Stone, president and chief executive officer of the Beanstalk Group, a brand-licensing agency, believes Simply Vera will resonate with customers. "Vera Wang is not a made-up name," he said. "It's not a tired brand that's being reintroduced at mass. It's a vibrant, robust fashion brand that's living upstairs and succeeding upstairs."

Stone didn't expect a feeding frenzy for the collection because "the Kohl's customer knows it's there and going to be there for a while. It will bring customers to Kohl's."