

The Sun

Designer, Retailer Team Up To Woo Customers

By LESLIE HENDRICKSON, Staff Reporter of the Sun | October 3, 2007

Under a tree of paper apples, designer Wenlan Chia uses giant pink needles to teach a group of 30-something city women how to knit. Across the room, an assistant in ankle boots and a fitted vest helps the knitters with the pattern for a "Shopping Tunic," one of the designs in Ms. Chia's book, "Big City Knits." The chunky-chic tunic is also sold for \$228 at Anthropologie, the women's clothing retailer hosting the event at its Rockefeller Plaza store.

About 100 women, mostly in Anthropologie's core age demographic, 30–45, attended its reservations-only "Knit Know How" session last week to work on projects from Ms. Chia's book, meet and catch up with friends over sparkling cider, and, perhaps most important, shop. Anthropologie offered a storewide 15% discount for the knitters and a gift bag of knitting supplies, including yarn developed by Ms. Chia.

"At Anthropologie, they seem to be bringing back a certain art and nostalgia," a marketing professor at Columbia Business School, Ketty Maisonrouge, said. "They want to link their brand with craftsmanship and show that there is an actual human being doing the work." The event was the first of three knitting circles Ms. Chia will teach at Anthropologie this fall, each featuring a design from "Big City Knits," which is sold at the store. October begins the high-sales months for sweaters, and the company timed the knitting circles around its new catalog, "The Stitch Book," which features 60 items made of yarn. The catalog will be sent to Anthropologie customers October 15.

More than 300 people replied to Thursday's event and 350 are on the waiting list for the next one, on October 9, according to Anthropologie staff. The third Knit Know How circle will be held November 1.

These events are an excellent tool for stores to build good customer relations, Ms. Maisonrouge said. They give customers an experience to remember, especially when they are learning a new skill or are made to feel special through an exclusive invitation, she added. "When you do events like that, where customers don't have to buy, they end up buying more," she said.

The knitting circles don't hurt

Ms. Chia's visibility, either. The designer arrived in Manhattan in 1991 from Taiwan and studied art history at New York University and needlepoint at the Fashion Institute of Technology. She

started her company, Twinkle by Wenlan, in 2000 after years of knitting for herself. Her first collection was launched in 2002, and she now has 10 full-time employees. Ms. Chia, whose sweater and ready-to-wear collections are also sold at Barneys, Bloomingdale's, and Nordstrom, said she thought Anthropologie was the perfect place to find an audience for the knitting classes she envisioned.

"I'm thinking of knitting as a classic craft that needs a new audience. With big needles and fast yarn, it goes fast and it fits into the modern lifestyle," Ms. Chia, wearing a navy dress with a thin studded collar, said.

Retailers and designers often team up for promotions, though not necessarily for an hour of arts and crafts and a mini-wrap, but Anthropologie was instantly on board.

"It's so great to have a partner like Anthropologie, who understands my fashion philosophy, which is to mix everything up — a chunky sweater with fashion of the moment," Ms. Chia said.

Philadelphia-based Anthropologie was established in 1992 and is owned by Urban Outfitters Inc. As of July 31, Urban Outfitters' net sales for the year were \$663 million, and its stock closed at \$22.62 yesterday. The company has 218 stores nationwide, but the Rockefeller Plaza Anthropologie is the only one to feature Ms. Chia's classes.

"It was a good fit," a spokeswoman for Urban Outfitters, Sara Goodstein, said. "Our customers love crafts. They love Wenlan."

Knitting is the hobby du jour for crafty types, with knitting stores popping up all over the city, Brooklyn bars hosting weekly knitting circles, and several books penned on the subject recently. And in the knit world, Ms. Chia is the hippest knitter around.

"People are starting to recognize Wenlan's knits without looking at the label," the senior sweater buyer at Anthropologie, Kathy Stromsem, said. The store has carried the Twinkle line for about three years, and although the hand-knit sweaters are priced at the higher end of the sweater collections, which ranges between \$68 and \$398, customers still shell out for the chunky knits.

A lawyer who started knitting a year ago, Heather Hollaway, said Ms. Chia provides contemporary patterns for an intermediate level. "Big City Knits" features "hip stuff that you can do," Ms. Hollaway said. She bought a sweater and a few \$10 skeins of yarn to finish the "Shopping Tunic" she began under Ms. Chia's tutelage.

For some beginners, just casting on was frustrating. Fortunately for them, the tunic was available for purchase — at the 15%, knitters-only discount. And they could always say the woman who made it was in their knitting circle.