What a difference a year makes. In the case of Neiman Marcus, two years is night and day. In May 2020, the upscale Dallas-based retailer founded in 1907 filed for Chapter 11, citing the pandemic store closures as the final straw.

Fast-forward to May 2021, as everyday activities and in-person events came back to life thanks to the widespread adoption of the Covid-19 vaccines, Neiman's kicked off a series of highly produced pop-up experiences that have defined its path forward fueled by a $600 million investment in its retail strategy.

Now, just over 13 months, the store has hosted over 3,200 events that have helped draw its clientele back where the retail pundits said they would never go again: the physical store.

FashionNetwork.com spoke to Neiman Marcus president and chief merchandising officer Lana Todorovich about the department store chain’s strategy of belief in IRL (in real life) experiences and integrated omnichannel platform, the silver lining behind the closures, and its continued legacy of supporting emerging talents.

“We were the lonely voice saying we wanted to invest $300 Million in our physical stores at a time when that wasn’t a popular statement,” said Todorovich in a video meeting on the eve of their latest activation with Burberry.

“The pandemic was about digital, but now we are focusing on the stores on top of the investments we were making in digital, developing our Connect platform, and acquiring Stylize. The digital foundation was there for us, so we...
in digital, developing our Connect platform, and acquiring Stylyze. The digital foundation was there for us, so we focused on the stores too.” (Stylyze is a machine-learning, cloud-based SaaS platform Neiman Marcus style advisors use in their toolkit for remote selling).

Todorovich revealed that Neiman’s has a third channel for sales engagement beyond in-store and online purchases. Its Connect platform, which pairs shoppers with a personal style advisor online, was born directly out of the pandemic store closures, and the concept took hold.

“We were on the forefront of remote selling, which was born out of necessity during the shutdowns,” she said, explaining the genesis of Connect, which had millions of engagements within a few weeks. (Today, that figure has reached 9 million emails or text messages sent to customers from associates).

The multi-faceted omnichannel gave the retailer a “clear vision that customers shop in an eco-system between channels,” according to the executive. Data supports this approach as stats show those who shop online versus just in-store spend twelve times the amount as those who just shop in the store.

That said, the retailer knew that once its clients came back in-person post after the first phase pandemic, they wanted a fresh start.

“We recognized the desire to connect differently,” she said. The first prominent activation, an experiential pop-up with the Prada beach collection, crystallized their instinct to provide a new ‘retail-tainment’ environment. Todorovich described the pop-up, including LED screens depicting waves crashing onto a beach, natural sand on the floor, models posing as lifeguards, and a gelato station. “It felt like you were at the beach. Everyone invited to the opening came and lingered after to chat, engage, or even hug each other,” she recalled.

“I spoke to Marcelo Noschese of Prada a few minutes ago, and we talked about that moment. It felt like a joyful way to come back to shopping, life, fashion, and relationships, all of that,” she shared. “We knew we were on to something, and we tapped into that with the customers craving human connection and interaction.”

From there, the brand embarked on several notable experiences, such as the Loewe X Paula’s Ibiza activation in the Beverly Hills store and the Tyler the Creator Golf le Fleur event that also took place there. Others included an ice-skating rink in the Dallas NorthPark store with Maison Francis Kurkdjian and the Balmain X Barbie experience that drove home the digital connection and the success of the over-the-top collaborations.

“We had that foundation, but this took to a new level of sentiment with the Prada event, and we built upon that by doubling the size of events to accommodate demand,” she continued, noting that event yielded seven figures after just a few days at one location.

It was the beginning of the trend to amplify events. For example, in the past quarter, Neiman Marcus has had over 1,000 events—think trunk shows, personal appearances, beauty launches, masterclasses, and more. The investment is paying off digitally too. The hot pink-bathed Balmain event generated 192 million impressions in January 2021, and the featured video on Instagram became the most-watched in Neiman Marcus’ social media history. Furthermore, customer demand online for Balmain tripled on the days leading up to, during, and after the event.
Its latest project with Burberry—chosen to be in the retailer’s Atlanta store based on its top performer status of the British brand helmed by Riccardo Tisci—debuted on June 17 and boasts wrapping the entire exterior of the store in a pattern made from the new TB logo and classic plaid motif.

Todorovich says product exclusivity is also crucial. “There was a bit of a frenzy with the Barbie collection. One hundred percent of the collectible bags sold with the entire capsule selling through seventy percent within a week,” she confirmed, adding online sales contribute to sell-through. On June 20th, the Valentino Escape pop-up was unveiled with fifty exclusive vacation-ready styles that used retro 60s and 70s prints from the Roman couture house.

From a content perspective, the installations also pay off. For instance, the Balmain pop-up editorial story was also number one in January when the pop-up took place. “We hosted ten pop-up experiences over the last twelve months, which collectively garnered 500 million impressions. The digital component supports the in-person events.”

While major brands and budgets may direct these more significant events, Neiman’s is still committed to supporting the little guy.

“Neiman’s has a history of discovering and nurturing talent,” Todorovich reminds. Indeed, a young Christian Dior won the prestigious The Neiman Marcus Award for Distinguished Service in the Field of Fashion award in 1947. Coco Chanel owes her 1954 comeback to the tony retailer who supported her return. (She would also win the store’s prize in 1957).

Recently they hosted a launch event for Salon 1884, a new ready-to-wear designer by multi-discipline artist Andrea Mary Marshall. They also will carry the collection of fellow Texan Bach Mai, who designed for Maison Margiela under John Galliano, among others who debuted a collection during the last NYFW.

“He’s from Houston. He said something interesting at our last meeting. Tom Ford, Brandon Maxwell, and designers from Texas uniquely understand this idea of American glamour and how to show fashion in a special way,” said Todorovich, noting Mai’s evening dresses are part of an important category for the retailer. Another eveningwear label from Italy sold after being featured in the Resort catalog.

Other young labels Neiman’s is currently excited about include buzzy New York designer Peter Do; Italian-made sustainable vegan shoe brand, Piferi; the edgy Japanese streetwear brand Mastermind; and Lebanese eveningwear Monot, who was picked up after a Paris debut in September 2021.

The president also mentioned that nine Neiman Marcus stores, including the New York City area store in Paramus, New Jersey, are getting remodeled as part of the retail investment.

“Fashion is at the heart of our business,” she said. “It's not the sprinkles on the top of other things but the core of what we do. We are very busy [delivering luxury product curation]. We are having so much fun.”

By Benjamin Fitzgerald