

TWO RETAILERS TELL HOW THEY PUT THEIR ALL INTO SERVING CONSUMERS WITH FOOT PROBLEMS / BY TIM SITEK

HEARTS MINDS FEET

Purpose and passion drive retailers serving the sweet spot of today's footwear market, namely the burgeoning ranks of customers looking for comfort or solutions to a myriad health needs. These retailers sweat the details, take the risks and spend time finding the shoe that fits.

Here's a look at how two independent retailers find a healthy business by catering to customers interested in healthy feet.

FOOT SOLUTIONS, SCOTTSDALE, ARIZONA BETTER HEALTH THROUGH CUSTOMERS' FEET



Sue Orischak

SUE ORISCHAK DISCOVERED THE business through necessity and chance. "I married a bad back with bad feet," she quips about her husband. While living in Denver, she and her husband went searching for solutions, well, at a Foot Solutions store. The light bulb burned brightly when she saw first-hand the crying need for a business dedicated to helping customers find relief from foot, hip, back and other problems.

Chance came about when the couple decided to forsake mountain country for the desert. The Orischaks wanted to move to Scottsdale, and lo and behold an existing Foot Solutions franchise was for sale. "We weren't looking for a business; it found us," Orischak says.

That was seven years ago.

Since then, Orischak has moved and expanded the store to 2300-square feet. Along the way, she has turned the store into the top performer among the retailer's nearly 250 stores in 13 countries.

Her devotion to helping people looking for relief and comfort led her to earn her pedorthic certification soon after she took over the store's operations. "I saw the need," she says of earning her C.Ped six years ago. "It adds to our expertise and experience." As a C.Ped, she does whatever is necessary to modify the footbed or provide custom orthotics to ensure the shoe fits every customer's needs.

Those needs cover a broad range — athletic, casual, dress and sandals. The store stocks about 30 brands, including MBT

RETAIL

and Mephisto, Mozo and PG Lite, Brooks and Spring Boost, Bella Margiano and Aetrex.

Orischak takes pride in becoming one of the first brick and mortar store in the states to carry MBT. “You have to take risks,” she says. “You have to innovate. You have to see the value of the function.”

She uses her C.Ped training to ensure that everyone in the store understands that value proposition, especially the proper way to fit feet. “I work one-on-one with our staff,” she notes. Plus, there are countless vendor training days, collective training with

the six other Foot Solution franchised stores in the area and training modules supplied by Foot Solutions. She also attends as many footwear events as possible, including those sponsored by Foot Solutions, the National Shoe Retailers Association and Formula4 Media.

By and large, she credits suppliers with making strides in serving the market with features that address a wide range of needs. Plus, those suppliers do a good job in helping educate the staff. The only downside is suppliers are playing it closer to the



You have to innovate. You have to see the value of the function.”

Sue Orischak

vest with inventory. They simply aren't stocking as deeply as they did before the recession so customers often find it easier to use the Internet than special order a shoe in their size.

Her expertise, along with the growing reputation of the Foot Solutions' concept, garners attention from the medical community. She gets referrals from orthopedists, podiatrists, physical therapists and general practitioners. “I should do more with the healthcare community but a lot of it is word of mouth,” she notes.

The bulk of her business hits the over-40 market, with women representing 60 percent of sales. She reaches those customers through targeted efforts. Existing customers receive direct mail and e-mails. The store reaches new customers through print

COOL COMFORT BODY & SOLE, FRANKFORT, KENTUCKY SHOE BUSINESS RUNS DEEP



Francee Sheridan and Leesa Unger

AS A FORMER SALES REP OUTSIDE the shoe business, Francee Sheridan decided to change places behind the counter by opening a footwear store in Frankfort, KY. That experience certainly helped in understanding retail operations and the challenges and opportunities of running a store. Francee had even more inside knowledge from her husband Jim, a sales rep for Saucony for 30 years and counting.

After opening its doors more than five years ago, Cool Comfort has evolved into the area's premier place to shop for comfort and more. That evolution has meant three moves, including its current home in a strip mall right next to a Walmart. With 2500-square feet, the store has added shoe lines and apparel, along with a host of accessories. It now attracts a loyal following in its small town, and even draws in customers from Louisville and Lexington.

Originally, Jim wanted to stick to his roots in athletic footwear but Francee saw a need to expand well beyond the jock market. Today, the store does the bulk of its business with women, especially 30 and older, but men don't receive short shrift. The selection runs the gamut

— athletic, work and casual. With nearly 20 brands in stock, customers can find everything from non-slip work shoes for those on their feet all day to running shoes such as Brooks and, of course, Saucony to fashion comfort brands such as Aravon, Dansk and Uggs.

Part of the store's continuing outreach to customers includes several apparel brands, which led to the addition of Body & Sole to the store's name. There's Moving Comfort for athletes, Exofficio for the adventuresome, Old Guys Rule for men who find age a badge of honor and more. There's even a selection of InnoVa products for Frisbee golfers and AmeriBags for those who want a healthy yet stylish handbag.

“No matter what we want the store to be, the customer dictates it,” Francee says. “We both decide this but I want it to go further than that. We are always trying to find something. We want people to get out of their comfort zone. I think it's important to add some fashion to the function.”

Cool Comfort reaches its customers through a variety of marketing techniques, Francee says. The store does its own version of GroupOn offers by placing a coupon on its Facebook

Sue Orischak



media, since they still read the paper, she says. It's a joint effort with other area stores that fly the Foot Solutions banner, which allows the owners to pool their resources and run full-color advertorials in the *Arizona Republic*. The stores often use a craft wrap that draws attention in the area's primary newspaper.

Orischak takes service a step further, too. "I've always been an artist so my creative side has allowed us to do things out of the box. I'll take an ugly shoe and embellish it, or a Plain Jane orthopedic shoe and give it some flair,"

she says.

Her ability to put the customer in the right shoe with the right look, even if she has to provide that look, has helped keep sales steady as the economy hit Scottsdale pretty hard. Her customer-centric approach and tenacity give her reason to be optimistic about the future.

"Anybody who has weathered the last few years should be OK," she says. "I see a bright positive outlook, especially with the boomers."

Or, in her typical fashion of stating it simply: "We like people with feet." ●



No matter what we want the store to be, the customer dictates it."

Francee Sheridan

page every Thursday. It uses Constant Contact to send e-mails to its customer base, and television ads work well to bring in new customers while promoting the store's image. Cool Comfort practices what it preaches, too, by hosting weekly running groups in its store and at a local coffee shop. And it sponsors several races, including a triecta series started by a local physical therapist that appeals to runners of all levels.

Its commitment to customer service remains the heart and soul of keeping customers and the word of mouth praise that spreads to new shoppers. Customers can have their gait analyzed using a Flip camera.

There's iStep to measure foot size and pressure points to determine the right shoe and orthotic. And there's Jim, a certified pedorthist, who provides custom orthotics and modifications to ensure footwear meets every customer's needs.

Jim earned his C.Ped through the Robert M. Palmer Institute of Biomechanics, which promotes pedorthic education throughout the world from its base in Elmwood, IN. Jim saw this as a natural fit with his business of both repping and selling shoes.

"You have to get the person in the right shoe," he notes. "We try to overdo it so they understand the value." That's a big plus when selling shoes and orthotics at full price, he adds. It's a big enough plus that another employee will soon attend the institute to begin her certification process, Francee says.

As for orthotics, Jim can certainly customize these for customers but over-the-counter orthotics have come a long way. It's become the store's top seller in both units and revenue, Francee notes. Power Step and Footbalance are its leading orthotic brands, with

the latter allowing the store to do a custom mold for insoles in 15 minutes for \$90.

Its ability to outfit customers with the right shoe and orthotic haven't gone unnoticed in the medical community. Orthopedists and physical therapists in particular refer customers to Cool Comfort. Podiatrists on the other hand often try to keep the business to themselves, Jim notes, but a new law in Kentucky will make that a little tougher.

Word of mouth has brought the business from medical

professionals. The store hasn't held a doctor's night but it always showcases its service and skills when a medical professional walks through the door. "We'll put them through the fitting like a true customer," Jim says.

Training keeps the staff up to speed. "It's constant. It's interesting. The staff always wants more information," Jim says. Staff regularly visit a Web site dedicated to technical training. The site serves as a clearinghouse to host training from participating suppliers. After completing a clinic, suppliers then often reward the sales associate with product.

The suppliers who really care also provide great training support. "The athletic people do a great job. People like Aetrex, Aravon and Timberland Pro also do a great job," Francee says, adding that "some of the brown shoe people need to do more."

And those suppliers have come a long way in providing product that benefits consumers, Francee says. "It's getting better. There are companies that understand it. Some just don't care."

But caring is what keeps Cool Comfort moving forward. ●

