

Well, here it is, a new season. Shoes for summer have gone through the door and it's time for you to think about spring 2009; it is beckoning you to the drawing board. Your numbers came in a few percentage points under forecast this season, a trend you've noticed over the last few quarters. There's an undercurrent in the industry, at least here in the US, that you just can't seem to get a pulse on.

The right choice of footwear can save you from injury

By Maribeth Bunch

You've re-engineered your processes, you can't run any leaner and your supply chain is meeting the mark with software tools such as manufacturing resource planning, but as you randomly click through the channels of your television set, you can't help but notice a 'swing' in advertising campaigns, a drop in the housing market, gas prices going up and economists predicting that this is just the beginning of bleak times that await retail over the next couple of years.

The US government is mailing taxpayers 'stimulus cheques', in the hope of injecting a boost back into the economy, but will this be enough? Is the footwear industry going to be able to stand on its own two feet through this blistering economy, or is it time to reinvent something so basic as 'the shoe' to simply stay in the retail game?

Maybe it's time to take the spotlight off the 'shoe' and put it back on the 'consumer'. Let's face it, colour and style are starting to blend in the industry. Competition is fiercer than ever, the melting pot is growing smaller with newbies fighting for a small seat in the arena with new concepts and innovative technologies. It's perhaps more difficult than ever to make your brand stand out above the rest.

Customer knowledge

You must ask yourself if you know who your target customer for next season is and who the competition is focusing on. To find out, you can hit the trade magazines, Google, and get up to

speed researching fresh ideas.

If you look at the stats you will discover that more than half of the footwear industry has had to discount product (with offers such as 'Buy one, get one free') to move it out the door. Big decisions will need to be made, because moving at this pace, you'll never survive.

As you blankly stare at your television screen watching the basketball playoffs, you realise that your customer could be right in front of you on the screen. Do those guys really care about the bright red stripes or do they care about performance and benefit? You observe their intense focus as they dribble the ball down the

NBA basketball star Sebastian Telfair tries out the adidas 1 basketball shoe, which provides intelligent cushioning by automatically adjusting itself.

 adidas



court, as they pivot into position, as they jump to shoot. They're not thinking about their feet, they're on the court and in the game, running, jumping, pivoting.

You may also notice, however, that a key player is on the sidelines sitting out one of the most important games of the season because of plantar fasciitis (a common foot injury). Then it hits you: proper footwear can prevent sports injuries so that players can stay in the game through the entire season. It's time to get back to the drawing board and take notes. Learning about the most common foot-related sports injuries and how to prevent them would be the way to go, so that you are not hanging dry on the sidelines yourself when it's time to tally up market share at the end of your season.

A lesson in foot anatomy

Did you know the foot has 26 bones, 33 joints, over 100 ligaments, multiple layers of muscles and tendons as well as a network of nerves and blood vessels and seven layers of skin? During a 10-kilometre run, the feet will strike the ground on average around 9,500 times.

Achilles tendon injuries outpace most other sports-related foot injuries by a good sprint. The great news is that preventing this type of injury is directly related to footwear in three ways: properly fitted footwear can be a major factor in preventing, recovering from and preventing the recurrence of achilles tendon injuries. Unfortunately, the reverse is true as well: incorrect footwear can increase the likelihood of achilles tendon injuries, delay recovery, and increase the chance of a reoccurrence.

An achilles tendon injury is a sign that a footwear change should be made. For most people, inexpensive improvements in footwear can make a huge difference to their achilles tendons. For example, temporarily inserting a small piece of felt under the heel can reduce tendon stretching and add cushioning; you can also add arch support inserts.

For most people (approximately 85%), simply wearing better fitting shoes and shoes designed for the sport you play can be the difference. If you are someone who has unique feet (approximately 15%), custom-made or custom-fit shoe inserts (with arch supports and orthotics) or shoes are required.

Not too high and not too much

As with most things, moderation is important. Too much heel cushioning is bad for the achilles tendon. The same is true for heel height. The heel of most running shoes is slightly cushioned and slightly elevated, which is fine.

Racing flats, heelless spikes, worn out shoes, moccasins with no cushioning, heel heights lower than 12–15 mm, and shoes with



The foot, with 26 bones, 33 joints, over 100 ligaments, multiple layers of muscles and tendons as well as a network of nerves and blood vessels and seven layers of skin, is a complex thing – and easily damaged.

cushioning that is too soft are bad extremes on the no cushioning, no height side. Cushioning is too soft if the heel sinks lower than the front of the foot. Too little cushioning and heel height overly strains and stretches the achilles tendon.

The key in selecting the type of footwear is to correctly match the footwear to an individual's requirements. A proper 'fit' means a lot more than just the right shoe size. It means the correct width, arch support, cushioning (for step-shock absorption), firmness (too much mobility and movement can cause a foot injury during a game), height, and heel height (this is why women do not play sports in high heels).

The foot provides the support, balance and mechanics for propulsion which we depend on for any exercise involving foot contact with the ground. The foot will absorb up to five times your body weight during sports or training. What that boils down to is this: wearing the correct shoe for the sport you are playing is of crucial importance, not only to protect your feet but also to maximise your performance.

Buying a shoe can be a complicated and confusing process due to the large range of brands and styles to choose from, but clever companies can differentiate their brands by highlighting sports injury prevention as a benefit.

There hasn't been a more exciting time in the footwear industry than now. Not only is it important to make a shoe that can protect the foot from the elements of daily life, but it's equally important to protect the foot from injury so the consumer can enjoy sport and exercise. Your job then is to 'build it and they will come' – the opportunities are endless. 

Maribeth Bunch is a pedorthist and the founder of walk2bfit.com, a source of information and specialist footwear for people with health concerns.