

Because shrinking and pinking isn't enough...

by Shari Shallard

Two years ago, Matt Powell wrote a piece for his market research company's blog entitled "Winning Women Over Through Sports Marketing." Mr. Powell, senior sports industry advisor and vice president of the NPD Group, contended that the athletic industry had traditionally been considered a "guy" industry and that real opportunity awaited

those footwear brands willing to explore the female side a little more thoughtfully.

Historically, Powell wrote, most athletic brands have used the strategy of "shrink it and pink it" to develop women's products. But, tailoring a man's shoe to a woman's foot is not the solution.

Maybe something was in the air in 2016. That same year, adidas announced the release of



PureBoost X, a running shoe designed specifically for women. We'll look at the shoe more closely in a moment, but it is worth noting that the idea itself was greeted as revolutionary.

Adidas was studying the female foot in order to design a shoe specifically for females. Imagine that.

In the two years that have since passed, the flood of women-specific footwear one might have expected hasn't appeared and the market for female-focused footwear remains wide open. The closing lines of Powell's 2016 blog still ring surprisingly true today: "There's a gap in the industry," he wrote, "which I see as an opportunity for brands to step in and better understand and speak to women's retail needs."

Despite the size of this gap, a number of products, brands and retailers have established themselves (or are currently carving out a spot) in this space. They are realising, it seems, that serving the sports footwear market for women involves far more than just going pink.

Revolutionary? Rykä begs to differ

Adidas may be the biggest name to take on the female market so directly, but Rykä has

been quietly doing so since 1987. Rykä was founded by Sheri Poe, whose honesty and openness in the early nineties about her own troubling history (which included sexual assault and subsequent post-traumatic stress disorder, eating disorders and depression) helped to cultivate an early intimacy and loyalty with female consumers. An early advertisement showed a woman looking depressed on one side of the page and exercising on the other; the tagline read "Sometimes the only way to work it out is to work it out".

In 1997, Rykä merged with another company, then in 2011 was bought by Brown Shoe, which changed its name to Caleres in 2015. Still based in California, Rykä is in good company as part of the Caleres portfolio of global footwear brands, which includes Via Spiga, Diane Von Furstenberg, Dr Scholl's and more. Rykä carries training, running, walking and casual shoes, along with boots and sandals, all for women. Just for women.

"Our shoes are made for women," Rachel Zakoura, Rykä's marketing manager, tells WSA. "They fit a woman's unique foot shape, muscle movement and build. They are not simply a

Female-specific shoes account for, among other factors, how women's forefoot expands upon impact.

 adidas





The first Nike Women store in Europe opened in London in 2015, following the launch of two other Nike Women stores in California and China.

 Nike

sized-down version of a men's shoe. Our design philosophy integrates all of our technologies into one of the most researched, women-specific fits in the industry."

The science behind Rykå shoes is fundamental to the brand, taking into account that a woman's foot shape, muscle movement and skeletal structure are all inherently different from a man's. As a result of differences in the alignment of the knee joint, women are more likely to shift weight to the outside of their feet, leading to over-pronation, instability upon foot strike and a higher risk of injury. Rykå takes such factors into account, along with a woman's need for a narrower heel, roomier forefoot, increased instep volume and a more secure footbed.

"Being a women's-only brand," said Ms Zakoura, "we are hyper-focused on the silhouette, materials, and special details of the shoe to make it uniquely feminine."

While Rykå doesn't have the ubiquitous brand recognition of the Nikes and Reeboks of the world, its consumer base has steadily grown since day one. A 1994 Ad Age interview with Ms Poe talks about Rykå sales doubling every year since its 1987 launch. By 1993, sales had hit \$15 million, a modest figure compared to big name competitors, but a sure sign that women were embracing the brand from very early on.

Today, the company is serving women all over the globe. "We have a strong following in Japan, particularly for our dance fitness shoes," said Ms Zakoura. "Our customers there love the fit and function of our shoes and particularly gravitate towards bright colours and materials, so we cater specific materialisations to this market."

The sense of community on which Rykå was built features prominently this season. "We are quite excited and proud of our spring campaign, highlighting the Rykå Tribe," Ms Zakoura

explains. "It is meant to embrace our individuality and the strength women gain when we support each other. We believe this community mentality is a way of life that can have nothing but a positive effect."

Sales figures for last year aren't publicly available, but, according to NPD's retail tracking service, Rykå sales increased 10% in the 12 months through August 2017, outpacing the overall women's athletic footwear market, which experienced a growth of just 1%. Perhaps even adidas is paying attention to those numbers.

Adidas looks at the female foot

When adidas launched the PureBoost X, they announced it to be a running shoe specifically for women in which "high performance meets high fashion".

The high performance part comes from motion tracking technology used to study the female foot and how it moves during running. The design includes a "floating arch", inspired by the contours of the female foot, with adaptive stretch mesh wrapping underneath the midfoot to deliver support. (The high fashion part comes from fashion designer Stella McCartney, who said she worked alongside female athletes to "capture their individual energy and provide them with a product that enhances their confidence to surpass their personal best every time".)

The floating arch is an integral distinction in this shoe, as it accommodates women's (typically) higher arches. The shoe's shape also allows for women's typically narrower heels and a wider forefoot which can expand by up to 10 millimetres every time the foot hits the ground. These are the types of nuance that get missed when a woman's shoe is simply a modified, smaller version of a man's shoe.

At the end of 2016, adidas released ACE and X

soccer boots; both were engineered specifically for the female foot in terms of shape, design and traction. This factored in what adidas research found to be a lower in-step and narrower foot bend, which called for a new kind of outsole tooling. Both boots also have shorter, smaller studs that are positioned differently than in men's boots; the studs' height and diameter are designed for female's rotational and linear traction.

Today, these lines - PureBoost, ACE and X - continue to expand, suggesting the market is rewarding adidas' investment in female-specific footwear. Watch this space to see if the other big names follow suit.

Infrastructure for women-only retail

Whether or not they're designing shoes specifically for the female foot, most athletic footwear brands offer a substantial selection of products for their female customers. By and large, these women's shoes are sold alongside men's footwear at unisex stores, but several paradigm-shifting openings over the last few years reflect a growing focus on women's fitness and shopping experience.

It is worth a brief mention that, ironically, a bellwether of the female-focused movement, Lady Foot Locker (part of the enormously successful Foot Locker chain) is getting reabsorbed by its gender-neutral parent. The first Lady Foot Locker opened 1982, carrying women's shoes and apparel. At its peak in the early 2000s, there were more than 500 Lady Foot Locker stores in the United States and Puerto Rico. Now that number has dipped below 200 as the chain prunes its portfolio and refocuses more on general footwear retail.

However, Lady Foot Locker is an exception. In the last three years, Nike has opened three women's-only stores, with locations in London, Shanghai, and Newport Beach, California. Nike Women stores offer bespoke services such as pant hemming, bra fitting, and gait analysis.

The Nike Women stores are reaching beyond retail, aiming to create a comprehensive fitness-centred experience and community. The

London store, for example, offers free weekly training club classes and a Nike+ running club. A digital booking system allows customers to reserve spots at sessions throughout London, and the store hosts special events to celebrate key moments in sport and fashion. The locations in China and California have similar offerings.

"Our women's business has never been stronger," said Heidi O'Neill, general manager of Nike Stores, when the London Nike Women store was launched. "Our deep connections with women at retail are helping fuel this growth."

Adidas has also shown up in the UK with its own women-only venue: adidas Fitness London. The fitness studio offers a range of classes, including barre and yoga, along with nutrition workshops and run clubs, all for free.

By empowering women to sidestep the often-prohibitively high cost of joining a London gym, adidas is creating a safe and accessible place for current and potential female consumers to build community and loyalty. The launch of this women-specific venue, by the way, coincided with the release of the women-specific UltraBoost X running shoe.

The shoes were "tested" at the studio's opening during a night-time run by a throng of female athletes and fitness bloggers. The scene was captivating: a red smoke bomb kicked off the run, and each woman took off with a red safety light attached to her head and UltraBoost X running shoes on her feet.

Vlogs [video blogs] and other videos from the night show an organic enthusiasm that would be difficult to generate through traditional marketing practices. Health and fitness writer Klaudia Balogh, in her own video report, affirmed that adidas was on to something: "It may have been the shoes, the community, the atmosphere, or, most likely, all of the above," she said, "but the energy was at its peak in the studio after the run."

Although this isn't a retail location - and most likely not a money maker - adidas' continued investment in the female consumer may prove to be invaluable. 



Adidas female-specific soccer boots have shorter, smaller studs.

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