

South Africa's answer to TOMS overcomes setbacks to secure manufacturing in the country, and aims to tackle poverty and foot-borne disease with its buy-one-get-one strategy.

Vosk believes charity begins at home

For Wesley Vos, October 2019 is a significant month. It will see the first large-scale batch of South Africa-made Vosk shoes roll off a production line, ready for sale in the country's retailers.

For such a nascent company, it has already overcome big setbacks, but the dream to produce shoes designed and made entirely in the country is finally a reality.

Although merely a schoolboy in Cape Town at the time, Mr Vos cites the devastating Asian tsunami in 2004 as his inspiration to help people. He moved to Stellenbosch to study and following a stint in financial services began to investigate the buy-one-get-one strategy.

"I researched brands doing it with products such as backpacks, socks and soap but the shoes stuck with me the most," he says. "We always joke that if you're not in your bed, you're in your shoes – that's where you spend most of your time, so it's worth investing in a good pair."

After 18 months of market research, he designed a sneaker and secured investment, with the premise being that all components and manufacturing would be done within the country. This would help to secure jobs, he believes, and people in South Africa love and support locally produced products. A factory in Durban was selected and Mr Vos moved the 1,200km from Cape Town for three months to oversee initial set up. "Once I was confident, I packed up my stuff and came back home," he says. "Then all these delay tactics started and eventually we realised we were never going to get our shoes. We lost a lot of money and I had to go back to my investors and tell them we've been conned."

Undeterred, he returned to investors, cap in hand, and defaulted production to China. The first shoes were ready in August 2018.

"It was great that we had shoes but we are a South African brand helping people in South Africa, we really wanted to close the loop, so earlier this year I met a sourcing agent in Durban, who had a relationship with a local factory. We flew there again and have been setting up production with them," he says. "This time, we did our due diligence!"

The company describes itself as a sneaker-loving community that wants to make a difference.

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Samaritan's Feet

Key to the business is a partnership with charity Samaritan's Feet, whose volunteers not only donate shoes to children but wash their feet, as a symbolic gesture, and offer encouragement. It was founded in 2003 by Nigerian Emmanuel Ohonme, who, as a child, won a pair of shoes in a competition organised by a US missionary. He describes the chance to own shoes "was beyond his wildest dreams", but more important were the words of encouragement given to him by the 'good Samaritan'.

"Myself, family and friends were doing charity work at an orphanage near Cape Town and I saw all these people washing the kids' feet, and chatting with them and giving them shoes," said Mr Vos. "I thought, 'wow'. I had recently set up the footwear company and knew I wanted to get involved."

The World Health Organisation estimates that more than 1.5 billion people, or 24% of the world's population, are infected with soil-transmitted helminths, and more than 830 million children live in areas where these parasites are intensively transmitted.

When a customer buys a pair of Vosk shoes, money is donated to Samaritan's Feet to buy shoes – in a similar manner to US brand TOMS – and they are also invited to join a private Facebook group, which offers the chance to join the team on Giving Days.

"We go with the charity to the areas where we distribute the shoes, and we chat with the kids while we wash their feet. We ask questions - what sports do they play, what's their favourite subject, etc. It's such an amazing experience, chatting with the kids, washing their feet, humbling yourself. Then we give them a pair of shoes and end with a hug or a high five."

The future

A distinctive style feature of the Vosk shoe, and one that has proved tricky for the mould makers, is the map of Africa on the sole. The sneakers are available in one main style, from UK 4 to 11, in various colours. "What's nice about local orders is that minimum order quantities are so much lower, so we can do collaborations, and limited editions, for instance for Mandela Day."

With the new designs ready, the next step is to increase the distributor network and stockists across South Africa. E-commerce is still at an early stage, and it is more usual for people to shop in stores, so boosting the retail footprint is key. A partnership with an agent in the US will push sales there, and the company is seeking distributors in the UK and elsewhere.

Early next year the company will start to widen the range, and the aim is to produce the shoes



Customers are invited to join Giving Days, where they work alongside Samaritan's Feet to donate to local children.

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Founder Wesley Vos. Vosk uses the hashtag #Imprintafrica on social media, which represents 'helping people along the way'.

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in leather. "We have the most amazing tanneries around so all our components will continue to be sourced locally so we can keep creating jobs down the supply chain," says Mr Vos.

South Africa's answer to TOMS might be small, but it could soon make a big imprint. "We understand that kids need moral support and inspiration to go with a pair of bright new shoes," says Mr Vos. "We do our best to give them both. And, with help, we can vastly increase the spread of transformation, not diseases."

Although the sole will feature a map of Africa the new range will differ slightly to the original but will be 'better quality'.

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