

Brown's Shoe Fit Company:

The Business Model Behind 110 Years of Shoe Retailing Success

ALLIE JEKA

"Whatever drives you – whether it's leading people, giving people opportunities, or making an income to support your family – you have an opportunity to do it with our company," promises Steve Ruzek, President of Brown's Shoe Fit Company. In speaking with Steve, his passion for his job, his staff, and his customers consistently shines through.

Steve originally went to school to be a teacher, but changed his path when he helped a friend with his family's shoe store and found that shoe retailing was his true calling, as it combined his love for people with his love for shoes. In 1992, Steve joined Brown's Shoe Fit Company, where every manager owns a percentage of their store. The ability to be his own boss was intriguing to Steve, who started out running the company's locations in Centerville and Mason City, Iowa, and worked his way up the ranks to become President, a position he's held for seven years.

"I love my job because I am able to make my own decisions every day. I love being around people. I get the ability to create my own team. I love seeing my team succeed and putting people in positions that speak to their strengths, and then seeing them blossom," Steve enthuses.

Brown's Shoe Fit Company has 74

managers that run stores in 12 mid-western states, in addition to their corporate office team in Iowa. Steve says these 74 managers are like a family, which is one of the retailers' biggest strengths. Twice per year, all of the managers get together for a "family reunion" style gathering.

"We deeply care about each other and want each other to succeed," Steve says of his team. "Whether you're a 24-year-old new partner coming in or a 60-year-old partner getting ready to retire, having our team's experience and knowledge to lean on is unique."

Speaking of young people getting into the business, Brown's Shoe Fit Company recognizes how difficult it can be to get started as an entrepreneur in this day and age without financial backing. They help people



with entrepreneurial spirit get going by giving them proper training, a store location, financing, and an inventory. New managers are able to stand on their own managing their individual store while accessing advice from the company team as a whole whenever needed.

"I'm a full believer in taking the bull



The stores have many options to keep feet warm and cozy.

Brown's Shoe Fit carries many styles and brands of work boots for individuals and businesses.

by the horns and making it happen," Steve declares. "When I got started in this company, I had no idea what it would do for me and my family. Now, I just want to give back and give others the opportunity to be their own boss."

Behind the Brand

Brown's Shoe Fit Company focuses on selling quality footwear and products. Among their top-performing brands are Brooks, New Balance and Birkenstock. They also do a tremendous amount of work boot business with brands including Timberland, Keen, and Red Wing. The managers at the 74 store locations do their own buying in order to cater to their individual communities, so the offerings in each store are different. They have mastered the ability to read their customers and cater to their needs, putting the right products in front of them.

When asked what makes the Brown's Shoe Fit brand unique, Steve mentions the family feel, the staff's education level on footwear and products, and most of all, old-fashioned customer service.

"Seventy-five percent of our customers are repeat customers. A customer who has a good experience tells five people, and a customer who has a bad experience tells 100," explains Steve.

One example of Brown's Shoe Fit's phenomenal customer service is the story of retired owner Rhonda Swanson, who ran the store in Marion, Iowa. Rhonda had an elderly customer call in who didn't have a ride to come to the store to get her shoes. Rhonda offered to pick her up. She brought the customer to the store and fitted her for shoes. Then, she offered to take the woman for lunch. The customer said this experience made her day.



Steve Ruzek, President of Brown's Shoe Fit.

"Our customers truly turn into family. When we go above their expectations, they will come back to see us," Steve says. "Having been around for 110 years, we're selling shoes to third-generation family members."

Not only are Brown's Shoe Fit Company owners great with their customers, they also care sincerely about their communities. All of their managers build relationships in their communities, whether through the main street, chamber, church, school, parks and recreation department or even coaching little league teams.

Steve credits this for the company's longevity, "Our people's ownership in the company and their communities is

why we've been around for 110 years."

An Old Company - Keeping Up with New Times

Although Brown's Shoe Fit Company has been around for a long time, they have learned to adapt to meet customers' current needs. When it comes to marketing, Steve observes, "Social media is huge. If you're not doing social media right now, you're crazy. It's the fastest way to get word out when we get new product in. And it's not just the younger kids – grandma and grandpa like it, too!"

Steve says social media has become even more handy as a marketing tool during the coronavirus pandemic, as it's allowed the company to instantly let customers know what changes have been made inside the stores.

The retailer has taken measures to go the extra mile during the pandemic. They're offering curbside pickup, private after-hours appointments, and even house calls to help customers find the right pair of shoes.

"We'll do whatever it takes to care for our customers. Right now, people are on edge. We give them one place they can go to forget about everything for

continued on page 25

Brown's Shoe Fit Company
continued from page 19

10 minutes. We give them a good pair of shoes that looks good, feels good, and makes them smile," Steve explains.

Steve also noted that product sales have changed in response to current events. Because weddings and formal events have been postponed, dress shoe sales have fallen by the wayside. Instead, people are purchasing more practical footwear.

"My goals right now are to keep my staff in a good place mentally, and to keep core product accessible to all of my stores," Steve says.

The pandemic has made it difficult to get product. Luckily, Brown's Shoe Fit stores can rely on their warehouse in Shenandoah, Iowa, where Steve's team is working to maintain their top SKUs at all times so the stores never run out of key product lines. This gives the store teams a huge advantage and has helped them to do well despite COVID-19.

Worst Part/Best Part

Steve proclaims the hardest part of his job is "dealing with 74 different store locations managed by 74 different personalities. However, this is also the best part. Our people are independent thinkers and as long as I'm leading this company, it will always be that way. Sometimes all

74 managers are not on the same page. But that's the beauty of it. If you're a one-man independent store owner, you have one mind to work off of. We have 74 minds, plus our corporate office, plus our retired managers. That's a lot of people thinking toward a common goal – and they all feel like family."

Parting Words

When asked what is the best advice he could give someone about retail, Steve replies, "Come work for Brown's Shoe Fit Company and own your own store. There's no better place to be your own boss and build your retirement." ■