

Danform Shoes:

Employees and Family Are the Heart and Sole

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Dave Bailey, CEO of Vermont's Danform Shoes, first started his business as purely a manufacturer of wood bottom clogs. The business got the name Danform because Bailey chose to make the Danish form of clogs over the Swedish version due to their narrower toe being more suitable for the American market. Bailey jokes, "There's no Dan working here even though people call wanting to talk to him all the time." As wood bottom clogs fluctuated between going in and out of style, Bailey realized he also needed to find a way to sell shoes. He put a bell on his factory door and set up seconds on a folding card table in the middle of the factory. People began coming to buy the shoes, and when the bell rang a girl would get up from her shoe-making station to sell a pair of clogs. Danform Shoes had officially become a retail business.

As Bailey traveled to meet with retailers for whom he manufactured, he began forming key relationships with retailers in the New England area. Bailey says, "I learned the retail business in the back rooms of great stores in New England and I'm very thankful for that." His new connections advised him on the best brands and styles, and today Danform Shoes' top product lines are **Dansko**, **Birkenstock**, **Blundstone**, **Hoka**, **KEEN**, and **Merrell**. As Bailey's

retail savviness flourished, he opened a second store in the late 80s and continued to expand by adding two more stores in the early 90s.

Focus on Family

Today, Danform Shoes has four full-service, sit-and-fit brick-and-mortar stores surrounding the Burlington area in northwestern Vermont (one of which is still located in the former clog factory), plus a retail website. Bailey credits his early achievements to his learning experience and mentors while on the road selling. He says success today lies in having a great group of customers and a great group of employees. Bailey's advice for retaining staff is to begin by taking an honest assessment of where you stand with your team and trying to improve anything you don't like. Then, it comes down to creating an environment where people want

shoes
danform
family owned since 1978

to work. "Our staff is the most valuable asset we have," Bailey explains. "We retain our employees and have many who have been with us for 10 and even 20 or more years. I give my wife, Helen, credit for this. She really concentrates on interacting with our staff not just as employees but as individuals. She listens to their needs and what is going on in their lives, which is how you retain people. This is a big job, but employees are the heart of the business. They are the brand."

Many of Bailey's current staff are family. While Bailey handles buying, merchandising and long-term planning for the



Danform Shoes is devoted to providing first-class service and an extensive selection of comfort driven, stylish footwear.

company, Helen runs the day-to-day of the business. Many of their children are also involved with Danform Shoes. Four key leadership roles are filled by family members: Helen's daughter, Betsy, and Bailey's son, Sean, serve as store managers, Helen's niece, Shari, is the Chief Financial Officer, and Bailey's son-in-law, Derek, is the General Manager. The couple's other children also help at the store and fill in part-time.

When asked the secret to success for sharing a business with family, Bailey proclaims, "The secret to success is having a wife like Helen! We've been married 20 years, and in the business together for over 30. She is the heart of Danform Shoes. I'm a big believer that women rule the world. If women have raised a family successfully, they make the best employees because they can keep 10 plates spinning in the air at once. Women are important in my business. They are great at getting a lot of things done and making quick decisions."

Customers and COVID-19

In addition to their employees, Danform Shoes prioritizes their customers. The retailer's trading area is only about 300,000 people. Due to the limited number of potential customers, they sell a variety of shoe types including infant shoes, work boots, dress shoes and hiking shoes. Bailey explains, "We don't have a very specific customer. What our customers do have in common is they like the service and assistance we give in stores. We fit shoes and listen to people's lives. We ask questions such as 'What do you do for work?' and 'What will you use the shoe for?' This allows us to use our knowledge of the inventory to put the customer in the shoes that will work best for them. I would best describe our customer as someone who needs and appreciates this type of service. Typically, this customer is someone who is a little older, or a mother with children. I like to say our customer is someone who has been through the millennial stage."

Danform Shoes has been in business 43 years, allowing them to build a multi-generational customer base. This is an asset as people who came into the stores as kids are now bringing their own children to shop for shoes. When it comes to targeting their customers, the retailer still uses some traditional forms of advertising, such as radio, newspaper, and TV, but has expanded into the digital space with email marketing and social media in



The company started out as a clog manufacturer in 1978.



Dave and Helen Bailey have four Danform Shoes locations in Vermont – Burlington, Colchester, Shelburne and St. Albans.

the past few years, which has made a big impact. The company grew its digital presence further to adapt during the pandemic, making sure customers knew about available product and were able to shop from their couch if necessary.

Danform Shoes also found other silver linings during the pandemic. Bailey says the business's frugal lifestyle is part of what makes them unique. When COVID-19 came along, Bailey was still able to pay all his employees during the 10 weeks the store was closed. "I'm glad we had the assets to take care of our staff without worrying. Being undercapitalized is a tough situation in the retail business. We aren't always in the position we're in now – we had our years where we struggled and had to decide who got paid. But our company has never had debt," explains Bailey.

A Servant's Heart

Bailey is proof those who love to help others shine in the retail business. He says talking with and helping his customers is his favorite part of his job, but his kindness doesn't stop there. Bailey runs a program where he places collection boxes for customers' worn shoes in his stores. He cleans the shoes, sells them, and gives all the profits to Turning Point, a local charity supporting people with addiction issues.

In addition, Bailey and Helen have a home in Florida where Bailey volunteers to clean beaches part time for the Parks Department. While cleaning beaches, he befriended a group of homeless people for whom he makes paper bag lunches three days per week. Bailey recently picked up some work in the Lee County COVID-19 vaccination center because he wanted to be a solution to the COVID-19 problem. He thought this position was volunteer work, but when he found out it was paid, he began putting all the money toward the lunches he makes for his homeless friends. Bailey and Helen also work with the Humane Society to foster kittens until they have permanent home placements. It's clear this retail duo is successful – but what makes them extra special is their hearts. ■