

SHOES-n-FEET:

Getting Customers Off the Couch and Across the Finish Line

ALLIE JEKA

SHOES-n-FEET is in the business of selling shoes – and changing lives. The independent retailer offers 3,500 sq. ft. of comfort and running shoes in a strip mall outside of Bellevue, Washington. They've been in business for 21 years. Current owner, Chris Bentvelzen, is a sixth-generation shoe repairman. His grandfather was the first person to offer while-you-wait shoe repair in Holland, and his dad later brought this service to North America, officially starting SHOES-n-FEET to offer the retail side of the business for the first time. Today, SHOES-n-FEET outfits customers in **Brooks, HOKA One One, New Balance, Dansko** and **Birkenstock**, among others, and also with the education and motivation necessary to run a 5K, 10K, half or full marathon.

Be You Training Program

In the past three years, SHOES-n-FEET has helped over 750 people complete 5K runs. Bentvelzen says giving back to customers and the community by helping to change their lives is the highlight of his job. One way SHOES-n-FEET does this is by offering a 5K training program. The retailer hired a professional runner to develop a custom 12-week program to train customers how to run a 5K. The program, called the Be You Training Program, encourages participants to be

who they are. "It doesn't matter if you're the slowest person or the fastest person. Getting exercise and being healthy is what really matters," Chris says.



Over the course of 12 weeks, Be You participants learn everything from proper running style to nutrition and hydration. SHOES-n-FEET teaches them about the best running shoes; and other professionals, such as physical therapists and yoga instructors, teach how to prevent running injuries and how to stretch and breathe correctly. Participants are told to trust the process. They begin

with intervals of running one minute and walking two minutes. Bentvelzen laughs, "In every program, there's at least one person who asks part way through how they're ever going to be able to finish a 5K." However, the program's success speaks for itself. By the end of the 12 weeks, 95% of participants are able to run the 5K.

"We had one customer who couldn't run for one straight minute at the start of the program. Today, he's down 200 pounds and has run many 10Ks. His lifestyle is healthier, his relationships with his partner and kids have improved – he's a completely different human being now. Seeing these positive outcomes is what makes the job," he explains. In addition to 5Ks, SHOES-n-FEET also offers training programs helping people run half marathons and marathons.

Colorful window merchandising
draws customers into the store.



Interior of the Bellevue, WA SHOES-n-FEET, with fun wall displays encouraging running.

Partnering with the Medical Community

When it comes to helping people, SHOES-n-FEET doesn't stop there. Employees have been trained by podiatrists to understand the biomechanics of the feet. The retailer partners with 150 doctors, who refer patients to help them get the best footwear products for their needs (25% of their business comes from medical referrals). "We are educated to fit people in the correct shoes for their ailments. We partner with doctors instead of competing with them, and this partnership with the medical community has been a lifeline for our business over the years," professes Bentvelzen.

He explains that his business helps customers run 5Ks, but also another type of "marathon." "We are able to help someone who can't go from their couch to the bathroom without being in pain. We give people solutions to solve their pain, including footwear, insoles, toe separators and even special socks. If we can solve their pain enough to get them outside and exercising, this leads to improved mental health and relationships, and makes their lives better."

The company's approach to education plays a key role in their success. "If



your feet hurt, everything else hurts, which affects everything you do. We use knowledge-based selling to educate the consumer and ask questions they never may have thought of to help find them the best solutions," Chris says.

Pushing Through the Pandemic

It's clear that SHOES-n-FEET's priority is the customer, and this focus has helped them continue to provide value through the pandemic. The brand's customers are loyal – 50% of sales are from returning customers. To cater to this, the retailer worked to continue relationships and reconnect with customers during the pandemic. They prioritized letting customers know that SHOES-n-FEET cared about them, their community, and keeping everyone healthy. They went above and beyond with everything from performing gait evaluations over FaceTime to installing a portable sink for handwashing outside of the store. The retailer also kept its relationships strong with referring doctors, letting the medical professionals know they were available to help.

SHOES-n-FEET's marketing efforts also helped them stay afloat during this time. They leveraged targeted email blasts segmented to customer interests and needs. They focused on driving traffic to their year-old e-commerce website when the store was closed. They added



Chris Bentvelzen, owner and sixth-generation shoe repairman.

non-shoe product lines, like sunglasses, to increase ticket amounts. In addition, the retailer ensured they had key inventory when others were out of stock. Chris says, "When things shut down, I bought instead of cancelled. I can't tell you how many customers came to me every day trying to find products that were out of stock elsewhere."

When asked for his best piece of retailing advice, Chris says, "You have to care about your customer and want the best results for them without looking at them as a dollar. If you can do that, results will come. If you take care of their needs, especially ones they don't even know they have, they will appreciate and be loyal to you forever." ■

SHOES-n-FEET Fast Facts

Location: Bellevue, WA

Size: 3,500 sq. ft.

Years in Business: 21

Employees: 2 full time, 1 part time

Top Brands: Brooks, New Balance and HOKA One One

Top Product Lines: Running and comfort shoes

Website: shoesnfeet.com