

Shoe Retailing NSRA.ORG TODAY

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Five Good Reasons to Host In-Store Events p. 10

Adding Women Can Make Your Team Smarter p. 12

Sharing the Pie with Online Retailers p. 18

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At Kneed Footwear, Independents Are Vital

MARY RUOFF

Kneed Footwear® Inc. sells running insoles as well as a less expensive line for casual footwear, but the markets aren't mutually exclusive. Take a Millennial or a Baby Boomer who does a Saturday road race or mud run with a Kneed2Run insole in their high-end running shoes. Come afternoon, they may reach back into the closet for a brightly colored pair of casual high-tops, a Kneed2Be insole snugged inside. Then it's off to shop, perhaps at a downtown business that helped sponsor the morning race, or to meet back up with their competitors, this time for a beer at a neighborhood café.

Local. Independent. Community. These words are at the heart of Kneed's business philosophy, so much so that the company is bucking a trend that has many wholesalers competing with their vendors, even if indirectly, by also selling to consumers online. The Calgary, Alberta, company, which was launched in March 2016 and has averaged double-digit growth monthly, will only sell through independent footwear retailers. Yes, that means *no* "Big Box or online" sales, explains co-founder Jonathan Koops at the blog on the company's website, www.kneedfootwear.com:

"Independent footwear retailers have long been this community resource with well-trained staff to ensure you get a great fit for your foot These retail-

ers are also the ones that research and find brands that will work best for their customers. They have a basic business model -- provide a service to the community and get reimbursed a fair price for that service to pay off their overhead



and bills. If a customer uses the resource without paying for that resource, it doesn't take an economics degree to know what happens to that resource. It becomes polluted, dries up, and dies."

Independents Are Key

Kneed's retailers are independent shoe stores that carry a variety of

footwear, from athletic shoes to comfort brands to work boots, as well as independents that specialize in running shoes. The company "celebrated" its first anniversary this past March by signing on its 100th retailer. NSRA members carrying the brand include E.L.M. Shoes in Greencastle, PA; Ahh Comfort Shoes in Arlington Heights, IL; Morgan's Shoes in Madison, WI; Lloyd's Shoes in Carmel by the Sea, CA; Marsden's Shoes in Whittier, CA; and Brown's Shoe Fit Co. stores in Centerville, IA; Durango and Grand Junction, CO; and Cheyenne, WY.

Koops and his business partner, fellow Kneed co-founder Karen Henry, are Canadian -- he a native of Prince George, British Columbia, and she of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. Both attended the University of Calgary, where the Human Performance Lab and Running Injury Clinic have done leading research on biomechanics and footwear, including



Karen Henry and Jonathan Koops, founders of Kneed Footwear, based in Calgary, Alberta.

Images courtesy of Kneed Footwear

insoles, Koops points out. Like Henry, he is a recreational runner and worked for many years at insole maker SOLE, also based in Calgary.

Experience Gained

As a college student, Koops landed his first shoe industry job, at a Kinney Shoes store. From there he went on to manage an independently owned comfort shoe store, Sole Doctor, also in Calgary. At SOLE for 11 years, he worked his way up to vice president of sales before leaving and starting Kneed. Henry worked at SOLE for seven years -- in sales, service, logistics and marketing -- before departing and co-launching the start-up.

The former corporate coworkers do a bit of everything as co-entrepreneurs. "You really have to be a jack-of-all trades in the early stages, as we are intimately and meticulously involved in design, marketing, sales, bookkeeping, production, logistics, etc.," notes Koops. "Thankfully, we have some fantastic collaborators that have been instrumental. We are very much about collaborating and have worked with people from coast to coast on this launch."

Collaboration with Contributors

At the company's website, below bios of its founders -- currently Kneed's sole employees -- are brief profiles of nine "contributors," who range from a podiatrist to a senior design engineer to a graphic artist. The group also includes Ted McGreer, owner of Ted's Shoe & Sport in Keene, NH. He carries Kneed insoles as a private label product, a unique business relationship for the Canadian insole maker, as its retailers typically sell insoles under the Kneed brand name. "We have had unbelievable success (with Kneed), and not just because we have our brand on it," says the New England business owner. "The product is that great."

Henry also had high praise for Kneed's partnerships with McGreer and other professionals, some in the United States and others in Canada: "We wouldn't

KNEED2Be BENEFITS | AVANTAGES DE KNEED2Be



ADAPTABLE ARCH SUPPORT



HEEL CRADLE



FLEXIBLE



1 ADAPTABLE ARCH SUPPORT
Biomechanically shaped moldable base ensures support from the heel to the ball of the foot.

HEEL CRADLE

2 Optimizes your heel's natural cushioning without causing heel slippage.

FLEXIBLE

3 Naturally flexes with your foot and maintains its shape where you need the support.

1 SOUTIEN DE VOÛTE PLANTAIRE ADAPTABLE
La base moulable formée biomécaniquement assure un soutien depuis le talon jusqu'à la pointe du pied.

2 BERCEAU DE TALON
Optimise l'amortissement naturel du talon sans glissement du talon.

3 FLEXIBILITÉ
Fléchit naturellement avec le pied et maintient sa forme là où vous avez besoin d'un soutien.

Informative package wrapping -- with text in French and English -- details the benefits of Kneed2Be, Kneed Footwear's insole for casual sneakers.



Priced at \$29, Kneed2Be is a three-quarter length insert that goes on top of the liner in shoes like lifestyle sneakers.

have launched without our contributors. They have been very important to the brand development. They have provided advice, consulting services, laughter, and shared in the pride of this project. They aren't employees, but they have a daily impact on what we do."

Although they don't sell to consumers online, Kneed -- like most businesses

today -- relies heavily on the Internet to operate. The company's retailers can transact all their business, including placing and tracking orders, at the company's retailers-only website, www.kneedfootweardealer.com. The company supports its retailers through www.locally.com, which helps "online shoppers to find, reserve and buy from nearby shops."

Talking with Retailers

Both owners take pride in their willingness, even eagerness, to pick up the phone and talk with clients and potential clients, and to meet them in person whenever possible -- at trade shows and industry events as well as their stores. Says Henry, "We are on the phone every day talking to our retailers. It's always personalized." Adds Koops, "We spend

continued on page 32

Kneed
continued from page 31

countless hours talking to independent retailers about the business practices currently being deployed within the industry. Some of them aren't pretty. We've listened to retailers tell us about brands that have inventory available for their direct-to-consumer web store but not for their authorized retailer."



Kneed Footwear is committed to selling only through independent footwear dealers.

NSRA membership has been a big help to the start-up company, the business partners say. Kneed has been impressed with the training and services the organization offers its members. They have also welcomed the enthusiasm NSRA has shown in helping to introduce Kneed and its insole products to the footwear industry.

Kneed2Run is made with PORON® Performance Cushioning and has a "moldable" base that provides support from the heel to the ball of the foot, assuring "adaptable arch support," notes Kneed's website, which displays graphics and text in a format that's easy for consumers to grasp. The product retails for \$49 and is designed to replace the liner inside "neutral" running shoes. The full-length insole "naturally flexes with your foot" and has a heel cradle that "optimizes your heel's natural cushioning," notes the website page about the running shoe insole.

Selling for \$29, Kneed2Be is a three-quarter-length insole designed to go on top of the sock liner or insole in casual footwear. Like its sister product, the insole has a heel cradle, arch support and "naturally flexes with your foot," states Kneed's website, which has links for additional information on injuries, like plantar fasciitis, that its products can help alleviate.

Henry notes that some people may need insoles for a limited time, or only in certain types of shoes -- despite claims to the contrary by some in the insole industry. As she puts it, "We are perhaps going against the mantra of other insole companies who preach, 'In every shoe, every day, for every activity,' and being a bit more reasonable, for the average person

Personal Glimpses

SRT: What's a recent book you've read?

Jonathan Koops: Stereotypically, *Shoe Dog* by Phil Knight.

Karen Henry: I'm currently reading *Shoe Dog*, but next is *The Book of Joy* by His Holiness the Dalai Lama and Archbishop Desmond Tutu, with Douglas Abrams; its subtitle: "Lasting Happiness in a Changing World."

SRT: What's a recent movie you've seen?

JK: "Storks." Having two young boys often limits movie times to their choice.

KH: "Zootopia," I watched this on my own.

SRT: If you could pick one person in the footwear industry to have dinner with, who would it be?

Why?

JK: Jeff Johnson -- I would like to meet the unwavering positive human engine that drove Nike in the early years.

KH: Too many great independent dealers to favor just one.

SRT: Do you have a personal hero in American history?

JK: Personal hero might be a strong word, but one of my favorites is Abraham Lincoln. I liked his sense of doing what's right and willingness to sacrifice and collaborate for the greater good.

KH: I don't have a personal hero in American history. (Editor's Note: Since these entrepreneurs are Canadian, we also asked about personal heroes in Canadian history, Koops laughed, saying, "Well, that would be Wayne Gretzky of course! Sorry, we're not really 'personal hero in history' people.")

SRT: What's the one thing about you that would surprise most people?

JK: My formal education is studying the brain and my current education is studying the feet.

KH: A bad cup of coffee in the morning can ruin my day. Like shoe stores, I like my coffee shops local with well-trained staff.

without a medical condition, and saying "Use Kneed when you need to."

Down the road, Kneed hopes to develop other insole products and possibly even insole-inspired casual footwear (no high heels!). Whatever course the company takes in the future, this much is certain: Its retail partners will help chart the course. Says Koops, "We have lots of concepts but want our retail partners to share with us how they would like to see our brand evolve." ■