



August 15, 2011

A Foot Care Company Shifts to Sell a New Line of Shoes

By TANZINA VEGA

AH, the search for the perfect shoe — comfortable, stylish and able to help you leap tall buildings in a single bound or at least make the elevator in three.

While that shoe may be elusive, that has not stopped shoe manufacturers from trying to create it. One of those is Dr. Scholl's, better known for foot care items like wart remover, moleskin and orthotics.

In an effort to reimagine Dr. Scholl's as a shoe brand and expand its reach, Dr. Scholl's Shoes, the shoe division of Dr. Scholl's, which is licensed by the Brown Shoe Company under Merck Consumer Care, has started an advertising campaign to promote its new line of about 80 shoe designs for women and men. The shoes include boots, sneakers and even an updated version of its Original Exercise Sandal, now with a lighter heel made of plastic instead of wood. The shoes cost \$50 to \$90.

"What really distinguishes us is that this brand has over a 100-year heritage of making products that are good for our customers' feet," said Maureen McCann, the vice president of wholesale marketing at Brown Shoe.

To help create the campaign strategy, the company conducted market research and found that while people were familiar with the brand — more than 90 percent said they knew and had an "emotional connection" to the Original Exercise Sandal — many people did not know that Dr. Scholl's made other types of shoes.

"Insights from our consumer research told us that we needed to reinforce the footwear element of the brand," Ms. McCann said in an e-mail. To do that, they added the word "shoes" to the brand name and began changing to the new name this spring.

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But altering the Dr. Scholl's message will be tricky, said Robert Passikoff, the president of Brand Keys in New York, a brand and customer-loyalty consulting company.

"A good market opportunity is not necessarily a good brand opportunity," Mr. Passikoff said. Consumers will have to be receptive to seeing Dr. Scholl's as a shoe brand instead of a foot care brand.

While the exercise sandal has made media appearances over the years, most notably in an Isaac Mizrahi runway show in 1993, on "Sex and the City" in 2002 and on "The Martha Stewart Show" in 2007, "If you asked 100 people about Dr. Scholl's, what they're going to do is talk to you about foot care and orthotics," Mr. Passikoff said. "It comes back to what are people willing to believe about the brand."

Perhaps the biggest move the company is making is opening retail stores. In October, Dr. Scholl's Shoes will open stores in Las Vegas; San Marcos, Tex.; and Tampa, Fla.

"These are also tourist destinations," Ms. McCann said. "We feel like reaching consumers when they are on vacation and out shopping."

New retail partners for the brand include Lord & Taylor, Macys.com, Piperlime and, perhaps most surprisingly, Urban Outfitters. Part of the retail strategy is also to get independent shoe stores to carry Dr. Scholl's Shoes, Ms. McCann said, adding that the brand had opened 150 new accounts with shoe retailers in the last six months. "We feel like it's a great place to get the Dr. Scholl's message out there."

The campaign also includes a new Web site where users can learn about the new products and buy shoes directly. A Facebook page for the brand now has nearly 11,500 fans, and the company has begun placing codes that take users to the Web site on its ads and on the tags that hang from shoes on display in stores.

Dr. Scholl's also introduced new technologies to their shoes, using things like memory foam and gel insoles to absorb pressure on the feet. As part of a new packaging design, a series of 19 icons will highlight the shoes' features, like whether they are waterproof, water resistant or "moisture wicking."

Ms. McCall said the company had increased spending on advertising over the last year but declined to say by how much. According to Kantar Media, part of the WPP Group, Dr. Scholl's spent \$278,000 on marketing efforts for products not related to food care in 2009 and \$3.3 million in 2010.

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Dr. Scholl's Shoes worked with the independent agency Kiku Obata & Company on the campaign. "We wanted to create imagery that really tells a story and suggests that life is made to play in the city and in the outdoors," said Ms. Obata. Most of the ads were shot in San Francisco because it has both an urban and outdoorsy feel, she said. Some of the ads feature models sitting on rocks at the beach or hiking, while others show them standing in front of shops with a '50s and '60s retro look.

"It's this sense of relaxed fashion that Dr. Scholl's customers live on," Ms. Obata said. The agency shot a variety of ads for consumer and trade publications including InStyle, Shape and Footwear News.

"Customers really wanted shoes that just take them anywhere," Ms. Obata said. "They are unwilling to sacrifice fashion or comfort."