

Leading the Pack

Women's specialty running dealers surge ahead thanks to refined tactics and strategies.

By Marianne Bhonslay

Living in the San Francisco Bay area and working in the high-tech industry, Lori Shannon devoted many of her non-working hours to training for marathons and cross-country bike rides. At 5' 3", the endurance athlete considered herself an average size woman, yet she found it frustrating to walk into local sports stores and not find gear—such as bicycles—that met her physical requirements. Not only did Shannon walk out of the stores without finding proper equipment, she left feeling as if she had not been regarded as a serious athlete.

"I felt marginalized," recalls Shannon, 39, whose professional resume includes World Com and EDS (Electronic Data Systems) Corporation, for which she was based in San Francisco. "I'm not tall and thin and I don't look like a runner, even though I run marathons." Quite simply, says Shannon, she did not feel welcomed into an athletic store's inner sanctum despite having completed numerous marathons—including New York City's—and participating in a cross-country bike ride for breast cancer.

The retail experience provided enough incentive for Shannon, who was tiring of the corporate grind, to open See Jane Run, a women's running shop launched in April 2000 in San Francisco's trendy enclave of Noe Valley. Originally intending to start a specialty bike store exclusively for women, Shannon says the shop "evolved into an athletic store" with a running focus, while also stocking gear for cyclists and swimmers. Last month, See Jane Run, which reports annual revenues of about \$1.5 million, opened its third Bay Area location, even as same-store sales rose by about 20 percent.

Shannon's exclusive women's retail running business is no longer a novelty in the industry. Yet, the growing amount of women's-specific product now offered by vendors, along with an increasing participation base of women walkers and runners, are combining to make women's running stores not only a cultural phenomenon but a formidable business enterprise. Although the quest to open a women's running store often encountered dubious reaction from vendors as recently as the 1990s, the entrepreneurs presiding over these shops are reporting enviable annual sales gains while earning accolades as premier service retailers within what is already considered a premium

service business.

"The breadth of women participating in charity and cause-related events has exploded the past five to 10 years," notes Ellen Wessel, co-founder and president of Moving Comfort. "Combined with the public messages regarding how critical it is to be exercising, there are more women in a variety of shapes and sizes that need running gear. The breadth of product now available, contrasted to 10 and 20 years ago, is giving the [women's] running market attention and credence."

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—Susan Frankel, Fleet Feet

That credence is due to annual sales gains in a retail segment finally receiving long overdue accolades, say the owners of the women's retail stores. And the notoriety initiates a domino effect: sales gains at retail generally mean open-to-buy increases, leading to more in-depth product offerings which, as it turns out, is what women runners were searching for from the outset. Moreover, as the clientele base has shifted to include not merely



Lori Shannon, founder of See Jane Run, operates three stores in the San Francisco Bay area.



See Jane Run caters primarily to female runners but also carries gear for cyclists and swimmers.

Boston qualifiers but New York finishers, it is the women's stores that have adapted to offer kinder, less-fartlek environs.

"The market has changed, particularly because it has expanded," says Susan Frankel, who opened a 1,800-square-foot Fleet Feet franchise in her native Cincinnati three years ago with her husband, Jeremy Perlin. Although the store carries men's and women's gear, Frankel is especially attentive to creating a "comfortable atmosphere so everyone feels welcome," and women's product accounts for 60 percent of sales.

"I'm a mid-pack, slower runner," says Frankel, 35, a former social worker who began running as part of a training regimen for collegiate tennis. "I've been in a lot of running stores that are intimidating. We see our role as providing consistent, high-quality customer service regardless of [a runner's] goal, whether she's going to Boston or just getting started. It doesn't matter if you are tall, fat, skinny, slow or fast."

The formula is paying off for Frankel, who reports sales rising at a rate of more than 20 percent annually. And like other women's-specific stores, Frankel discovered that organizing running or fitness events is a boon to business and an axis for that ever-reliable, cost-effective marketing and advertising campaign: word of mouth.

Frankel orchestrates about 45 events a year, many exclusively for women, such as The Fleet Feet Sports Lady Distance Classic. Frankel also hosts an annual Health and Fitness Festival, complete with 10K and 5K runs followed by a fashion show, live music, body fat testing and a kids' race called The Lil' Bug Run. An estimated 1,200 people attended Frankel's most recent running fair.

A sister Fleet Feet franchise in Hartford, CT, launched its business as a women's-only running store. As a former collegiate psychology professor who taught Women's Studies at Wesleyan

University in Middletown, CT, Dr. Alice Gold was keenly cognizant of the nuances of the female psyche. And although Gold may not have intended to utilize the knowledge and insight she gained while earning her Ph.D. at Columbia University in a retail capacity, she distinguished herself in 1997 by opening a Fleet Feet franchise in Hartford catering exclusively to women.

"I felt that women runners were not being served well in the Hartford area," says Gold, who successfully sold the idea of a Fleet Feet franchise devoted to female runners to the company's headquarters, although not without some convincing. "And the one running store in town was focused toward men. I felt there was an opportunity. It was time to give women their due."

Gold's refrain is now echoed frequently in the running business, although her parable has a unique twist: Gold was so successful in creating an ideal running environment and retail experience that men came calling. Enough male runners, in fact, that Gold expanded the business to include men's product—perhaps the quintessential testament that the desire for superior customer service, proper fitting running shoes, high-end technical apparel that makes any jogger look svelte, and a vast product selection is not merely "a girl thing."

The decision to begin carrying men's gear was fostered by the husbands and boyfriends of Gold's customers inquiring as to whether they, too, might benefit from a footwear fitting session at her Fleet Feet store.

"We have a good reputation for excellent service," says Gold, noting that the store had become a haven for referrals from doctors, podiatrists and physical therapists. "We were getting lots of calls from husbands and other men who had found out about us asking us where they could go to get fitted for shoes properly. I was sending them to our competitors all the time."

Gold realized she was foregoing too much business and began carrying men's products two-and-a-half years ago. Women's gear remains about 70 percent of sales and Gold expects that the final tally will settle at about 65 percent for women and 35 percent for men.

While similarities with the men's business exist, retailers that cater to female athletes say the most notable enhancement in the women's running market is the arrival of product truly designed for women. Although women's-specific product has allegedly been on the market for more than a decade, many women retailers believe it is only recently that the technology—such as women's-



At Frankel's Fleet Feet, grass roots efforts include organizing women to participate in local events.

specific lasts—is being effectively employed.

"The fit is getting better," says Gold. "Companies are focusing on new lasts, and although I think there was some misinformation [in the past], companies have stepped up to the plate and tried to get a better women's fit." The challenge has been multifold, retailers say, although fitting women's narrow heels has, in the past, been difficult.

Companies are now making strides with that effort. For example, Gold cites the Adidas Brevard as a shoe that addresses the double dilemma of pronation and a narrow foot. "Most shoes for women with severe pronation have been a wider fit," says Gold. "The Brevard works for women with narrow feet who over-pronate." The new model, the third edition, has become a staple of the store, she says.

The darling of women's shoes at the moment, retailers seem to agree, is Asics, which is often noted as the leading brand in running specialty stores. "Asics is a good example of a traditional men's brand that, in the last few years, has turned around and created good products for women," explains See Jane Run's Shannon. The Asics 2090—which has been in the line in different iterations, such as the 2020, 2030 and 2040—is now so popular that Shannon is currently unable to receive additional shipments. "That series of shoes have been our best sellers," says Shannon, adding, "[The series] offers a classic women's fit with a narrow midfoot, wide toebox and narrow heel."

Saucony, meanwhile, has developed the Grid Energy, a "fairly technical shoe meant for fast women walkers," explains Gold. It is an important shoe, particularly as more women are taking up walking.

Technical running apparel has been another battle, retailers say, although one that is slowly being won. Women retailers have devoted years in

backdoor meetings with vendors trying to explain that their typical customer is not a 20-something, size small female racer.

"I had a special meeting with the staff of one running department—who were all men—and they said everything they manufacture is designed for a 26-year-old runner," relates Shannon. "I said the average age of my customer is 39, and she's willing to spend high-end [dollars]. She might be a 38-year-old who has had a baby and is resuming training. And I don't know many 26-year-olds who can afford a \$50 sports bra."

At Frankel's Fleet Feet in Cincinnati, the struggle has been for plus size apparel. The trick has primarily been one of inventory management, she says. "How do you work with fitting a range of sizes and body types and maintain inventory control?" she asks. One method is to know which vendors will ship such product quickly and then wait for requests, she explains. Fortunately, running companies such as Sport Hill and the Canadian vendor Sugoi have been willing to reply to immediate orders.

Gold's Fleet Feet found it difficult to find suppliers designing petite technical clothing. "There was a paucity of technical apparel for women 5' 4" and under," she notes. Last year, however, Hind responded to the market need.

The nuances of proper fit and abundant selection remain critical to successfully serving women runners at retail, although most specialists say women merely want to be recognized for and supported in their effort to remain fit.

"Building relationships with people is essential," says Lisa Voorhees, who has run Denver-based The Sporting Woman since 1991, a store that has posted sales increases annually. "We send a thank you post card to everyone who buys something with us, and a post card every six months to alert people that it may be time for new shoes and remind them of what they purchased in the past. It is a personal way for us to stay connected to our customers." ■

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—Lori Shannon, See Jane Run