

CHEAPER CHIC



Cheap, chic and comfortable: It's my new footwear mantra. While luxe labels such as Taryn Rose and Thierry Rabotin may be some of the hottest names in the category today, moderately priced brands — often under the \$100 mark — are making fashion product more accessible than ever.

According to Karen Sadick, EVP of merchandising for Edison, N.J.-based Aerosoles, the modestly priced comfort brand's formula for success is simple. "We believe that [getting a] shoe that's stylish and fashion-right doesn't mean consumers have to sacrifice comfort or spend \$300." Customers are open to lower price points, Sadick said. "Women today really look at all their options. [In the past], a Bloomingdale's or Bergdorf Goodman shopper wouldn't be caught dead in Target."

For stores trading in higher-priced merchandise, introducing more affordable lines may not seem like a profitable move. In fact, I've heard the argument time and time again: "Why should my staff spend time selling a shoe at \$79 when they can be selling one at \$179?"

My comeback is always the same: Why not sell both? Peddling two pricey pairs can be difficult. However, what customer can resist buying a second, more affordable pair that also satisfies her desire for fashion?

For retailers worried about convincing customers of the durability of less-expensive products, point out that these are fashion styles — not workboots.

Or if you're thinking that more affordably priced brands are the domain of department store accounts only, don't be discouraged. While it may be true for some high-profile labels such as Aerosoles, there are still plenty of labels, including Tsonga,

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Täos and the newly launched Natural Comfort from Steve Madden, that are eager to do business with smaller accounts.

Whether these moderately priced lines are selling in chains or independents, women are embracing them.

Case in point: I often pass by the Aerosoles store on 42nd Street and Lexington Avenue, a few blocks from *Footwear News*' offices, where I've noticed women shopping before they head to work or at lunchtime.

Just who is packing the store? I decided to stop by one afternoon and chat with customers. Jeanine, an administrative assistant, owns 10 pairs of Aerosoles, and cites their comfort, price and styling as the draw. Kimberly, who works in sales and marketing, also has 10 pairs in her closet, while Diane, who is employed in advertising, owns 15 pairs. All agreed that while comfort has always been an attraction, they'd noticed the company's efforts to up the fashion quotient.

Like Aerosoles, South African brand Tsonga knows what women want. According to Claire Lindsay, VP of the Colorado Springs, Colo.-based company, business is growing by about 60 percent annually, with year-to-date business as of June up 93 percent. Business is so brisk, Lindsay said, because of the brand's accessible prices as well as its unique approach to looks. "Color doesn't have to be boring," she said. "Customers are responding to it." And, she added, "You don't have to take out a mortgage to buy the shoes. We keep it affordable."

Customers, eager to share their thoughts about the Tsonga brand, often e-mail the company. One customer wrote, "I saw the Thandiwe (sandal) in a Nordstrom catalog [and] thought it was the most attractive. ... The color tan is perfect (not too light or dark), great ornamentation (not too gaudy nor too plain) and the heel was just right."

Another said both she and her mother owned several pairs, writing, "My mom hasn't bought anything with a heel in years. She loves the comfort of these shoes. I love the style."

Aerosoles and Tsonga are just two of the brands striking a chord with today's value-driven fashion comfort consumers. Newcomer Täos by Shoes West Inc. is yet another. Retailing from \$65 to \$80 for sandals and clogs, the line incorporates such features as leather-wrapped EVA footbeds and lightweight molded EVA outsoles. According to Glen Barad, president of the Torrance, Calif.-based company, while comfort is "first and foremost," the brand adds a dose of attitude to the collection. One of its best-sellers for spring '06 was the Layla, a thong sandal with jewel embellishments.

Italian brand Geox also offers plenty of options priced just below the \$100 mark. In fact, on a recent visit to the brand's flagship store on 57th Street and Madison Avenue in New York, Eros Scattolin, communications manager for the Woodbridge, N.J.-based company, told me that business is booming. He said that after shoppers compare Geox mocs to the pricier shoes at nearby luxury boutiques such as Tod's,

they consider Geox a bargain. "People are accustomed to spending \$300 to \$400 for a pair of shoes in this area [of the city]," Scattolin said. "They stop by our store, find similar looks and quality, and buy two or three pairs in different variations — suede, patent leather, etc."

So as you shop WSA, don't be a footwear snob and let price stand in the way of presenting your clientele with some cheaper, chic comfort shoes.

BARB'S WIRE ■ Beyond luxury options, women can now find fashionable comfort product at a price.

