

Shoe Fly Shoes Builds on Partnership

LESLIE RAABE



It is easy to see that Todd Lewis has vision. He was just 17 years old when he realized that he wanted to be in the shoe business and, at 19, incredibly, bought his first store. A freshman in college, Lewis learned that the owner of the family shoe store where he worked part time planned to sell the business. He thought, "If I'm committed to being here, I may as well buy it myself." Many college freshmen have yet to declare a major. By contrast, Lewis "fell in love with the shoe business and recognized that it fit my personality and skill set."

It was 1988 when he bought Morris Levine Family Shoe Store in Tyrone, PA. Today, he and his partners operate a successful company, Shoe Fly Shoes (SFS), which includes 11 shoe stores in six locations in central Pennsylvania and south central New York. They celebrated their 20th anniversary in May. "I like people," says Lewis, who serves as a director and treasurer of the company. "I like the retail challenges of being positive each day and making the most of each day."

Lewis grew up in rural Pennsylvania and began working on a farm when he was 13. One of his goals was to operate a commercial farm after college. Somehow, he has managed to weave this into his life as well. He and his wife, Marcie, who have eight children aged 2-14, operate a beef and crop farm in central Pennsylvania.

Shoe Fly Shoes are full service, size and width stores, and offer comfort and athletic shoes as well as better brands. Some locations include children's shoes and industrial work footwear. The current brand mix includes SAS, New Balance, Red Wing, Aetrex, Birkenstock

and others. The Shoe Fly Shoe team strives, through better training and education of employees, to improve the shopping experience for all customers. Stores range in size from 3,500 to 10,000 square feet, with inventory filled in directly to the stores using EDI and the RPRO POS system.

From Sole Proprietorship to Business Enterprise

Within a year, Lewis expanded the product mix in his first store to include industrial footwear and athletics. In 1993, Lewis learned that the owner of The Shoe Fly Store in State College, PA planned to retire. Given his other commitments, Lewis felt unprepared to purchase the second store on his own, so he entered into a partnership with Greg Wagner, the fourth generation of Wagner Quality Shoes of Pittsburgh, who today serves as president of Shoe Fly Shoe, Inc.

Between 1993 and 1998, Lewis and Wagner purchased four more stores: Glick Shoes in Lewistown, PA, Lester Shoe Store in Olean, N.Y. and Irving Shoe



A young Todd Lewis (left) with Charlie Biddle and Red Wing sales rep Vince Mysticyan in 1990, in the original Tyrone family shoe store that later was consolidated to open the Altoona location.



Ancient history: In 2004, the stockroom experienced an accident.

Stores in Camp Hill and York, PA. With the addition of these stores, the partners incorporated and The Shoe Fly Stores was born. "As I look back, that was a stepping stone," Lewis explains. "We were then operating six retail stores—all purchased through retirements—in their original locations."

During this time of transition, one of the company's key employees, Charles

Biddle, bought in as an owner and became a partner. In 1999, George Gripp became the fourth partner/ owner.

The next milestone came in 2003. "We transitioned from what the stores were originally to what we believe is the future," Lewis explains. "Up until that time, we had six stores in six original locations with single-concept businesses. Then, we started to change some locations and opened with multiple storefronts under one roof."

For example, the original Morris Levine Store was relocated from Tyrone to Altoona. A joint venture was formed with another shoe store owned by Byron Lasser, the business' fifth partner. Today, Lasser serves as the general manager of the Altoona business, Shoe Fly Shoes' largest store.

Once moved to Altoona, the store was expanded from the 2,000 square feet it had been, to 6,800 square feet to accommodate three storefronts. The Altoona store includes Lasser's Shoe Fly, offering comfort and pedorthics; a New Balance concept store; and Shoe Fly Boot Outlet, plus the Shoe Fly Shoe Mobile. (See sidebar.) Two full-time employees are certified pedorthists, and one of the company's goals is to have certified pedorthists at each location.

Each of the SFS stores has the Aetrex iStep System, a pressure plate diagnostic tool. It helps sales associates and pedorthists understand each customer's foot, determine the arch type and pressure points and choose shoes and orthotics with the best fit and function.

"The primary reason [we moved stores] was because we were seeking high-visibility locations," Lewis says. "At one time, two of our stores were inside indoor malls. Customers didn't know the name of our store. The higher the visibil-

Shoe Mobile Unique Part of Sales Mix

At 6,800 square feet, the Altoona, PA location of Shoe Fly Shoes is the company's largest store. On some days, it is even bigger, or, more specifically, 28 feet longer. The Shoe Fly Shoe Mobile, a 28-foot box trailer, spends part of the week parked adjacent to its permanent partner store as the endcap of a strip center. But, more often than not, the mobile store can be found on one of its regular visits to Pennsylvania glass factories, steel fabrication businesses, paper mills and lumber and logging companies.

Industrial Sales Manager Bill McPhail fits customers in Red Wing boots, almost exclusively. "It is a real convenience for the employees, who are able to shop for their shoes while they are at work," McPhail explains. "And it is also convenient for the employer because they have only one invoice to deal with." The businesses typically pay for at least a portion of employees' shoes.

McPhail is on the road Tuesday through Thursday each week. He visits one plant per day spending 10 hours on site so that he can cover all three work shifts. "I arrive between 6:30 and 7:00 a.m. to accommodate the third shift coming off," he says. "We are there for the first shift and for the second shift that usually arrives between 3:00 and 4:00 p.m."

There are usually 600 pairs of shoes on the truck, many of which are displayed in the showroom at the front of the trailer. McPhail spends Fridays compiling the week's orders, preparing invoices and calling in orders to replace what he has sold. Mondays are spent preparing for his week: receiving shoes, loading the truck and pulling folders for each plant he will visit. Plants notify employees with posters about two weeks before the shoe mobile's arrival. The shoe mobile visits each factory, on average, once each quarter.

Shoe Fly Shoes added the mobile unit in 2001 as a service to its industrial clients. "It is like any other shoe store, except that my store has wheels and my inventory is in the back of the trailer," McPhail says.

"Our business has grown from the dedication of our managers like Bill McPhail," says Lewis. "We are building a culture that 'we go the second mile' for each retail customer, team, and industry we serve. I believe that the retail shoe industry has a bright future for companies that put the customers first and [make] the employees empowered and encouraged to serve them."



Shoe Fly Shoemobile, special convenience for industrial clients.

ity of the destination, the bigger the opportunity to build our own destiny." Lewis also cites controlling rent expense

and decreasing cost per square foot as reasons SFS relocated several stores.

continued on page 32

continued from page 31

In 2004, Shoe Fly Shoes opened Irving's Shoe Fly in Harrisburg, PA. This 6,400-square-foot location includes four stores: New Balance, Kids Shoe Fly, Irving Shoe Fly, which carries multiple lines, and a Birkenstock concept store.

Looking Forward, Honoring the Past

"We decided to retain the original names of the businesses we bought, Lester's Shoe Fly, Glick's Shoe Fly, Irving's Shoe Fly, Lasser's Shoe Fly," Lewis says. "We attached our surname because we wanted to have continuity with Shoe Fly, but heritage is important, and we wanted to continue the heritage that customers had grown up with."

Over time, the original stores' product mix slowly transitioned from moderately priced, middle-America shoes to higher-end comfort and exclusive brands. Shoe Fly Shoes plans to continue to grow,

transition some existing stores and seek additional locations. Most of its locations are growing in volume and profit.

The Secret to Their Success

In addition to his responsibilities as director and treasurer, Lewis manages human resources and new store development. He makes three key points about the partnership's business achievements:

- > Successful relationships with managers and employees. "We have a great team working together and that's what drives business every day," he says. "So few shoe retailers in our markets offer full service. We offer better service and a better store experience."
- > The relationship SFS has built with the National Shoe Retailers Association (NSRA)

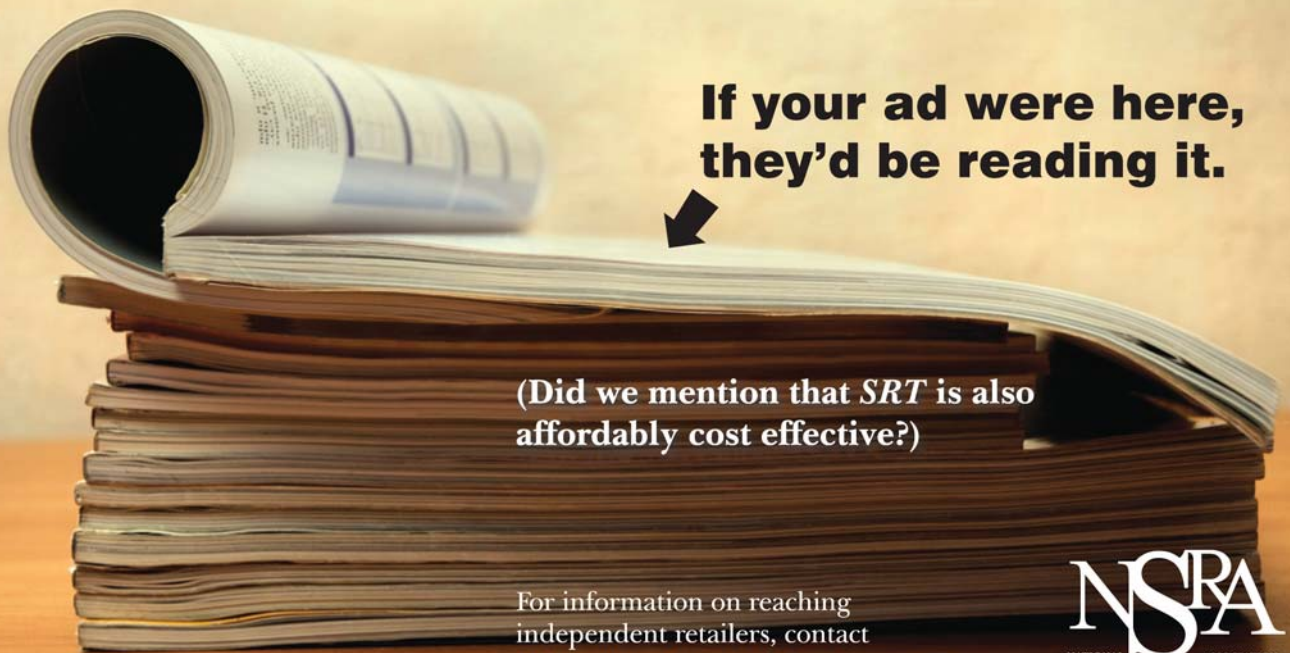


Lewis and McPhail fitting in Shoemobile showroom.

since 1995. Staff have attended 20 or more of the NSRA educational conferences, visited member stores and participated in "very good networking" with other members. They also take advantage of the NSRA FedEx and credit/debit card programs.

> "From a personal standpoint, I have always tried to seek advice from others around me—partners, employees, peers, others. I don't try to do it all myself," Lewis says.

In a recent survey, 92% of NSRA's members told us they read *Shoe Retailing Today* regularly.



If your ad were here, they'd be reading it.

(Did we mention that *SRT* is also affordably cost effective?)

For information on reaching independent retailers, contact Hilary Fritze-Waye at hilary@nsra.org.



Like other independent retailers, SFS faces the challenges of over-distribution of key brands, and internet-based and

other retailers who carry similar products but sell them at lower prices.

To offset those challenges, Shoe Fly Shoes focuses on service. The company uses radio, cable TV and broadcast TV advertising as well as direct mail to build business. To keep employees motivated, daily, weekly and monthly goals are established and posted. Bonuses are given when monthly goals are achieved. Today, SFS has 55 employees, the majority of whom work full time.

"I think that a successful manager creates an atmosphere in the store of positive service and sales growth," Lewis reflects. "A good manager

makes the most of good times and makes the most of bad times. When the weather is right, the staffing is right and customers are flowing through the door, they turn that into a great day, and when the weather is wrong, the staffing screwed up and inventory out of whack, they still manage to have a good day." ■



Lasser's Shoe Fly, Altoona PA.

GOT EMAIL? NSRA requests your email address!

The association is updating its membership database and would like to include your correct email address. Please put your name and current email address in the "Subject" line of a blank email, then email your updated information to bridgette@nsra.org. Current and correct information helps NSRA better serve your needs.

75 different styles to choose from

because our shoes are made for each customer one pair at a time, you will never encounter the inconvenience of obsolescence or the need for markdowns.

Find out more on how we can help attract the crowd to your store.

Call us for special terms to get started right away.



Corvalis



Meridian



The Links

Every size made to order in 6-8 weeks, with your choice of Standard Depth or Extra Depth to fit orthotics.

TAUER & JOHNSON
Made to Order Comfort Footwear

Customer Service
847.631.7134

Or visit us on the web at
www.tauerandjohnson.com