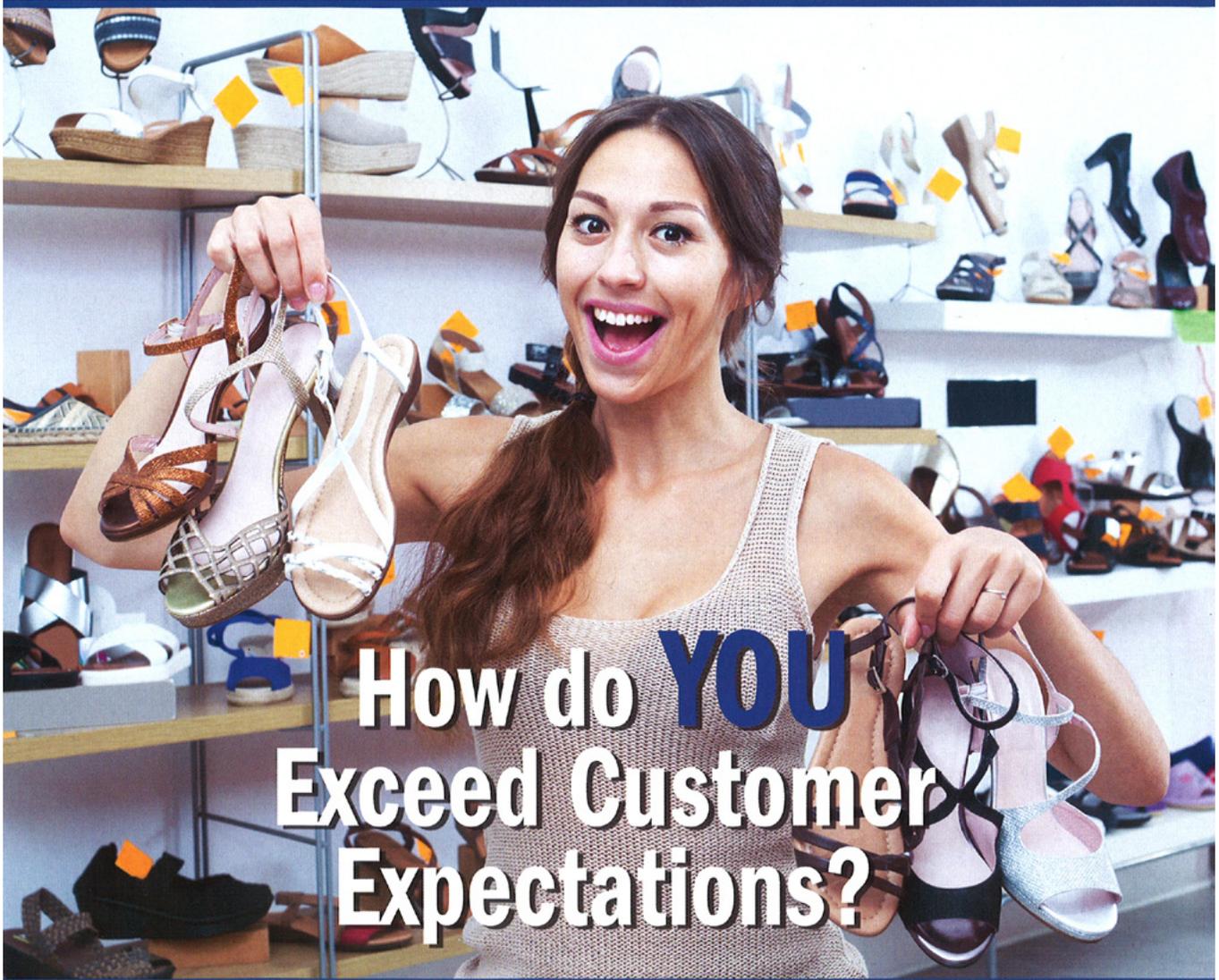


Shoe Retailing NSRA.ORG TODAY

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How do **YOU**
Exceed Customer
Expectations?

Evaluating & Optimizing Your
Business' Social Media Presence p. 4

Consider Adding Categories
to Increase Sales p. 8

Conversations with
Women Execs, Part 2 p. 18

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Spring Footwear

Turning Dreams into Reality

FAYE RAPOPORT DESPRES

Spring Footwear founders David and Avi Ben Zikry make it clear from the start: They are committed to the success of independent shoe retailers because they know what it's like to travel a mile in their shoes. The brothers' own journey brought them farther than that – almost 7,000 miles from Israel to New York, where they were determined to pursue their American dream.

David and Avi are identical twins who say their personalities are as different as their looks are alike. They exude extraordinary passion for the shoe business and small retailers who face the challenge of succeeding in today's market. "Independents are a huge part of our business and we value those relationships," David says without hesitation. "Working with them and servicing them, that's really what we do best."

There's a reason for David's enthusiasm, which is shared by his brother Avi. The twins' history in the industry is worthy of a Hollywood film. Born in Israel to Moroccan immigrants who had seven other children, the brothers started working for their father at the tender age of six. Their father, who had worked as a cobbler in Casablanca, opened a small shoe factory and store on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. The children laced shoes and packed boxes, getting paid after they turned twelve.

Twins David (left) and Avi Ben Zikry founded Spring Footwear.

Interesting Childhood

"Other kids normally play, but for us, shoes were our toys," David says. He stresses that the brothers were happy

that we are very fortunate, because we had the opportunity to learn the shoe business from the ground up," David explains.

The brothers threw their energies into introducing Americans to fashionable comfort shoes ("Why was everything in basic colors, white and beige?" David asks). They even added a tagline to their company name, which became Spring Footwear: House of European Comfort.

and didn't mind; in fact, they became fascinated with shoemaking and determined to make their own mark in the industry. "It was a really interesting upbringing, and looking back we feel

When the twins were 15, the family spent a two-week vacation in the United States. It was 1982, and while window-shopping in New York and examining the footwear available in U.S. stores, the



twins were struck by the lack of design options available in the comfort shoe segment. They were used to seeing a wide variety of styles that were popular among Israeli and European consumers.

"We were shocked to see the complete disconnect when it came to fashion," David says. "The shoes in the window looked like they were from 1960. There was a huge gap between what was happening in the U.S. and the fashions in Europe and Israel. So we went back to Israel and began looking into how we could bring European fashions to the U.S."

At 17, with more than a decade of industry experience already behind them, the twins moved to New York with \$10,000 in life savings and their dream to bring European styles to America. They stayed with a relative in Queens, rented a small store, and made shoes in the back while trying to sell them in the front. Unfortunately, the business didn't take off the way they hoped. In fact, sales barely covered operating costs. "We were struggling to make a living and pay the electricity," David says.



Lightbulb Goes On

The brothers tried to stay afloat, but none of their efforts generated enough business. Just as it appeared that their dream would turn to dust, salvation

arrived in the form of an agent attempting to sell them liability insurance. Seeing that the struggling entrepreneurs could never afford insurance, he suggested they go where their customers were and pointed them towards a local flea market. It was like a light bulb went on; before David and Avi knew it, they were selling more pairs in a single day than they had previously sold in a week.

After four years in the United States, the brothers returned to Israel to do their mandatory army duty. When they returned to America for a second shot at their dream, they arrived with a new strategy. They would bring European shoe styles to the American consumer, but focus on designing the shoes here instead of also attempting the manufacturing. "Looking back at our first 4 years in New York, the learning experience was greater than any university could have provided us," Avi says. "We came back in 1991 to start Spring Footwear and continue our life mission: to make comfort beautiful."

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continued on page 36



Spring Footwear continued from page 29

basic colors, white and beige?" David asks). They even added a tagline to their company name, which became Spring Footwear: House of European Comfort.

European Sizing

One of the first steps was to introduce European sizing. "We were one of the first companies to introduce European sizing to the U.S. market," David says. "With the size and width styles, retailers needed to cover 50-60 sizes. The commitment was so big for manufacturers and retailers that they couldn't bring new styles to the market."

The brothers' idea faced resistance at first. Store owners didn't think the switch would work or was possible. "It was hard to convince American retailers," David admits, "but I said, 'I come from Israel and I traveled all through Europe, where there are no styles with size and width, and I never saw anyone go barefoot!'"

Today Spring Footwear Corp. manufactures six popular shoe brands – Spring Step, L'Artiste, Azura, Flexus, Patrizia and Spring Step Professional. The company has been based in Florida for the past 15 years and has 100 employees as well as offices in Israel, Italy, and China. "We experienced double-digit growth last year with independents, and we expect the same this year," David says. While the U.S. is Spring Footwear's most important market, the company also sells its products in Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the U.K.

Coming Special for Independents

To stress its support of independent retailers, Spring Footwear has some big news: they will debut a product offering exclusive to its independent retail partners in Spring 2018. David and Avi see independents as footwear testing labs, their company's best partners to launch and deliver innovative products to the market. "Independent retailers are passionate about product and are the most

connected to the consumer," Avi says. "They are our best brand ambassadors. We understand the specific needs for the independents by delivering a broad assortment of fresh, unique styles. Our extensive open stock/in stock program, large assortment, and dedicated team make us ideal partners for the independent retail community."

"We are still a family business, and we relate to challenges facing the independent retailers," David adds. "Independent retailers helped build the foundation of Spring Footwear. Without their support and belief in our product 25-plus years ago, we would not have been able to achieve the level of success we have today."

Spring Footwear offers its independent retailers outstanding margins protected by a MAP (minimum advertised pricing) policy. The company also provides a tiered Early Booking Program that enables independent retailers who place qualifying orders to receive extended dating and/or discounts on their orders. The company's website features a store locator page that will direct consumers to retailers in their area.

Sales Reps

Spring Footwear's sales reps are expected to visit their independent retailers a minimum of twice per year. "Educating the store staff about our brands is just as important as selling the shoes to the retailer," Avi says. "To be truly successful, the store staff needs to have a connection with the sales rep and our brands. They need to be confident in their ability to discuss the features, advantages, and benefits of our brands in order to differentiate Spring Footwear from the competition."

The company does participate in trunk shows and utilizes GWPs (gifts with purchase) and shoe raffles in coordination with the hosting retailer.

Marketing and Ordering Processes

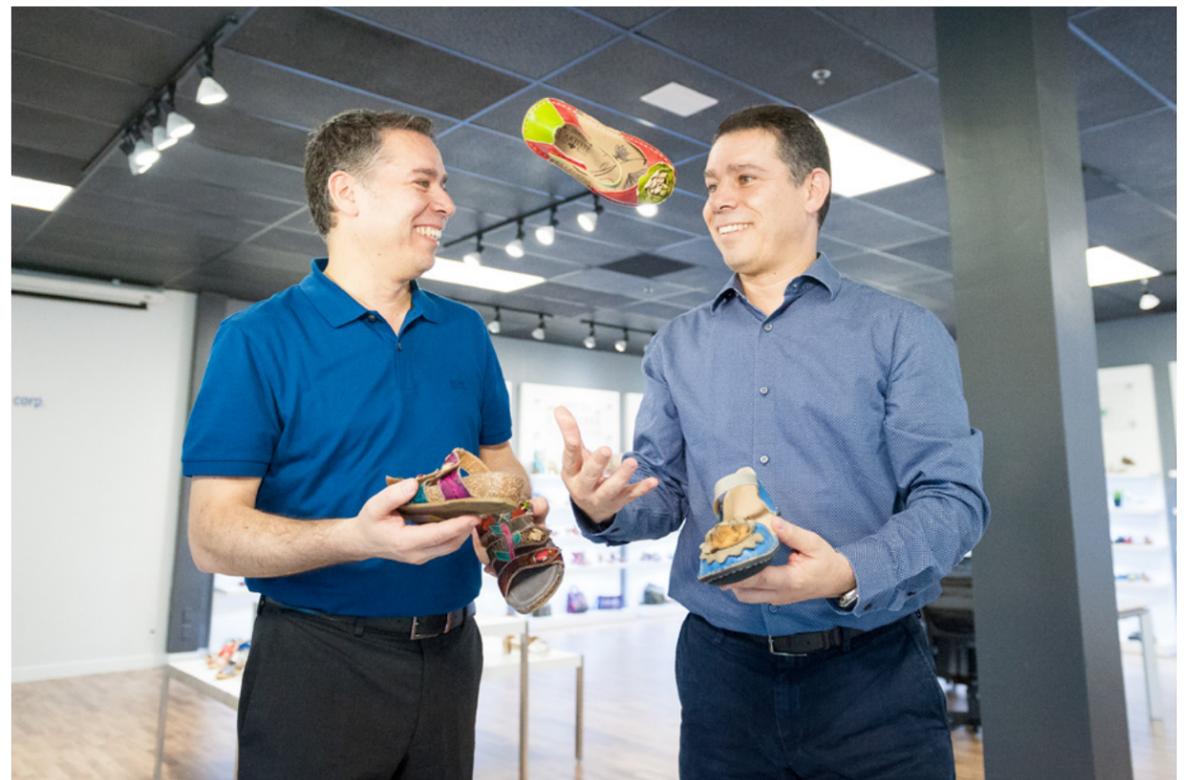
Spring Footwear supports independent retailers with Co-Op/POP funds in

support of in-store events, GWPs, display materials, and marketing efforts. In addition, the company has a talented team of in-house graphics designers willing to create various marketing elements for eCommerce, social media, print, and in-store needs. The brothers maintain a stock of more than 300,000 pairs in their Florida warehouse so they can serve customers and can take any size order necessary to fill their needs, and they offer an E-Service program to all of their independent retailers at www.springfootwear.com. Logging into the customer portal provides full access to account information, product inventory availability, and marketing tools. Spring Footwear's customer service team is available to set up and support retailers so they can use the site effectively.

Customer Service

Spring Footwear Corp.'s customer service team consists of six highly trained individuals who are dedicated to the independent channel. They share the same passion and love for shoes and service as the company's founders and retailers and receive extensive training on the company's systems, products, and procedures. Spring Footwear stands behind their product and offers a one-year warranty from invoice date.

For David and Avi Ben Zikry, a journey of far more than 7,000 miles began in a small factory on the outskirts of Tel Aviv. If the brothers have their way, the road will only go onward and upward from here. ■





SPRING FOOTWEAR corp.

House of European Comfort

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