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The Eneslow Experience

In stride with the wellness movement, Robert Schwartz's new comfort shoe emporium aims to heal consumers' world of hurt.

By: By Leslie Shiers



THIS IS A GREAT TIME TO BE IN THE wellness business. Between the graying of the baby boomers and people of all ages getting into holistic health (consider the onslaught of organic foods, a proliferation of low-impact exercise options and our country's increased attention to obesity and other health issues), today's consumer is looking for products that can contribute to head-to-toe well-being. For any shoe store aiming to outfit customers with footwear that fits that bill of health, that means its time has come.

As the health movement swelled over the past two decades, Robert Schwartz, owner of Eneslow, The Foot Comfort Center in New York, has been riding the crest of this macro trend's wave. In the past, he says, "There was always a perception of [comfort footwear] that it was for people who were already in trouble." But these days, he explains, more and more consumers want to feel good and are willing to do what it takes to prevent injuries before they occur or become irreversible.

Eneslow's founding mission "to improve the quality of people's lives from the foot up" resonates with these individuals, and Schwartz's new store—a three-story, 15,000-square-foot Park Avenue mecca for comfort seekers—offers every thinkable option to tackle foot issues of all kinds. The store has been open for more than a year; prior to that, Eneslow's Manhattan location was in the Chelsea neighborhood. Schwartz relocated to provide visitors with an easier shopping layout and a greater selection. Though skeptics initially worried about the new store's site (not known as a prime shopping destination), Schwartz says revenue has gone up each month since the move, proving wellness footwear—not to mention the extra comfort services Eneslow offers—is something shoe buyers will stray from the beaten path to find. "For the last six months, we've been up 20 percent [over the previous year]," he reports.

Bumpy Road

Though the sheer size of the gleaming new Eneslow store plus the widespread respect for Schwartz's pedorthic expertise may lead you to believe wellness retailing has always gone smoothly for him, Schwartz acknowledges this is not the case.

Eneslow was founded in 1926, and Schwartz's father and uncle acquired the business in 1968. Schwartz started his professional career doing marketing for Playtex consumer packaged goods. There, he learned how a brand could become a true partner for retail stores and a real customer draw. "I always looked at wholesaling through the retailers' eyes," Schwartz notes, though back then he never expected to enter that side of the business.

In '73 he joined his family at Eneslow, which at the time included Apex Foot Industries, a wholesale operation, in addition to the store. Schwartz and his brother Richard fully took over from their father in '74, the year in which Schwartz became a certified pedorthist. Eight years later, the brothers split the two businesses, with Robert handling the stores while Richard assumed management of Apex. (The brand was subsequently re-coined Aetrex Worldwide, and its comfort footwear and footcare products are of course still available in Eneslow stores.) "My father felt I was a better fit at retail," Schwartz says. "I never asked him why."

Perhaps he viewed Robert's blend of sales and marketing know-how and a true knowledge about pedorthic care as factors that would win over customers on the floor. Pedorthic expertise "is very integral to the Eneslow model," Schwartz explains. Throughout his time in retail, he has emphasized continued learning and helps educate the medical community as well as other retailers on the importance of a proper fit. Schwartz notes his father was not well enough to show him the ropes when he passed his son the reins. "It prevented me from learning the business from someone who had been in it for years. That makes it so much harder. Let there be no misunderstandings—not having the skills in running a retail business, nor a specific retail business, then coming in and having to learn it from scratch..." Schwartz trails off.

But learn he did. For nine years, Schwartz built a retail model based on pedorthic care and filling prescriptions. And for nine years, the model worked. During that time, Eneslow opened additional store locations and acquired a custom-mold shoe company. By 1985, Schwartz says half of his business was coming from customers on Medicaid. Then, suddenly, the U.S. government changed its Medicaid program, tipping off what the



retailer refers to as the “nightmare” of his life. “As [that comprised] 50 percent of my business, I had to shut down,” he says.

Just when he had the medical shoe business down to a science, Schwartz was forced to rethink Eneslow’s game plan. “I had to become a consumer retailer, rather than a medical retailer,” he says. In addition, he had to shut down seven locations—all but the Chelsea store—having decided that under the circumstances, it was not wise to be operating multiple doors. The custom-molded shoe business had to go, too. Without the medical retail angle, “It didn’t have the same volume potential as when I bought it,” Schwartz explains. “It was no longer valid.”

“To survive took a lot of moxie,” the retailer adds, “but I’ve always acknowledged that my balls are bigger than my brains.” Once Eneslow pushed off down its new path, however, it began to grow once more. And as consumers increasingly began seeking out comfort footwear, the store’s wellness angle became a draw. Schwartz opened a second site in Great Neck, NY, in 2003. Looking back today, Schwartz chalks up his retail history as an educational business story, proving Murphy’s Law tends to manifest itself as soon as things get too good.



Comfort Player

Now, Eneslow’s new wellness emporium is considered one of the industry’s standard bearers when it comes to modern comfort shoe retailing. Selection, service and fitting expertise make the store a destination for thousands of consumers who have difficulty finding such a complete package anywhere else. But Eneslow has also had to stay ahead of the comfort curve and anticipate the changing consumer’s needs. “They had to assimilate,” says Naot rep Jeff Larris, who notes that today Eneslow’s product is less “old” than it once was, thanks to input from some younger buyers. Additionally, Larris says, the grand appeal of the new store—complete with three large-screen TVs near the lofty ceiling—has been a boon. “It gave them a new life,” he asserts.

Schwartz confirms he’s added new products to his wide assortment. Eneslow’s current No. 1 brand is MBT, but Mephisto, New Balance, Munro, SAS and Ecco are also top-turning brands, along with Durea, a high-quality line from Holland that Schwartz used to import (“its lasts are the best, and they come in multiple widths,” he says, noting few U.S. retailers carry it) and Finn Comfort. “[Finn] is one of those specialty brands that transcends fashion or style,” Schwartz says. “When you put them on, you say, ‘Wow, this is a foundation to me and my body.’”

And that is exactly what the store’s visitors want. Profiling Eneslow’s customer, Schwartz says they have their own sense of style but are not slaves to fashion. “When fashion and their lifestyle match, they’re happy, but if the fashion moves, they don’t move with it,” he notes. His customers don’t necessarily belong to one demographic but share a common “spiritual” psychographic, he adds. Eneslow’s customers also skew more female. “I give women credit in being far more advanced in being conscious about [their pedorthic health],” Schwartz says. “Men suffer silently.”

Still, Schwartz attributes the overall growing interest in wellness products to a big-picture cultural shift. He thinks people are beginning to realize that they need to tune in to their pain and find solutions, rather than masking them with cosmetic procedures or painkillers. “I used to say, ‘I’m in the right place at the wrong time,’ but I’m definitely at the right place and time now... The culture of Eneslow was out of synch until [around] 1991,” he says, citing the Birkenstock revival and Euro-comfort revolution as the turning point for the comfort segment. “The ’90s was a transformative decade for my company.”

Now that Americans have learned that taking control of their lives—through diet, exercise, and the products they use and wear—can have a positive impact, more people are making healthier choices. “And that’s what Eneslow is all about,” he says. “What we’re trying to do is give them back control.”

Life Savers

“Stores like Bob’s have a benefit in that they’re making lives better,” notes Mitch Lenett, Northeast rep for MBT, who adds that Eneslow’s philosophy speaks exactly to what his brand is all about. “They’re a destination; they don’t just sell orthopedic shoes—lots of people do that,” he adds.

While some customers come to Eneslow for mainstream brands they could find elsewhere, Schwartz says they tend to have a completely different viewpoint from the generic footwear customer. They ask, “How will they enhance my stamina, my endurance, my health?” he explains, noting top-notch athletes sometimes visit the store to address foot problems, which can greatly affect their overall performance.

For all customers, the underlying question they enter with is: “How can my shoes be an asset to my lifestyle, rather than a liability?” Schwartz adds. To help find the answer, Eneslow offers product for multiple wearing occasions as well as an entire catalog of services to enhance the comfort factor. From stretching the shoes to recommending over-the-counter inserts (Lynco is a best seller) to building custom orthotics in the store’s on-site, state-of-the-art lab, Schwartz says his staff can modify any shoe for a better fit. Though the custom business is a small part of Eneslow’s overall sales—they sell fewer than 10 a week, Schwartz estimates—it’s an important piece. “I would never give it up,” he claims. “But it’s a high-labor process, not a get-rich scheme.”

Additionally, “The majority of my staff is pedorthically trained,” Schwartz says, adding that eight on his team have been with his company for 20 years or longer. Having such dedicated and knowledgeable staff lends customers a certain degree of trust. Except during heavy growth periods, Schwartz estimates that 60 percent of Eneslow’s visitors are repeat visitors. “People are coming for the Eneslow ‘experience,’” he says. “Even if they have a favorite brand, they tend to allow us to select options. There’s a tremendous trust level, and more than 90 percent of customers who sit at a fitting stool purchase on that day. We don’t see a lot of customers per day per salesman, but we close virtually every one of them.” Similarly, Eneslow’s private label shoes extend that reputable name, and as a result they sell at a higher price point than most other stores’

private label product.

“It’s not about the shoe—it’s about the result, the safety,” he stresses. “We use orthoses, education and training as a way to [improve lives]. When that’s your purpose, the product can come and go; you’re not locked into a particular product and can stay innovative.” He notes that to do so, he and his buyers have to be pioneers. “We can’t wait for people to invent it. We have to go out and find it,” he says, pointing to Z-Coil’s funky looking shoes with a spring-like heel, which could be the next MBT if consumers keep an open mind.

Though Schwartz continues to face retail challenges—he notes inventory management and staff productivity are two constant hurdles—Eneslow may be poised better than other stores for the current economic environment. “When things get bad, people try to find a way to make things better and themselves better,” reports MBT’s Lenett. And consumers surely have confidence that Eneslow is the place to provide them with foot health-related tools. Not to mention, Lenett adds, “You’d be hard-pressed to find other people as passionate about what they do.”

Footwear Plus

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