



Franchise with Education: Bentvelzen Develops Business Template

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“Customer service is the means to a successful shoe store,” says Chris Bentvelzen, Director of Franchise Sales and Buyer of SHOES-n-FEET[®], headquartered in Bellevue, WA.

People listen when he speaks about shoes: his heritage is steeped in the shoe business. Grandfather Jan was born into the fourth generation of a shoemaker’s family in Holland. In 1932, Jan Bentvelzen opened a shoe repair store, with the innovative service of free pick-up and delivery; son Joseph grew up in the business, absorbing the customer service philosophy, and helped his father establish a “While You Wait” service that also proved popular. Joseph came to the U.S. to earn a doctoral degree in engineering; then, deciding to stay, he adapted the “While You Wait” concept to the United States, building a successful chain of shoe repair shops. In 1992, he added an “Employee Ownership Program,” which eventually grew into the franchise concept. Now Chris Bentvelzen and his father own a booming shoe company: seven franchises and one company owned SHOES-n-FEET[®] on the West Coast.

Aside from serving his customers exceptionally well, Bentvelzen is selling shoes on a different plane than most shoe stores. “The concept of SHOES-n-FEET[®] is to close the loop between the medical communities and the shoe store,” says Bentvelzen. “We want to build a relationship with doctors, their patients, our customers and SHOES-n-FEET[®].”

Bentvelzen himself is a voracious reader who also attends retailing conferences, medical conferences and shoe shows to keep his business talents honed and his knowledge fresh. A regular attendee of NSRA’s twice-a-year conferences, Bentvelzen recently agreed to become a member of NSRA’s Education Committee, which plans the conferences. His belief in the importance of learning is a key to the company’s success.

What makes SHOES-n-FEET[®] different from its competition, Bentvelzen explains, is education. “The big difference is the education our staff has and how we continue to educate our franchisees and staff. We are very selective when it comes to which shoes can be carried in our locations; it is important to only bring in the best quality shoes but with style also. But our number one goal is for that shoe to fit the foot and a potential insert.” That, he maintains, takes education, starting with the sales staff and continuing through to the customers they educate about foot health and comfort.



The Comfort Zone

Bentvelzen went down the comfort/therapeutic road after he identified it as a niche that was not being fulfilled in his area. “Recent studies have shown that approximately 80% of people are living with foot pain, and we find that unacceptable,” he says. “There are great products out there, but there is also a lack of knowledge in the fitting process -- and that is where SHOES-n-FEET[®] comes in.” To educate customers, Bentvelzen had first to educate himself and his employees, which he did by partnering with the medical community and establishing training programs, covering not just shoes and shoe characteristics, but the biomechanics of the foot work and how to fit customers and/or patients correctly into shoes.

SHOES-n-FEET[®] stocks a large selection of shoes and over-the-counter inserts. The customer ratio is roughly 80% women, 20% men, and Bentvelzen’s target age group is 35 and over.

He builds relationships with his doctor referral sources “by trust and frequent visits,” he says. To keep the communications lines open, SHOES-n-FEET[®] employs a Director of Medical Community Relations on his management team. “She dedicates her time to building relationships at a national level and also trains our staff and franchisees on a regional level,” says Bentvelzen. SHOES-n-FEET[®] owners also test their employees before granting them the title of “Shoe Fitting Specialist.” To maintain the business’s integrity, Bentvelzen holds all of his franchisees to the same high standards, teaching them how to operate all aspects of a business from visiting doctors’ offices and putting together visitation schedules to how to properly fit a customer in the proper shoes. That, he says, makes it professional and easy.

A customer may walk out of a SHOES-n-FEET[®] location with advice to see a doctor, instead of a new pair of shoes; conversely, customers may walk and in say, “My doctor sent me.” As Bentvelzen sees it, “Doctors refer their patients to us because they understand that proper shoes are important in completing their treatment plans for their patients. They also understand that we have the knowledge, and foot care products to help to complete their treatment plans successfully for their patient’s quick recovery.”

Bentvelzen notes that the industry as a whole promotes fashion over fit and comfort, and most marketing money goes to pushing fashion. “That is what we are all up against,” Bentvelzen admits ruefully. “Here, we are converting people one by one to buy smart shoes with style and elegance, but [shoes that are] also good for their feet,” he says.

Finding and Serving the Customer

When asked how he finds his customers, Bentvelzen says simply, “Grassroots word-of-mouth marketing.” He calls it “Four Walls Marketing.” The greatest asset he has as a



retailer, he maintains, is his store. “And the best place to market yourself is inside the four walls of your store. Our goal is to give such great customer service, combined with fit and knowledge, that the customer leaves saying, ‘Wow! This was the best shoe fitting experience I have ever had -- and it was fun!’ ”

Roughly 90% of his business comes from three sources: first-time referrals from doctors, repeat customers, and word-of-mouth marketing. That means his company doesn’t really have a need for other advertising. “If you’re the best, naturally people will preach your name to their friends, and it builds a strong, loyal customer base.”

SHOES-n-FEET[®] has branded the company as a four-point experience:

- Quality of fit, with a one-on-one fitting experience for every customer
- Knowledge of fitting and of the feet
- Continued education in product and health
- Close relationship with local doctors.

But branding alone isn’t what Bentvelzen credits as the success behind his franchise operation. SHOES-n-FEET[®] works to keep each member of the store team fully engaged within a successful and satisfying work environment, which incidentally leads to a very low employee turnover rate.

How does he keep employees engaged? “By keeping them involved . . . in all of the day-to-day decisions [and] in our longer-term development planning. Also, by giving them freedom to use their talents [and] challenging them to gain new talents with continued education.”

For example, he says proudly, “Lara Fugate, a Shoe Fitting Specialist in our Bellevue store, helped start a shoe drive for victims of Hurricane Katrina. She set up drop-off spots at our stores and even got local podiatrists’ offices as drop-off stations. It was more than just using her talents to help out in the store; it was helping people in a time of need.”

Fostering that kind of work ethic is a significant factor in SHOES-n-FEET[®]’s success.

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