

Foot Health - Does size matter?

Well, it does and it doesn't...because size means very little, it is all about the skill of fitting. At Footwear Today we find when we are sent shoes to road test that a size 10 from one manufacturer can be size nine or size 11 from another manufacturer. Half sizes aren't available in continental shoes, which only exacerbates the problem. We pitched some questions to Laura West, Secretary of the Society of Shoe Fitters, to find out her views:

Q: On what is the shoe sizing system in this country based?

A: The English size scale was based on barleycorns – but even barleycorns can be different sizes! Both English and Continental sizing are predominantly used in the UK, and because of the number of imports having overtaken British manufacture, continental sizes are now the most commonly used size scale.

If you are a retailer the benefit of continental sized shoes means less stock, therefore less money on the shelf, as some sizes may cover an English whole and half size. However, for the comfort of the public it is better to have a greater choice of sizes, width fittings and brands etc. It means the greater chance of finding a shoe that is comfortable and fits well. There is no standardisation of shoe sizing in the UK, which is a good thing. Feet are not standard – they are highly individual.

Q: Is it a measurement and what is the measurement based on? I remember when I was young going into shoe shops (I think Clarks were good) and having my feet measured in a device that measured the length and breadth of my foot.

A: There is no substitute for a simple measuring gauge - which is merely a guide to a qualified fitter with an expert and experienced eye. Over the years suppliers have tried all sorts of gadgets to make the process look more professional and slick by introducing machines of different shapes and sizes, x-rays, lasers etc., but this is a marketing tool, as opposed to need or necessity. The gauge or size guide is merely a starting point and a size stick and tape does the job if teamed with the knowledge of shoes and their idiosyncrasies!

The size scale is almost immaterial as most suppliers' gauges are calibrated to suit the manufacturer's lasts. The Society of Shoe Fitters uses Brannock devices and we chose a continental size scale for our junior gauge, and English scale for the adults gauge. Why? Because if retailers are selling children's shoes in English sizes they are probably selling Clarks or Start-rite and they can provide their stockists with their own gauges calibrated for their footwear. It is the shops that want to fit correctly but only selling continental children's shoes, that needed a device to guide them. However we believe in English full and half sizes and various width fittings, and disagree they are unnecessary and only appear in expensive shoes – far from it, which is why we provide the adult gauge in English sizing. Gauges should never be sold to the public because they do not understand this. A gauge is just a starting point and varies. It is irresponsible to sell gauges to the public for this reason.

Unfortunately people are hung up about size – which is hardly surprising when every celebrity magazine feels obliged to comment on the size and shape of everyone they feature! They know nothing about the content of the person, simply what they look like, and shoes are treated in the same way. Shoes are today's celebrities – the public know nothing about them other than what is fashion and what is not, but do not appreciate what goes into designing them, how they are constructed, what materials are used and why, and the importance of fit and how they are the only item of clothing/covering that can seriously damage your physiology.

It is the obsession with eternal youth, tomorrow never comes, so they don't care or are not aware of what they are doing to their bodies just by simply buying the wrong shape shoes for their feet. Many retailers can be categorised in the same way. If shoe shops were more responsible and trained staff professionally, or the government stepped in to ensure that shops selling shoes did so responsibly and ethically, it would save the NHS a fortune and there would not be the need for more than 11,000+ chiropodists in the UK as there is at present! The number of Podiatrists speaks volumes about what we are doing to our feet with self fitting!

Q: Has that fallen by the wayside because it meant, especially as they offered breadths as well as length, that shoe suppliers had to hold too much stock?

A: Hard to say because sadly the majority of shops are 'serve yourself shops' (stack them high sell them cheap) with independent retailers in the minority. That is why it is so important for independents to specialise and create fitting as their USP (unique selling point). They need to give a better service and be more qualified than anyone else, get out of their shops and see what others are doing, how they are displaying their goods, do they have an internet presence, have they been to all the schools and playgroups in the area, do they need to have special promotions etc. There is no substitute for a personal service – as long as it is worthwhile. A member of staff who has no product or fitting knowledge and cannot make a consumer feel good about being in the shop and purchasing something, may as well not be there at all. That is the difference between a shop assistant (someone who merely gets the shoes from the stockroom) and someone who 'sells' and is either a sales person or trained or qualified shoe fitter.

Q: How does the shoe fitter cope, if there aren't enough sizes available in a shoe that the client wants to buy?

A: It will vary between a 'shoe fitter' and a sales person. We ask our members to advise on the best fitting shoe, however you often have to fit a head before you fit someone's feet, and if they are determined to have the shoes they like all we can do is try to make the shoe fit more comfortably or securely. We teach our members how to add small orthotic materials to give greater fit (not heel grips), but if that is not acceptable to the consumer and they are determined to buy something that the fitter knows is wrong, they are advised to put SF on the receipt (self-fitted) and not accept the return when it inevitably comes back through the door.

Q: Is the problem that each manufacturer has its own shoe dimensions for the accepted shoe sizes?

A: Yes, sort of. Shoes are made on a last and the shape of the last determines the shape and fit of the shoe. At one time 'lasts' were the most expensive and therefore most closely guarded item in a shoe factory. Now with shoes being made in overseas factories making more than one brand, it is impossible for lasts to be protected in the same way. What was helpful to fitters in the past was that the 'last number' of each shoe was printed in the suppliers catalogues. Some lasts were so well designed they fitted a variety of different shaped feet, so the retailer knew that if a shoe made on a specific last fitted well and inevitably sold out, it would be a safe bet to order shoes made on the same last the next season.

Q: Which manufacturers shoes are "on the big side" and which are "on the small size"? Or -is there not consistency even between manufacturers?

A: Too dangerous to answer this question explicitly – a real can of worms! We give the 'fitting benefits' of specific brands to our members and students when asked, but are never critical because it does depend on the fitting mix of your stock and your customer base. If you are in an

area highly populated by a specific ethnicity, then their feet will be a certain shape, and having the right brand of shoes to suit their shape is helpful.

Q: Does the problem vary from shoe model to shoe model or batch to batch?

A: Not usually, but can happen, more noticeably if the same shoe is being made in two different factories. It is all about the 'lasting tolerance' that the country of origin or factory used.

Q: Do shoes coming from different countries have different dimensions for the accepted shoe sizes – are Chinese shoes bigger than Italians shoes for the same accepted shoe size?

A: Yes, country of origin definitely affects the overall shape and fit of the shoes they produce. Bear in mind that a factory will always try to sell to their home market first and foremost. The knowledge of their own nationality's feet definitely plays a part. Obviously if a UK supplier gives a foreign factory their lasts to produce shoes, then the shoes should be uniform in size and fitting – but experience shows it does depend on the country in which they are made, as the lasting tolerance due to things like temperature of the factory, will affect the leather and lasting process.

Q: Would it help them if there were half sizes?

A: Costs more to produce, as you require more lasts.

Q: Would the universal application of the Continental shoe sizing system help?

A: No. Keep English sizing. The greater the choice, the more feet will be fitted comfortably. Bear in mind that only one third of the population has average feet – therefore two thirds need something more.

Q: Does inconsistently sized stock present a big problem to a retailer and how does a shoe retailer deal with the problems of inconsistent shoe sizes and the apparent lack of a system?

A: If the staff are not trained properly and do not keep themselves familiar with the stock on the shelf, then probably yes, the inconsistency of the size and fitting is off-putting in the selling and fitting process. But, if staff know what they are doing and communicate with one another, then they should be able to sell stock that is possibly too large or too small, by informing the customer accordingly and/or making adjustments – and that is why we advise our students not to give the size and fitting information to the consumer. A. they will take it as gospel and think every pair of shoes they buy should be that size and fitting. B. they are rude and cheeky enough nowadays to use the knowledge of the staff in-store and then walk out and buy online!

On-line Shoe Suppliers

Q: How do shoe sizing problems affect on-line retailers and their costs and revenues, given that a wrong size dispatched by post or courier has to be replaced if it is wrong, at cost in time and delivery costs?

A: Online retailers always bargain on the public being too lazy to pack up and return stock. Overall it is not cost effective for the consumer – who tend to overlook no service and happily pay postage and packing, and it would be interesting to see how profitable for the retailer. All retailers do need an online presence now because it is a showcase to their stock, another window to their business but, selling shoes online to certain age groups can be considered unethical and risky.

Because people are ignorant about how shoes affect their feet, the way they walk, and the long-term damage that can be done, they do not realise that the size and fitting they order may still be completely unsuitable and if they had just gone into a shop for someone to look at their feet and been fitted properly, a potential problem could have been spotted and treated before it becomes too serious. Some of the public are extremely rude and go into a shop for a free fitting service and then get out their phones to buy online. You don't walk into hairdressers and use their brush and combs or take your packed lunch into a restaurant... It is rude and unfair as the shops have expensive stock, business rates and overheads. Shops have it really tough because if they charge for fitting it would put an honest customer off having regular checks on their children's growth.

Q: What percentage do they add to the price of shoes because of the risk of necessitating a return?

A: Will vary considerably. Some suppliers competing with their own outlets consider the costs of return worthwhile, because they have cut out the middleman, and can make the profit the retailer would have made.

Q: Do they feel that consumers were deterred from online purchases because of sizing problems?

A: Thank goodness many are! What is infuriating is using the time and services of a retailer and then incorrectly assuming they are going to buy a well fitting pair of shoes online with that information.

Q: How does their website ordering system try to ensure that buyers get the right sized shoes first time?

A: These vary from supplier to supplier, some basic, some sophisticated, but regardless of the scale and size recommendations given, there can never be a substitute to putting shoes on feet and looking at the person walk – assessing if they have a high or low instep, high or low ankle bone, flaccid feet, overlong or short toes, diabetes, pronation, supination.... etc.

Q: Bearing in mind the considerable problems in sizing, should children's shoes be sold online?

A: The SSF cannot condone selling children's shoes online. Children's feet are precious – they are the hardest working part of a body and if malformed will affect the gait of the child to adult, which in-turn 'throws out' other parts of the body. This leads to pressure on joints, trapped nerves etc. Even migraine has been attributed to ill-fitting footwear. There are many checks a qualified shoe fitter will do before selling shoes to a child and these are all done with their eyes and hands, asking a child to stand, walk etc.

A fitter will have the experience of seeing and comparing dozens of pairs of feet walk into their shop, and the knowledge gained from their training. A one day course may show how to put shoes on a child and handle a gauge, but there is no substitute to the information contained within our 5-10 course material, our Workshops, and years of 'hands-on' experience and the comfort of knowing there is a body of experts to back them up and on hand to assist with any concerns. Yes, have a website, show the public what you can offer, but always encourage them to shop in-store. ...and when they do...know your stuff and make it worth their while!

Tell us your views Footwear manufacturers, retailers or suppliers are invited to have their say on this issue. Please e-mail your comments cheryltaylor@googlegmail.com. Your views will be published in Footwear Today www.footweartoday.co.uk.