

Press Release



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Calling all suppliers to professional Shoe Fitters and Independent Retailers – THEY NEED YOUR HELP AND THEY NEED IT NOW!

We are all aware of how the internet and supermarkets have been allowed to ride roughshod over our high streets and town centres. Whatever you wish to buy whether it's a washing machine or a lawnmower it is all too tempting to use a local shop and knowledgeable shop staff as a showroom and information centre, with absolutely no intention of buying from them because you know you can get it cheaper online, or from a warehouse style operation. *Guilty?* Yes most of us are and we ought to be very ashamed and rather scared! This is exactly what is happening to independent shoe shops and it should be a frightening prospect for EVERY footwear manufacturer and supplier, not just the smaller ones.

Whereas we were seeing a shoe shop closure once every few months, now it is a weekly occurrence. It is all too easy for brands to shrug their shoulders and think 'that's okay we have our own website' or, 'we will simply keep offering bigger margins to the multiples', but there is no real profit to be made this way and you will simply be competing with thousands of others. The old adage 'when one door shuts another door opens' no longer applies. Villages and towns have become carbon copies of one another with large multiples occupying small shops, interspersed by coffee and charity shops – what happened to individuality, *vive la différence?*

So 'why is the Society of Shoe Fitters (SSF) so concerned' you may be thinking, 'why are they writing so passionately about independent shoe shops and not fitting'? Well if we don't rattle some cages now and muster up some support for the independent shoe retailer, it will soon be too late and we will all suffer for their loss!

You have heard the Society of Shoe Fitters (SSF) speak out about the online sale of children's shoes in particular, and we make no apology for that. We are not scaremongering, we are trying to educate and inform both our own industry and the public. There should be a Government Health Warning on all websites selling children's footwear, anyone selling children's shoes should be qualified to do so, and the sale of 'fitting gauges' to the public should be banned. There is a moral obligation but not a legal obligation to do so. It is irresponsible to sell gauges as a gauge is merely a starting point, they are all calibrated differently and they mislead people into thinking they know their own shoe size and fitting which is misinterpreted by the public. Damage done in the formative years to young growing feet does not just affect their feet but their entire physiology. The bones in the foot do not ossify until around the age of 18. A small child (or a diabetes sufferer) cannot always tell if a shoe is too small and therefore toes can be malformed and their gait will develop unnaturally. If you walk differently to compensate for pain or discomfort, it 'wears' other joints and tendons which would not be affected in normal gait. This in turn will cause all sorts of aches and pains that may require long term health care, or even surgery in later life.

Society members come from all avenues of the industry, but predominantly you will find them in good quality Independent shoe shops. These are usually the people who make 'fitting' their USP (unique selling point). In these shops you will find a variety of brands, many of whom cannot be found on the high street, as they are created for 'difficult' feet, or simply for the more discerning and knowledgeable customer who want to be comfortable, rather than those who are only concerned with the price or the latest fashion. These shops invest in the education of their staff and their loyalty is returned, whereas the staff employed in multiples or chainstores will often move on quickly, their footwear education is limited, indeed in the majority of shops selling shoes the staff are simply shop assistants capable of working a till and finding shoes in a stockroom – shoes

may as well be Baked Beans. Because only a third of the population have 'average' feet there is no substitute for a proficient shoe fitter taking a look at how you are walking and discussing your feet and footwear whatever your age. One slight mention of hard skin in a certain area of the foot will inform a qualified shoe fitter that the person is putting too much weight in that spot and may need a small orthotic to remedy the situation to make them more comfortable. Without this the public simply go on often in pain, taking up valuable GP and clinic time, taking time off work, or having costly podiatry treatments.

If independent shops close there will be fewer places for manufacturers of quality or specialised brands to sell to, and less specialised people to serve our families. The larger shops won't want brand names; they are capable of having their own shoes made in bulk cheaply. However good or bad their shoes are, this reduces choice and fit for the public, and in time prices will rise. We have seen it with energy companies, insurance companies, telecommunications and supermarkets, their offers are no longer cheap deals but inflated short term incentives and we have no choice but to pay because the shop on the corner has closed, our choice is limited. This is a 'lose lose' situation.

We all know banks can help the most, but there are ways you can help a little more to make business easier and drive footfall into your stockists – keep some in-stock available, offer smaller pack sizes, agree individual credit terms, incentivise assisted promotions, don't go into 'Sale' too early, do not offer the same product you've sold your retailer cheaper online... these are just a few ways to help. In turn independents need to communicate their concerns and ideas, share business plans, keep promotions fresh etc. This is not a vast industry despite the number of shoes sold in the U.K. and if we don't act now to help our independents it will be smaller still and far worse for everyone.

Just before Easter the Society will be promoting a: Keep Feet 'Fit' – National Shoe Fitting Week starting April 26th 2014, with posters and press releases available. Independent shops and suppliers are welcome to join in and help fly the flag to remind the public you are there to serve and your shoes are great! For more information email: secretary@shoefitters-uk.org or visit the SSF stand at MODA in February.