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By Tiana Velez: Fitness store can step up sales with mailings

By Tiana Velez

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The story

Most people would not be amused with the idea of having others' feet thrust in their face on a daily basis, but for Fleet Feet Sports owners Jeanne and Pete Snell, it's just another day at the office.

The Snells own Fleet Feet Sports on East Tanque Verde Road, the only franchise in Arizona of the North Carolina-based chain. They opened it in March 2004.

The focus is primarily on runners and walkers, and the product mix of shoes, attire and accessories reflects that. Another of the Tucson store's main selling points is its selection of sports bras in a wide range of sizes — a point the couple pushes in their advertising.

Women athletes "need a good pair of shoes and a good sports bra," Jeanne said, stressing the latter.

For those unsure of which size and cut is better for their bodies, a fit specialist is usually on hand to help.

The same attention to providing the right fit is given to Fleet Feet's inventory of shoes — still the dominant reason shoppers come by, Pete said.

Using a process that starts with looking at an individual's foot, trained associates then examine their walk using a treadmill outfitted with four cameras.

The purpose of the treadmill is to detect any abnormalities in their gait such as over-pronation, when the foot rotates inward, which can lead to painful heel spurs, Pete explained.

Profile

The business: Fleet Feet Sports, 6538 E. Tanque Verde Road, Suite 160, 886-7800.

The local owners: Jeanne and Pete Snell

The services: Running, walking and fitness specialty store.

The goal: Expand customer base to build referral network and promote steady growth.

Consultant

Clint Parry is a certified business coach and business owner with Action International, a global business coaching team with more than 500 business coaches worldwide. He can be reached at 529-6100 or at clintparry@action-international.com. His Web site is www.proactioncoaching.com

For some "it's confirming what they already know," he said. But "a huge percentage have no clue. It's an educational process."

The Snells have a third component to their business, which is a set of workshops and clinics on health-related topics, including a half-marathon training course.

"My husband and I owned a consulting business for many years before opening Fleet Feet, but owning a consumer-based retail business presents a whole different set of challenges," Jeanne said.

For starters, the launch date was not the most opportune. Just as business was starting to pick up, the summer months hit.

It's a low season for runners, Jeanne said. There are fewer races, and people are not as eager to buy shoes with the intention of hitting the gym in the heat.

Additionally, the population of Tucson declines as the some residents leave for cooler climates.

They worked through it and in the past two years have enjoyed steady growth, buoyed by a different set of shoppers including nurses and children. To continue growing, the Snells sought direction on how to continuously reach their expanded clientele.

The advice

"Fleet Feet Sports truly has a unique concept that has been under-promoted to the marketplace," said business coach Clint Parry.

The fitting services, both for shoes and sports bras, provided by the Snells and their trained sales associates add value to the products they sell, he explained.

Effectively promoting that service is but one way to reach their target market.

"Fleet Feet can start with developing a direct mail campaign to the demographic they've identified, targeting select ZIP codes on the East Side," Parry suggested.

Rather than send a broad message about the store, the mailings should highlight specific benefits or offers that correlate to key problems faced by their target market — runners and walkers.

Examples, Parry cited, include foot-, shin- and knee-pain resulting from those activities, lack of knowledgeable fitting personnel at mass market outdoor stores and problems that can arise from ill-fitting sports bras.

"They can test different combinations of headlines, benefits and offers using oversized postcards to portions of their target market and then measure results," he said.

By conducting some preliminary market research, the mailings could be revised and be more apt to trigger a positive response from prospective clients. This could be done for both their shoe and sports-bra fitting services.

Then, if the mailings prove successful, Parry recommends taking the message to a broader audience and advertising in select newspapers and magazines.

A second way the Snells can reach their prospective audience is via strategic alliances or partnerships with like-minded businesses, such as personal trainers or podiatrists.

These are groups that are more likely to be aware of the importance of proper fit when it comes to training shoes and bras.

Together "they could also offer bra fitting events, similar to how the larger retailers like Dillards, Macy's offer bra-fitting events," Parry said. "The key message is to use their fitting services as the way to get their prospective clients in the door."

Once in the door, it's much easier to develop the potential for a lasting customer relationship, and that can generate more referrals, he added.

Last, Parry advised the Snells to capitalize on the knowledge of their trained staff and incorporate staff members into Fleet Feet's monthly newsletter by having them write articles on health topics of interest to their shoppers.

Doing so builds their credibility and allows "existing clientele to get to know their staff on a more personal level," he said.

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