

Footwear Economic Facts of Life

- BFA represents British footwear brands and manufacturers, not retailers, and so we are not the prime source of information for consumers - most of our contacts are business-to-business. Nonetheless we are happy to provide some background information to consumers as follows:
- Until the late 19th Century mass-produced shoes were not available and so people had three choices in relation to footwear:
 - Wear fairly expensive made-to-measure shoes;
 - Wear ill-fitting cast-off shoes; or
 - Wear no shoes at all
- Mass production techniques have hugely reduced the cost of shoes, to the enormous benefit, of **most** consumers. Low European import duties on footwear have added to this effect by allowing large quantities of very low-priced footwear imports from countries such as China, India, Thailand, Poland and Vietnam.
- Fierce High Street retail competition has reduced footwear prices, squeezed specialist retailers who used to offer a wider range of fitting and forced surviving retailers to concentrate their stockholding on the best selling sizes, styles and fittings.
- More unpredictable weather and greater fashion consciousness amongst consumers have added to the financial pressure on retailers' stock.
- The people who have **not** been served well by mass production are those with minority requirements in size, fitting or style e.g. large or wide fittings, extra-small or extra-narrow. Mass-market retailers by definition only serve volume market sectors and there are fewer specialists than in the past.
- Consumers with a particular minority need - e.g. extra narrow – would represent a worthwhile number of potential sales for a retailer except for the fact that they are spread thinly across the whole country. If they all lived in the same area the local retailers would do a roaring trade in that specialisation.
- There are very few barriers to setting oneself up as a footwear retailer and there are very many brands and wholesalers happy to supply diverse sizes and styles of footwear; every so often someone with “non-mainstream” feet thinks of establishing a specialist business and contacts us, certain that there is an unexploited market opening. We refer them to IFRA - Independent

Footwear Retailers Association, PO Box 123, Banbury SO, Oxon, OX12 6WB. Tel: 01295 738275, Email: ifra@netcomuk.co.uk and wish them well. IFRA produce an information pack for new retailers which I am sure is full of relevant and practicable advice.

- Two groups of consumers with a shared set of needs for non-mainstream footwear are the Tall Persons Club and Solemates – both self-help groups which seem to me a model of concentrating purchasing power to increase consumer choice.
- Different countries have different consumer profiles and people with slim feet often speak of a much better choice in North America. There is also a much better range of sandals available in hot countries than here, many more warm boots to choose from in Finland and Japanese consumers with relatively large feet must be delighted with the choice of footwear available to them when they visit Britain.
- Consumers with minority requirements in footwear could choose to blame their average-sized colleagues for helping mass-market retailers drive out of business most of the traditional specialist shoe shops who offered a bigger range of sizes and fitting.
- It is much harder to make do with footwear of the wrong size than is the case with clothing which can often be let out or taken in, which makes life difficult for consumers whose feet are not average. Unfortunately there is no social provision for relevant footwear, except for prescription orthopaedic footwear and the economic pressures on footwear retailers and manufacturers do not permit them to go far in helping minorities. The obvious exception are the dedicated specialists who concentrate on one sub-sector,
- BFA has produced its directory “Hard to Find Footwear” which lists all the specialist suppliers we have come across who offer unusual or non-standard footwear. It also gives details of other associations, self-help groups and sources of professional advice. We are always happy to learn of new contacts for this directory. Incidentally nearly all the firms listed are not BFA members and we produce it as a public service.
- Footwear manufacturing and retailing provide powerful case studies in globalisation, with the obvious winners and losers – both employees and consumers- produced by that process.

Niall Campbell, Chief Executive, British Footwear Association, June 2002