

FN

FOOTWEAR NEWS MAY 18, 2009 VOL.65 NO.19 WWW.FOOTWEARNEWS.COM \$10.00



POWER TALKS

Traffic. Trade Shows. Product. Price. At the FN CEO Summit, the industry's biggest players tackled the hot topics and searched for opportunities in a dramatically changing environment.



CHARLES JOURD

June



FF

The New White

Independent Spotlight: Staying nimble, Ron White has undergone a rebranding initiative to fight the economic downturn, and more change is on the way. *By LINDSAY E. SAMMON*

NEW YORK — For Ron White, being an independent footwear retailer is a competitive advantage in the current economy.

"This business is all about change, and we can change on a dime," said the Toronto-based store owner. "As the consumer's vibe changes, they want to be less flashy, so the buy has to change and the stores have to change. Those big, Goliath [retailers] can't react the same way [we can]."

It's that ability to adapt that has kept White and his six-store chain relevant with his fashion-minded customer base. White launched his first The Foot Shoppe store in 1993, when he was 23 years old, with limited capital and a big cash advance on his Visa card.

Since then, the retailer has garnered a loyal customer following, appeared in countless local media and branded himself as Canada's resident shoe expert.

"Ron White is a perfect example of the entrepreneurial independent retailer who uses creativity to get his message to the consumer and incorporates his personality into creating a brand image for his stores," said longtime vendor Stuart Weitzman. "Our industry could use dozens more like him."

Part of White's reaction to the changing tide of retail and fashion included a complete rebranding of his stores. In 2006, White changed the name of his boutiques from The Foot Shoppe to Ron White-The Foot Shoppe, right around the time he launched his eponymous private-label brand, and as the stores' merchandise mix evolved to include more fashion-forward product.

"We decided on the rebranding when my advisory board and I were looking at the business and we found that it was really starting to [slow]," he said. "Our growth wasn't as significant as it had been a few years earlier, and although we had an amazing amount of loyal customers, we weren't getting many new customers. When we first started, we didn't even carry heels, but over time, our biggest sellers became Stuart Weitzman and Donald J Pliner. The product mix changed so much over the years and what was happening inside the store didn't match the outside, with The Foot Shoppe's orthopedic image. That was the disconnect."

The image overhaul included a new logo and a redesign of the store interiors that incorporated sleek champagne and vanilla colors and rich chocolate-colored leather furnishings. White also took customer service to the next level, providing complimentary champagne, strawberries and shiatsu foot massages to shoppers in the store.

The gender product mix has changed as well over the years,



Vanilla, champagne and chocolate have become Ron White's signature store colors.



Store owner
Ron White

Complimentary foot
massage machines are
available to customers.



much more heavily toward women's product,

to be a much more difficult business, and I only
three doors now," he said.

ores are stocked with casual, fashion-athletic,
less brands from Cole Haan, Danskø, Camper
ng others. About 15 percent of the merchand-
ive product, including special makeups from
Mephisto and Thierry Rabotin.

it is consistent across White's product selection
eed to both look good and feel good. "I buy with
nical brain," joked the retailer, who has a back-
mechanics. "We won't just bring a shoe in be-
gous. It has to be gorgeous and comfortable."

his customers' needs and buys for her. He
od eye and has a flair for fashion," said Penny
sident of La Canadienne, who has worked with
years.

, White sometimes asks vendors to tweak lasts
le bottoms to boost the comfort, and his staff,
o through a rigorous training program, are edu-
cal foot conditions and fit.

o White, the attentive sales associates and
experience encourage new customers to buy
y's penny-pinching times and inspire some
ers to spend \$15,000 to \$30,000 each year

we're selling more pairs in the \$350-to-\$500
nything else. Our \$200 pairs have slowed down
id.

spots recently have been the Web store, which
t year, and spring sales are up 50 percent over

the previous year. There is also growth in White's private-label
brand, which he debuted three years ago.

The brand's tailored pumps and peep-toe heels have been
strong sellers for women, said White, as well as spring es-
padrilles and casual sandals. The line also features booties,
sandals and fashion-athletic styles for women, and oxfords,
boots and dress shoes for men. Retail prices range from \$235
to \$550, with an average selling price of \$450.

"We tripled the size of our collection for spring, and it's been
doing really well," White said. Last season, the brand was the
store's 10th best seller, he noted, adding that he hoped to
raise it to the No. 7 spot this year.

"For this season, we're trending in the top three [best sel-
ers]," he said. "Our consumer is loving it, and it really took
off guard. I just wasn't expecting it."

For fall '09, White will unveil a new private-label collect-
called Ron White All Day Heels. It takes its name from his
Day Heels in-store merchandising section, where he has
picks styles from various brands that embody both com-
fort and style and are appropriate for all-day wear.

Recently, the Ron White label caught the attention of retail-
outside Toronto, as well as some in the U.S. that are interes-
in carrying it, but no deals have been confirmed.

"We're not really there yet," said White. "We've got a lot
other things going on and coming down the pipeline."

That would include the company's many charitable in-
itives, such as an annual shoe drive for the homeless, which
collects thousands of shoes from vendors, the local commu-
nity and celebrities such as Justin Timberlake and Celine D-
White also sponsors an annual breast cancer benefit feast-
a for-sale, limited-edition shoe bag, with proceeds donated
the Canadian Breast Cancer Research Foundation.

Most recently, he launched the Ron White Foundation, which
raises money for different organizations each year. On May
it held the White Knight party, an evening of food, fashion,
music, featuring a white-carpet entrance for A-list guests,
white tigers. Proceeds from the \$6,500 tickets went to Tor-
to-based human rights charity Free the Children.

White also is meeting with producers about a regular
a shoe and fashion expert on a local TV station and has
for retail expansion this year in Toronto.

"We're in talks with some of the leading local mall owners
who have approached us," he said. "We're looking at ex-
ing some existing spaces and opening additional doors."