



Beautiful Shoes and Healthy Feet

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Boston Women's Journal: An Educational Newspaper Serving the Women of Greater Boston

October/November 2007

Who hasn't watched the minutes tick by during the day, waiting for that blessed moment when you could kick off your work shoes and put on those sneakers?

Every day in the U.S., millions of women slip into too tight, too pointy, high-heeled dress shoes to make the trek to work...then to the lunch meeting...then to the kids' soccer practice...then to that dinner engagement.

Entrepreneur and working mother Jennifer Lovitt Riggs knew this story all too well. The founder and CEO of [Nota Bene Shoes for Women](#), Riggs was hiking across the Pentagon parking lot to deliver a briefing to one of the Joint Chiefs of Staff when she could feel it starting – that preblister sting. Her position as a consultant for Booz Allen Hamilton required she don business professional attire at all times, meaning 10-12 hour days in a suit and dress shoes.

“As I winced toward the entrance, I looked over at my male colleagues in their handsome shoes and thought, ‘Their feet are comfortable and they’re mentally reviewing their analysis and presentations. They’re not thinking about a blister,’” Riggs said. “Then I saw women in the parking lot wearing suits and sneakers, carrying their shoes in their bags.” The injustice of the situation hit her. “How can half of the professional population of the U.S. not have appropriate footwear for work? It’s just not right.”

That day sparked the beginning of Riggs' search for a professional woman's shoe that was comfortable yet stylish, feminine and affordable – a search that would drive her to start her own company.

“At first I was on a quest for good but beautiful work shoes for myself,” said Riggs. She found the market was flooded with shoes that claimed comfort but were clumsy, cheaply made or ill-fitting. Even the best products still strongly resembled orthopedic shoes and cost upwards of \$400. “After only a few days of research, I became incensed by the complete failure of the industry to serve active women. At that point, it was no longer about me.”

Riggs didn't understand why women's dress shoes couldn't be comfortable and stylish. "I didn't know if a geometric mismatch between our beauty ideal and our biology, or a set of technical manufacturing barriers, or some other market phenomenon was the cause, so I set out to find the answer," Riggs said.

She mapped out a market survey and started studying the anatomy of the foot, the biomechanics of walking, and technical manuals on shoe manufacturing. Talking with retailers, wholesalers and consummate shoppers alike confirmed no one was making a shoe equally emphasizing beauty and comfort. The manuals and journals revealed no insurmountable geometric, manufacturing, or financial barrier – just challenges.

So in late 2002, Riggs began R&D and prototyping to address those challenges. She assembled a team of orthopedic surgeons, podiatrists, and design consultants to work with factories on prototyping and production. The goal was to provide a beautiful dress shoe that could be worn every day, all day, and would not contribute to women's foot problems.

According to a study conducted by the American Orthopedic Foot and Ankle Society, women are nine times more likely to develop a foot problem because of improperly fitting shoes than a man. Annually, women have about 90% of the surgeries for common bunions. These surgeries cost the American public about \$3.5 billion and 15 million lost work days each year. The same study found that 8 out of 10 women said their shoes are painful.

"It is not that women are being silly," Riggs said. "We are taught things like 'beauty is painful' and 'no pain, no gain.' So, we grit our teeth and bear it – the pointed toe and the stiletto heel are a badge of feminine machismo."

Riggs spent much of her time and money on "corrective surgery" of the shoe – reshaping the last, the block around which shoes are built. Adjusting the last's dimensions is one way to prevent the shoe from pinching toes or blistering heels. She also conducted extensive market research, sending out 50 surveys to friends and colleagues, and talking to dozens of retailers. When she received more than 300 survey replies back from the 50 she originally sent, she knew the questions resonated with women and that she was onto something.

The survey feedback provided the basis for the shoes' design and development. "Even before the first sketch, we begin the design process by considering the day to day needs of our customer," Riggs said.

Nota Bene's customers have an active lifestyle but like to look and feel good. "The woman we are serving is often thinking in terms of movement: going to a couple of cities in one week, several engagements in one day, or three meetings in one hour," Riggs said. "She's not looking for trendy, but she wants something beautiful she can trust to wear all day."

The second step in the design process was to integrate customer feedback with the latest European and American fashion trends. Riggs enlisted the design prowess of several fashion industry insiders who had experience with Church's, Prada and Capezio, Sperry and Ariat and Birkenstock. They helped translate the design and construction concepts into instructions that factories and modelists could follow. Erv Shames, former CEO of Stride Rite Shoes, and former Candie's CEO Lynn Miller played key roles in helping Riggs identify candidate manufacturers.

Seven months pregnant, Riggs began to interview manufacturers in Spain and initiate prototyping and production planning. The first samples arrived along with her first child in April 2003, ushering in the prototype correction phase, a key factor in Nota Bene's success. Instead of testing prototypes using foot models, which is industry standard practice, Riggs solicited real women to be [Nota Bene fit and wear testers](#). Based on the comments from testers, the shoes were rigorously corrected until they felt good the whole day, not just the first 15 minutes.

"Even with the first prototypes, women could tell the difference," Riggs said. "They were excited that someone was paying attention to their needs, but the fact that their toes could wiggle, that nothing was cutting, and that they could feel the cushioning was even more exciting."

Nota Bene introduced their first line of biomechanically correct and stylish women's dress shoes in April 2004. The resulting collection offered what women wanted and consultants recommended: room in the toebox, heels that are well-balanced, all-leather soles with added thickness for protection, and high-performance running shoe quality shock absorbing materials in the footbed. In 2005, *Good Housekeeping* magazine featured the Nota Bene line in their "High heeled shoes that look good and feel good too" segment, giving Nota Bene their coveted Seal of Approval.

Nota Bene shoes are designed to allow the foot to function "as nature intended — with the right biomechanics for flexing and pushing off during walking," states Brett Puckett, orthopedic surgeon and special consultant to Nota Bene since inception. "These characteristics will definitely contribute to less stress and wear and tear."

Customer feedback is impressive. The website is filled with testimonials from satisfied women across the country, many who have purchased several pairs of shoes. Riggs would like to see [Nota Bene](#) shoes become closet staples for active women — and never an impulse buy.

"Plenty of companies are trying to appeal to women's vanity, insecurity, neediness," Riggs said. "We want to appeal to their deep wisdom, their sense of beauty, and their real needs, because those are the foundations for a long-term and loyal customer relationship."

Nota Bene's price point, at \$200-\$275, is purposely set lower than most upper-tier competitors so that owning a pair of Nota Bene shoes is within the reach of most

professional and active women. “Because we use better materials and because of our wear-testing and R&D, craftsmanship, and durability, the shoes are expensive,” Riggs acknowledges. “We will never be an \$89 or \$129 shoe company.”

However, considering Riggs’ market research, the shoes are not only a health investment but a financial investment as well. “At the bottom of the average woman’s closet, at least in our target demographic, are 30 pairs of shoes. Among those, an average of 3 pairs are loved and worn regularly,” Riggs said. “This means that women are spending \$1,000 to get a pair of shoes they actually like to wear. When you think about the happy steps per dollar spent, it makes \$250 a good deal.”

Independent boutiques in about 14 states carry Nota Bene shoes, but Riggs is looking to expand her retail presence in 2007 and 2008, as well as the shoe line. Nota Bene’s core collection currently includes 15 shoe styles; 10 additional styles are slated for introduction this year and next. Nota Bene recently introduced their first sandal called the Eve. In addition to being the company’s first domestic and “modular” production, it has given the line a more casual and versatile style and a new way to achieve fit and comfort.

“This style is special because it gives toes a little R&R,” Riggs said. “The arch strap does all the work holding the foot back and close to the footbed. Its adjustability and openness allows it to fit almost any foot. And because it uses no elastic, the fit will not wear out after a season.”

The company’s overall goal is to enhance the quality of active women’s lives by providing a favorite closet staple that won’t hurt their feet and will help them maintain their active lifestyles and mobility by preventing foot problems.

“You only get one pair of feet, and they have a long journey,” Riggs said. “They are worth protecting.”