Mass customising footwear: the left® foot company case

Matti Sievänen*
Tampere University of Technology
Institute for Industrial Management
P.O. Box 541, 33101 Tampere, Finland
E-mail: matti.sievanen@tut.fi
*Corresponding author

Linnea Peltonen
Marimekko Oyj
Puusepaenkatu 4, 00880 Helsinki, Finland
E-mail: linnea.peltonen@marimekko.fi

Abstract: The Finnish footwear industry has had a difficult time since the end of the 1980s. The companies that have managed to survive are either innovative or specialised. Pomarfin is one such survivor. After a market analysis, the firm’s management concluded that individualism could become a dominant trend. Using modern technology combined with a long tradition of shoe manufacturing, Pomarfin succeeded in manufacturing mass customised shoes. Its new brand, left® foot company, is specialised in mass customisation. Early results of left® foot company are promising. It has become an international brand with outlets in many countries and continues to grow at quite a fast rate. This case examines how left® foot company operates and discusses some of its success factors.

Keywords: mass customisation; footwear industry; scanning; competences.


Biographical notes: Matti Sievänen is a Senior Researcher at the Cost Management Centre of the Tampere University of Technology (Tampere, Finland). The Cost Management Centre is a research group that operates in close collaboration with industrial organisations. Its research projects focus on innovations of management accounting and their industrial implementations. Sievänen holds a PhD in Industrial Management and Engineering. His research interests lie in management accounting, product variety management, and customisation. Sievänen has been published in The Finnish Journal of Business Economics, Industrial Marketing Management, International Journal of Production Economics, and Technovation.

Linnea Peltonen is a PhD student of Industrial Management at the Tampere University of Technology. She holds an MS in Industrial Management and Engineering from the Tampere University of Technology. Her research interests are related to mass customisation in the textile and apparel sector. Peltonen is currently employed by the Marimekko Corporation.
1 Introduction: the footwear industry and footwear market in Finland

There have been big changes in the Finnish footwear industry over the past decades. The industry’s golden age was in the 1980s. In contrast to other market economy countries, footwear production in Finland increased in the early 1980s primarily due to high oil prices and the clearing trade with the Soviet Union. At its highest level in 1985, production was around 10 million pairs annually, approximately 40% of which were exported to the Soviet Union. Trade with the Soviet Union declined in the late 1980s and practically ended in 1991 with the collapse of the Soviet Union. This had a dramatic effect on the Finnish footwear industry. At the same time, imports from low-wage countries increased significantly, which made the economic environment even tougher. For example, imports from China increased from 2.6 to 8.7 million pairs of shoes between 1990 and 1994. Since then, imports have declined and the total imported volume in 2003 was approximately 13.4 million pairs. During the past 15 years, Finnish footwear companies have been struggling to survive. In 1989, there were over 4300 employees in footwear production, but the number of employees had dropped to 1500 by 2003. During the same period, the production volume declined from 6.6 to 2.7 million pairs (all statistical data provided by The Association of Finnish Shoe and Leather Industries).

Much like the footwear industry, the Finnish footwear market has also changed over the last 20 years. The number of private shoe retailers has declined by 80% and a few big retail and department store chains now dominate the market. The total volume of manufactured footwear in 2003 was 15.2 million pairs. It has declined slightly since the mid-1990s, when roughly 17 million pairs had been produced. In comparison, supply was at its highest level in 1990 with 20.5 million pairs of shoes.

When examining the environment in which left® foot company operates, we have to make a distinction between all footwear and leather footwear. Out of the total footwear market, leather footwear has a share of about 40%, i.e., 6.4 million pairs (2003). left® foot company produces low leather shoes for men; in the market segment, the total volume is 1.5 million pairs. In addition, unlike in most markets, domestic footwear makes up over 50% of the market share in the low leather shoes segment. Finland has a population of 5.2 million; approximately two million inhabitants are males over 20 years of age. If we compare 1.5 to 2.0 million, it is evident that every man in Finland buys an average of less than one pair of low leather shoes per year.

The invention of the sewing machine for sewing the soles of shoes to their uppers launched the footwear industry in the mid-19th century. In Finland, the first shoe factories were founded in the late 19th century. Before that, shoes were mainly made by highly reputed craftsmen. Mass produced shoes never completely replaced handmade shoes. There were people whose feet deviated so greatly from the norm that custom-made shoes were their only option. Similarly, some people, such as diabetics, require orthopaedic shoes that are often custom-made. Finally, there have also always been those consumers willing to pay extra for unique shoes custom-made by shoemakers.

Before the arrival of left® foot company, the footwear market was divided between high-volume mass producers and high-end shoemakers. Moreover, a good fit is an important factor when buying shoes, and mass produced shoes simply cannot offer an optimal fit to everyone. A shoemaker can make shoes with a perfect fit, but the extra cost can be quite high. At the moment, custom-made shoes cost between 1,000 to 2,000 euros per pair, whereas the typical price of a high quality mass produced pair of shoes is around...
150 to 200 euros. Thus, there has always been an obvious market for mass customised shoes that can offer a better fit at an affordable extra cost, such as those supplied by left® foot company.

2 Pomarfin Ltd.

2.1 History and present situation

Pomarfin Ltd. was founded in 1960 by a married couple on the upper story of a small house, and is still a family-owned private company today. The company grew at a stable rate until the mid-1980s. Unlike the situation at most major footwear companies, exports to the Soviet Union were not of special significance for Pomarfin, comprising only 10% of manufacturing volume at the most. This is one of the reasons why Pomarfin survived the difficult years. Actually, the worst years for Pomarfin were 1995–1996, when it incurred heavy financial losses. The company had to make radical changes in order to survive: costs were cut and workers were made redundant. The company also transferred most of its production to Estonia, where labour costs are significantly lower than in Finland. In addition, Pomarfin has moved into the segment of luxury products and is specially orientated towards the Northern Countries. Pomarfin also manufactures shoes with Gore-Tex lining, which helps keep shoes dry, and shoes with a Fenomex sole structure, which keeps the internal temperature of the shoe 3°C–8°C higher than the regular sole structure. With these innovative new products, Pomarfin has been able to avoid price competition (Kerins, 1999).

Table 1 Overview of company data

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pomarfin Ltd.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Address</td>
<td>29630 Pomarkku, Finland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>URL</td>
<td><a href="http://www.pomar.fi/">http://www.pomar.fi/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><a href="http://www.leftfootcompany.com/">http://www.leftfootcompany.com/</a></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Year of foundation</td>
<td>1960</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of employees</td>
<td>180</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net sales (2004)</td>
<td>€7.1 M</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Industry</td>
<td>Footwear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Products</td>
<td>Men’s, ladies’, and children’s footwear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Markets</td>
<td>Finland, Scandinavia, Russia, Baltic Countries</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The company wanted to stay in business and knew that it could not win a price battle. Gore-Tex lining and the Fenomex sole were the first steps to escape price competition by offering more differentiation options. Unfortunately, the volume of Gore-Tex shoes was not large enough to become a success story. The company continued to search for new business opportunities, and Pomarfin ordered a market survey to identify customers’ preferences. The survey of potential Finnish customers was conducted in 1996. The result was unanimous – individualisation was the dominant trend. Even before that, there had been internal discussions about how the company could manufacture shoes made to order. The idea itself was not new, but so far, nobody had been able to manufacture mass customised shoes. There were many problems that had to be solved.
2.2 Why mass customisation?

The answer behind the question of mass customisation is clear. In general, the company wanted to uphold its footwear production in Finland, fight Chinese low-cost products, and exit the price war with improved profits. The most important factor in making a move over to mass customisation was to avoid the price war. Moreover, the company wanted to create additional customer value and answer existing, but unsatisfied, demands. Pomarfin went about setting certain goals for the new mass customisation concept, as briefly described below:

- Strategic goal: True customer-centricity focused on control of entire value chain.
- Operative goal: Products manufactured and sold based on existing orders.
- Financial goal: Higher profit due to added value and improved efficiency.
- Technical goal: Ability to exploit the economies of scale of mass production.
- Customer goal: Desired level of individuality.

2.3 Development phase of left® foot company

In 1997, Pomarfin started a project focused on mass customised shoes. There were five to seven people working full-time for three-and-a-half years before the first shop was opened in 2001. There were some technical aspects, such as foot scanning, an integrated computer system and manufacturing technology, that had to be studied to identify the possibilities of current technologies. Many tools and computer programs had to be custom-made for the project. The enabling technology for mass customisation was a CAD/CAM cutting machine. Normally the uppers are cut using dies, with at least one die for every size, which pays off only when there is a sufficient volume. Unique pairs are cut manually, a process too slow and expensive for mass customisation. For this reason, the firm invested in a CAD/CAM cutting machine. Although the technical aspects were important, the most vital information regarded shoemaking know-how. The foot scanner, for example, which makes a 3D image, operates with an accuracy of 0.1 mm. However, there is no use for such accurate information and most of the scanner-generated data are practically useless. Thus, it had to be decided which information was useful. The programme that analyses measurements was designed by a person who had extensive experience in footwear manufacturing. After a certain number of trial runs, a good compromise between accuracy and practicality was found. The company decided to use a size range rather than the cutting-to-measure approach. This greatly simplified the system and provided the required volume. In the beginning, the shoe collections were rather limited because left® foot company wanted to be sure that their idea actually worked before expanding the business.

The entire concept of left® foot company was well-tested during the developmental phase. The development of the configuration and manufacturing system itself was particularly time-consuming and complicated with its several iterations. This ensured, however, that most of the problems were solved during the developmental stage. Problematic issues were related to the use of the new technology and computer program, as well as determining precisely what to offer and what makes shoes fit. Since the market launch, no major changes have been required. In the future, development will
concentrate on design and material innovations. Moreover, the innovations in business processes and improvements in service are very important factors in maintaining competitive advantage.

At quite an early stage, it was decided that top-quality, luxurious men’s shoes were the target market for left® foot company. The collections are for fashionable, trendy businessmen who know what they want and are willing to pay for it. The price is high enough to cover extra costs, and customers prefer classic styles and a good fit. Moreover, Pomarfin has solid knowledge of manufacturing men’s footwear. It was soon confirmed that there was not enough market potential for the left® foot concept in Pomarfin’s regular market area, which is why the business concept was geared to an international market from the beginning.

At the moment (12/05) there are 13 left® foot retail outlets. Four of them are located in Finland and owned by the company itself. Of the remainder, one is in Copenhagen (Denmark), one in Osaka (Japan), one in St. Petersburg (Russia), one in Hong Kong, and five are located in Germany. The locations outside of Finland operate on a franchising basis. This means that ‘owning’ the customer is very important to the shops, because they earn royalties from re-orders. So far, left® foot company has agreed to the opening of one more sales outlet in Switzerland. The aim is to open around ten more outlets annually; growth will be mainly outside of Finland.

2.4 The left® foot shoe

The left® foot shoe is a mass customised men’s shoe that offers the customer individuality and better fitting properties not found in ready-made shoes. In addition, left® foot company shoes combine traditional craftsmanship with state-of-the-art technology. The collection includes about 30 models, thus amounting to almost 3000 different footwear variations. There are three different categories for left® shoes: business, fashion and casual. The business collection includes 19 models of classy business shoes. The fashion collection models are trendy; special details and materials are used. There are ten different models in this collection. The casual collection includes comfortable and easy shoes for leisure use, and there are five models in this collection. The collection changes three times a year. New models are introduced and some of the old models are discontinued, but there are some bestsellers that stay on from year to year. left® foot company has outsourced the original design process to an Italian designer, who creates the designs and makes suggestions regarding the materials. Together with a Finnish designer, the prototypes and the final decisions about materials to be used are made.

The left® foot company’s core competence is its profound knowledge of shoemaking combined with an understanding of the most important measurements that must be considered when customising a shoe. Not every manufacturer is able to come up with the right formula for creating a comfortable mass customised shoe. left® foot company has succeeded in developing a set of measurements that guarantee the best-fitting shoe for the customer. Knowledge of the anatomy of the foot is extremely important when designing a mass customisation system for shoemaking. left® foot company/Pomarfin was lucky to have collaborated with a software expert on the project, who also happened to have a shoemaking background and an extensive understanding of the most essential issues of
the craft. Moreover, knowledge of the behaviour of leather itself is highly important. Different components have to be cut in different manners; leather stretches when in use, for example, and this has to be taken into account as early as during the design process.

The rivalry in the mass customised shoe business has been insignificant so far. There have been three to four competitors from Hungary and Germany, but they have not been successful. The EuroShoe project is one current competitor, even though it is still more involved in academic research and is not purely business-oriented. The project participants include shoe manufacturers who might opt for mass customisation, depending on the results they get from the project. From left® foot company’s point of view, the competition is not negative at all and it welcomes more mass customisers into the shoe business. The more knowledge and development there is, the more companies and, above all, customers will benefit.

3 The interaction and configuration process

Ordering a pair of shoes begins with a visit to a left® foot retail outlet, where feet are measured and customer data are entered into left® foot company’s system. Any future orders are very straightforward – all the customer needs to do is to visit the website and place an order. Orders are delivered to the address of choice.

The shop’s setting is simple and elegant with the left® foot brand colours, black and orange, dominating the scene. All models are displayed on a shelf. Customers can touch and feel the shoes, and each model has leather samples attached to it. The first step is to take exact measurements of the customer’s feet with a 3D scanner before transferring this data to the ordering system. The scanner uses three different lasers to produce a 3D copy of the foot. The lasers provide 15 different measurements of the foot, with the accuracy of one tenth of a millimetre, to ensure the best possible fit. Figure 1 shows the scanning process. Note the lines in the socks, which help the scanner take measurements (this measurement system is provided by the German technology company corpus-e1).

The 3D measurements are automatically analysed and individual characteristics of the feet, such as size differences between the left and the right foot, are taken into account. The computer programme offers a couple of suggestions for the size, and the sales assistant gives the customer a pair of specimen shoes to try on for size. If the first pair of shoes is uncomfortable, the customer tries on another size proposed by the programme. It is important to try on the specimen shoes to find, among other things, the best-fitting last type. This is a standardised phase that regulates the process. All the measurements are taken with a scanner and electronically processed. There is no room for human errors that are common when taking measurements manually. In the future, there will be no need for various fitting sessions, as the measurements are stored in the system and shoe sizes usually stay the same even when other body measurements somewhat change over time. Re-orders thus can be placed easily over an internet-based ordering system (Figure 2).

After the customer has found a proper-fitting pair of shoes, the shoe design is selected. Just like the shoes themselves, the customer also selects the colour, leather type, outsole, and lining. One model can be done, on average, in five to six different kinds of leather. Moreover, Gore-Tex lining can be added to some models. The customer can order cedar shoetrees and shoe care products specially designed for each type of upper material at an extra cost. A distinctive, individual feature of left® shoes is the owner’s name and customer number, which are laser-printed onto the leather insole of the shoes.
Figure 1  3D scanning of the feet

Source: Picture courtesy of Corpus.e Corporation

Figure 2  Internet ordering page
The sales assistant enters the customer data in the ordering system and sends it to the factory. The customer receives an order confirmation and customer ID for the internet service. Similar choices are made when ordering shoes on the internet (Figure 2 shows a sample ordering form). Shoes are delivered to the customer within three weeks of ordering. The entire process of scanning the feet, trying on sample shoes, taking down the customer information, and offering advice to the customer on left® foot shoes takes around 20–30 minutes. The procedure could theoretically be done in five minutes, but one of the most important things is the service that left® foot provides to its customers, which is why time spent at the shop is prolonged up to half an hour. As part of the service, a salesperson tells a customer what makes a shoe fit, how to select a fitting shoe, and how to take care of shoes. By offering such service, the company hopes customers will enjoy long-term satisfaction, as even the best shoes can be quickly ruined by insufficient care.

4 Mass customisation processes and capabilities

4.1 Manufacturing and logistics

The orders are sent to the factory in the evening after the working day. The next morning, these orders are processed and go into production. MC orders are run among normal production. In normal production, the shoes are divided into batches of ten pairs in which a pair of left® foot shoes makes up a separate production unit. The inner sole where the customer’s name is printed accompanies the shoes throughout production, even though it is only needed during the very last stages of production. This emphasises the importance of customer-centric thinking in the production line.

Materials are purchased before actual manufacturing. This means that left® foot is struggling with the same problems as traditional shoe manufacturers, i.e., which materials should be ordered and in what amounts. left® foot prefers to have fewer suppliers and durable partnerships, because leather is a complicated material and has special features. It is preferable to use the same suppliers if one needs to be sure of the quality of the leather, and this obviously helps keep the quality of a pair of left® foot shoes stable. The normal delivery time for leather is from six to 12 weeks. Soles and other components are standardised and can thus be bought in advance.

Manufacturing begins in the cutting department, where professional workers choose the upper and lining materials selected by the customer. A computer-guided automated cutter performs the cutting, based on the customer’s measurements. Next comes stitching, where a souter stitches the upper sections together. All sections receive traditional pre-treatments, which include thinning and tucking at the edges, interlining, and eyelet reinforcement. Special attention is paid to the strength of the stitching and the type of needle and thread used. In the next step, left® shoes are precision-stretched on correctly sized lasts. Traditional shoemaker craftsmanship is combined with computer-guided lasting technology to carry out the stretching. Throughout production, the shoes are given a full range of traditional heat and vaporisation treatments. This ensures that the design, size, and symmetrical appearance of the shoes are accurate. A tried-and-tested procedure is used to examine all materials at the outsole stage to check if the outsole is firmly attached and has a well-finished appearance.
Each pair of shoes undergoes a rigorous final inspection to check the quality of the leather, stitching, seams, outsoling, and finishing, not to mention the product’s conformity to the order. The shoes are polished, brushed, and shined in separate stages. The final touches are then added during the finishing stage: the lace, left® logos, flannel shoe bags and, if ordered, a shoe care package and shoetrees. Tissue paper is placed between the shoes, which are then packed before the outer wrapping and address label are added. All together, the production process includes roughly 40 different tasks. The normal throughput time is six to seven days. Finally, the pair of shoes is delivered to the customer within three weeks of ordering. The logistics are outsourced to the Finnish Post and its suppliers. In Japan, DHL takes care of the logistical operations. The shoes normally arrive at the customer in the afternoon or in the evening, and left® foot recommends that customers have their shoes delivered to their place of work so that someone is there to receive the package.

Manufacturing is critical for quality. left® foot shoes are manufactured using the same production machinery as normal mass production. This helps guarantee a stable quality of the product. However, shoe manufacturing, especially in the case of leather footwear, still requires many manual tasks. These are common for both mass customised and mass produced shoes. As mentioned above, when an employee knows the name of the customer for whom the shoes are made, quality is significantly improved.

4.2 Sales channel management

left® foot company already has thousands of customers. Repeat buyers form a significant proportion of the customers. In Helsinki for example, the number of re-ordering customers has outgrown the total number of new customers. left® foot customers are typically more active in buying shoes than the average buyer. It is normal for customers to buy two to three pairs of shoes at once. Some customers even buy as many as seven pairs of shoes at the same time. Normally, a customer buys two to three pairs of shoes in the shop and later orders more on the internet. The implication of this is the desirability of establishing a solid trust between left® foot and its customers so that when the customers feel comfortable with the brand, they will be more inclined to buy shoes directly on the internet without the help of a sales clerk. Moreover, some customers need the opportunity to go into a shop, feel the product, and see the leather options in real life. Then they go home and order their shoes on the internet. This indicates that it is difficult to present all the materials online in such a way that customers can really know what they are going to get when they receive the shoes at home.

In 2003, the proportion of internet sales at left® foot was 15% and continues to grow today. In Denmark, for example, the amount of internet buyers is quite large. This could be explained by the fact that the customers of the shop in Copenhagen are international and therefore re-order online. Internet buyers can be classified as satisfied and loyal customers. It is good to keep in mind that the store that originally takes the foot measurements ‘owns’ the customer and receives a royalty from every purchase made later on through the internet. There are five to six campaigns a year that target specific customer segments. On average, customers will be contacted four times a year. Customers are informed, for example, when a new collection will be launched. A campaign typically has a direct impact on sales, especially internet sales. The customer database contains data from past orders and by using this information, it is easy to personalise campaigns and categorise customers, e.g., according to the date of purchase.
or the type of shoes. The customer information is stored on a server that all sales outlets can access, as well as the factory. Having all information in one place helps maintain and update the information.

All advertising is designed for the international market and is merely translated according to the market area. Retailers have to contribute to marketing and advertising expenses. They need to do their own marketing and left® foot company provides most of the common advertising and promotional material. For example, the shop in Japan has designed its own catalogue and a short advertisement that is displayed in the largest business hotels in the area. It should be noted that a lot of work momentarily has to be done to increase the awareness of mass customised shoes and get potential customers to try left® foot shoes.

4.3 Product development

Regarding the physical product itself, there is not much room for innovation in the basic shoe anymore. Design requirements follow fashion trends. The fitting of the shoe and measurements are checked and updated, and then implemented in the design. Over the years, foot measurements change ever so slightly, thus affecting the overall shoe structure. The standardisation of foot measurements is a difficult task. The Mondo Point system was an attempt to standardise measurements, but it was not successful. Follow-up changes in foot measurements are therefore separately made at each company.

Production technology is fairly standardised and new innovations are taken into account from time to time, but these tend to encompass gradual improvements rather than the development of something totally new. Material development is one part of product development at left® foot, although the market segmentation and customer target group define the direction of innovations that could be implemented. It is not very probable that fabric materials could be used in traditional business shoes. left® foot business shoes are made out of leather, and different coatings or treatments for the leather are more likely to be used than completely new materials. In conclusion, product development capabilities are important, but not vital for left® foot company. The company has to be aware of what is happening in shoe technology, even if it is very unlikely that any radical innovations will occur. The development of process methods on the other hand is vital, and this is the area in which future developments will be made.

5 Case assessment of left® foot company

From the very beginning, the left® foot concept was conceived for international markets. Growth has been steady and now more resources are being allocated for expansion. The SWOT analysis shows that the international concept makes large potential markets possible (Table 2). The company does not need to do all manufacturing for these markets; suppliers can be used outside its own immediate market areas. The extra cost involved is not high because left® foot does not have to worry about seasonal sales; every single pair is sold at the normal price. Disadvantages are related to the delivery time and still quite limited resources. To be able to survive and succeed, left® foot must continue to expand; its current market share is not yet sufficient.
Table 2  SWOT analysis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strengths</th>
<th>Weaknesses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Long experience in shoe manufacturing</td>
<td>Not for ad hoc buyers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast and easy way to introduce new models</td>
<td>Limited resources to expand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very low stock level</td>
<td>Only for ‘normal’ feet</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No seasonal sales</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No unsold pairs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Opportunities</th>
<th>Threats</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ladies’ shoes</td>
<td>Another major brand coming onto the MC market</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Large potential markets</td>
<td>No growth because of lack of interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Franchising as a way to expand</td>
<td>Customers unwilling to pay extra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of other shoe manufacturers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

No single competence makes left® foot company special. Everything relies on good and visionary leadership. An important aspect is that the firm has been able to combine laser foot measuring, CAM manufacturing, smart database, and internet solutions. To be able to be a successful mass shoe customiser, a company has to have experience in shoe manufacturing and have knowledge of the anatomy of feet. Pomarfin has been able to provide the information on shoe sizes and the anatomical details that are needed in the design process and the manufacturing of perfectly fitting footwear. Furthermore, the use of standardised manufacturing methods minimises variance in production, thus ensuring comfortable, well-fitting shoes.

The concept of left® foot company has been based on shoe manufacturing knowledge, but for the future, its goal is to become a system and concept provider rather than a traditional shoe manufacturer. In the company’s mass customisation concept, development activities particularly foresee the development of the system itself, the incorporation of improvements in the measurement software, and also the improvement of the service level in order to serve customers better. Part of the service concept is to provide customer training during the buying process, and later on through different forms of customer contact, e.g., email, customer events, etc. A product development strategy and its development are also important in order to hold ground in the premium category of shoe mass customisers.

In comparing the left® foot company case with findings of the EuroShoe (2002) project, many similarities can be found. Modern, elegant men’s shoes were mentioned as a promising category for the customisation concept. The most promising form of promotion was the service-oriented shoe store, as in the case of left® foot company. The configuration time of left® foot is within the mentioned 20–30 minutes, and the premium cost within 10%–30%. The major difference is that left® foot cannot deliver shoes within the recommended time of one to two weeks – it takes three weeks. Nonetheless, left® foot company has achieved its most important goal: ‘to make the fashionable shoe more comfortable’.
Acknowledgements

This case is based on interviews with the director, sales manager, and technical coordinator conducted at left® foot company in April 2005. Other background information was collected on shoe manufacturing, etc. There was a visit to The Shoe Museum in Tampere (Finland) to collect data on the history of the Finnish footwear industry and shoe manufacturing. The year books provided by The Association of Finnish Shoe and Leather Industries (1996; 1998; 2004) were most helpful. We would like to extend our thanks to all the people who have helped us write this case, especially those at left® foot company.

References


Note

www.corpus-e.com