

Aetrex offers customised footbeds in order to promote comfort and avoid injury. CREDIT: AETREX



Standing out from the crowd with customised shoes

You only have to visit a school playground to understand that what you wear, and how you wear it, is of the utmost importance. Having the latest trainers is often what separates the haves from the have-nots. Although the comparison process usually becomes more sophisticated as we get older, such often unspoken rivalry does not always disappear. Many people still use clothing and footwear to reflect social status, brand awareness and individuality by the way we dress; think *Sex in the City*.

Customisable shoes are one way of achieving this, in terms of individuality at least. Several footwear firms are going beyond simply offering shoes in various styles and colour options, allowing customers to more or less design their own shoes. The idea of walking into the gym, or onto the pitch, wearing a more-or-less unique shoe is, for some, as important as it was back in school days. It goes without saying that different is often thought to equal better.

Express your look

Those simply looking for aesthetic benefits can give their shoes an individual look through Keds Studio, a partnership between Keds, a division of The Stride Rite Corporation, and on-demand retail platform Zazzle. The studio is an online customisation programme that allows consumers to design the graphics for their own original Keds Champions. Customers can upload their own artwork, graphics and text onto the shoes instantly and choose from a wide selection of colours. A number of pre-made designs, many of which have been devised by artists such as New York-based Sara Singh and artistis showcased by Gen Art, are also provided.

Zazzle has reported an overwhelmingly positive response to its custom shoe offering. It claims that more than 30,000 user-generated designs were created within a week of its launch and that the number of designs is growing at an accelerating rate. "We've simply been blown away by the response, both the volume and variety of user-generated designs have exceeded our expectations," says co-founder and chief product officer Jeff Beaver.

While some of the most popular themes include art, music, animals and politics, some users have created highly technical and unique designs. One example is the 'Google Maps mashup', created by a computer expert within 48 hours. The application allows customers to add a map or satellite photo of their hometown, or another chosen location, on the shoe. The process is quick: designs can be previewed instantly and the shoes are embellished and assembled from scratch within 24 to 48 hours, so that customers can receive their personalised shoes within one to two weeks.

Style and performance

Going one step further, the Nike iD service invites consumers to "select the materials, choose the colours, customise the fit and express your look". The list of options available is astonishing. "There are literally millions of combinations available when selecting colours and materials in the design process, from the options available," says Nike spokesman Simon Wainright. Colour options can be chosen for each and every part of the shoe, from its base colour to the laces and logos.



Through the iD customisation process, personalised details, for example the wearer's name, can be added to many of the models offered. Some styles, such as the Free Dynamic TR iD, allow the 'designer' to choose a country flag and sports icon/mascot to adorn the shoe. This process is effective even for the indecisive as each change is loaded onto a prototype, which can be viewed from every conceivable angle.

However, although appearance is important, style cannot make a shoe fit for the task. If Nike's customisation process stopped here, it would suggest that aesthetic benefits were the only ones on offer. However, with the iD service, the consumer's first task is to select the shoe function, for example running, basketball or track and field, to ensure that the essential performance requirements are met as a priority. Shoe sizes can often be specified for each foot, so that if, like many people, one is bigger than the other, this can be taken into account. Various width options are also available for many of the shoes, in order to achieve better fit.

Customers can give their trainers a unique look using the Nike iD service.

CREDIT: NIKE

"The benefits are mainly cosmetic, especially in the context of the fashion-led casual styles on offer," comments Mr Wainwright. "However, some performance styles can be altered to suit the wearer. A good example would be in the football category, where different outsoles can be chosen to match playing conditions and ordering can be finalised in different sizes for each foot, to reflect an individual's specific needs."

Personality and performance

This concept of customisation, designed to combine advanced performance attributes, better fit and personalised design, is endorsed by Brazilian footballer Ronaldinho, who plays club football at AC Milan. Speaking about the Nike Ronaldinho Tiempo shoe, he says: "To have my own boot with my signature on it is something I have always dreamed of since I was a little boy." He appears to speak on behalf of many consumers

when he says that: "I always wanted something to identify myself with, to feel at ease with."

Furthermore, while the bespoke shoes allow him to express his own personal style, they also support his playing needs. "There is no doubt I like to feel the ball," he says, "and this leather gives you better contact with the ball." The rubber studs are designed to offer extra control and he describes being able to wear his "dream boot" as a "great joy".

It seems that personalised fit combined with carefully chosen inbuilt properties help to support the player's natural flair. The suggestion here is that, knowing your shoes have been made to fit your own unique remit, boosts confidence and, in turn, promotes better performance. Ronaldinho suggests that having a totally personalised shoe can make the wearer feel they have a special advantage purely because they have something nobody else does.

According to Mr Wainwright,

endorsements are only possible when the sportsperson is at the pinnacle of his or her profession. "So the connection lives in the fact that they have become so iconic from being such a stand-alone figure in their chosen discipline, reiterating that personalisation is a very premium thing," he says. "A privilege associated with elevated status therefore? Now everyone can feel that way through this service and in turn get something of their own that nobody else has."

It's what's inside that counts

However, some critics may argue that appearance and performance are entirely separate issues. Those belonging to this school of thought are likely to value less visible customisation services that focus solely on improving the fit of the shoe. Arizona-based eSoles Custom Footbeds recently partnered with Wisconsin-based Trek Bicycle Corporation to produce a customised cycling footwear line. Trek's Bontrager brand offers a range of shoes featuring eSoles' eFit footbed.

The footbed can be customised using a kiosk scanner designed to identify the need for specific inserts, which are available for an additional charge. The scanning system uses a pneumatic air pillow to capture 2D and 3D digital images of the foot. These images are then analysed against eSoles' algorithms to find the most appropriate eFit components, including the metatarsal pad, arch length and arch height needed to build a customised footbed. The scanning process takes less than five minutes and customers can then choose a semi-customised eFit, a ready-made footbed that is the nearest match to their specification, or order a fully customised version.

Comfort and injury prevention

Working along similar lines, American pedorthic footwear brand Aetrex recently introduced three new footwear lines of patented customisable shoes in dress, casual



Aetrex's foot analysis system identifies the individual's foot size, arch type and pressure points using sensors and infrared LEDs. CREDIT: AETREX

and athletic performance styles. Each shoe offers customised comfort, breathability and performance as well as various biomechanical benefits. Its digital foot analysis system identifies the individual's foot size, arch type and pressure points using sensors and infrared LEDs.

"We tailor our clothes to fit our body, we set the steering wheel and seat at a certain location so we are comfortable when we drive, and now our footwear can be customised," says chief executive, Larry Schwartz. "Footwear standards are finally being elevated to where they should be. There is now technology and fashion-forward footwear that provide customised comfort to individual needs, enabling everyone to feel great on their feet all day and prevent injury."

The newest lines include the Gramercy Collection for men and the Essence Collection for women which feature full-grain leather uppers, breathable linings made from leather and synthetic fibres, removable orthotics, patented Mozaic Customization Technology, and slip-resistant polyurethane outsoles. The

Athletic Performance Collection includes ultra lightweight runners, cross trainers and trail runners (15 designs in total for men and women), which are said to combine pedorthic benefits, Mozaic Customization Technology and biomechanical features to provide comfort, stability and shock attenuation.

The demand for bespoke footwear is clearly on the rise. "I genuinely think people are striving more and more to be individuals, looking for new ways to stand out from the masses," explains Mr Wainwright. With an ever-increasing list of options to choose from, the chances of two people wearing the same pair of shoes at the same event are becoming slimmer.

Customisation processes are also being streamlined so that, in many cases, bespoke shoes are available as quickly, or almost as quickly, as an ordinary pair of shoes. Whether the shoes are being altered for cosmetic reasons, or to enhance wearer comfort and performance, it looks as though it won't only be the Ronaldinhos of this world wearing personalised shoes in the months and years to come. 