

A young entrepreneur based in Michigan, US, recently launched 'upcycled' footwear made from old billboards as an alternative to going barefoot.



Paper-feet are created using untreated billboard vinyl, making each shoe unique. One giant poster advertisement can make over one hundred Paper-feet shoes.

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WALKING ON A BILLBOARD

For Jimmy Tomczak, living near a lake in Michigan, means going barefoot for outdoor activities. But when walking barefoot to the lake started to hurt his feet, he began looking into alternatives. "I've always loved the outdoors, camping, adventure hiking, stuff like that, especially by the water," he says. "I live near a lake and I love to go barefoot, but sometimes the feet just need a little extra protection to get you to the lake, where you can take off your shoes."

In 2008, the young entrepreneur attempted to make himself a pair of sandals using Tyvek, a synthetic material made by DuPont which is used for FedEx envelopes. "In theory it could work, but the material was too thin," Mr Tomczak says. "Tyvek is waterproof but when it gets wet it gets heavy and floppy and it doesn't stay on your foot, so I swept that idea aside for several months."

The solution came when Mr Tomczak was repairing the roof of his house, and someone recommended he use old billboard vinyl to prevent leakage. "I made a few calls and eventually got a McDonalds advertisement and used it on the roof," he says. When he took the vinyl material down six months later, Mr Tomczak was surprised to discover it was still in perfect condition, despite having been exposed to a harsh Michigan winter. He realised he had found the ideal material for his 'barefoot' shoes.

Billboard vinyl is a triple layer, fibre-reinforced PVC plastic material used for large outdoor advertisements. The sheets

measure 14' x 48' (over four metres by almost 15 metres) and are usually stored in a warehouse or thrown away at the end of an advertisement's life.

DESIGNING A SANDAL

Mr Tomczak spent the next few months developing his 'barefoot' shoes, but with no previous experience in footwear manufacturing, he had only his enthusiasm and determination to rely on. "I studied Neuroscience at Michigan," he explains. "I have no experience in the footwear industry. I knew nothing about upper development and all the things that I've learnt along the way. So how the shoe was initially designed was, I made something that worked for myself. I cut various pieces and designs and sewed it, glued it and tried different things that would work for my size 13 feet (European 47). After probably at least 20 different conceptualisations, from ideas that didn't work to ideas that just needed tweaks, I eventually came up with something that I was happy with, and I was able to create the different sizes based on the initial one that I created for myself and a couple of friends."

Mr Tomczak called his new creation Paper-feet. The shoes were initially constructed by sewing the parts together, but when Mr Tomczak realised how costly it would be to manufacture them on a larger scale, he altered the design to consist of a single piece of billboard vinyl which connects around the foot with a hook-and-loop system which is glued on. "Right now they're as minimalist as you can get," he says.

The shoes were launched for online order in the US at the beginning of June last year, but are still being developed to their final version. "We're working on a version that has an additional material that will be added to the bottom as a more durable sole," Mr Tomczak says.

The concept of 'barefoot' shoes is nothing new. UK footwear company Terra Plana launched Vivobarefoot in 2004, which the company describes as "the first minimalist shoe with a patented, ultra thin puncture resistant sole that offers maximum sensory feedback and maximum protection". Italian footwear sole company Vibram launched its Fivefingers 'foot glove' soon after, which the company promises will "stimulate the muscles in your feet and lower legs... to make you stronger and healthier, improve your balance, agility and proprioception".

While Paper-feet shoes are less technical than those produced by Terra Plana and Vibram, Mr Tomczak believes that their comparatively inexpensive retail cost and portability will make them popular among outdoor enthusiasts in the US. Consumer responses have so far been positive, with comments left on the website including: "Paper-feet are tailor-made for me," and "they're exactly what I wanted; something that I can put in my pocket and take where I need them".

GOING GLOBAL

The shoes have been developed with input from consumers, and Mr Tomczak says this involvement has paved the way for the company to expand. "The responses have been pretty positive, people are thrilled about the design and they're happy to be part of the process, to see the development of the shoe from when the hook-and-look system was initially sewn on and we had fewer sizes. Everybody's excited now to take it to the next level, as we ramp up production from just a small boutique-type production to something more national and potentially global in the near future."

The shoes are currently produced in a factory in Michigan, but plans are afoot to upsize to a larger facility, possibly elsewhere in the US. "Right now we're looking at different places in both Michigan and New York so we're not going to take it offshore," says Mr Tomczak. "We're championing local ethical labour that's done by qualified people here in the States, and that's something that's important to me."

Mr Tomczak is also keen to promote awareness of how products are manufactured and how they come to have a

value. "I don't have a footwear background, but I now know what goes into creating a shoe," he says. "I don't look at my apparel the same way anymore because I know what it costs to create something as simple as a pair of Paper-feet; so when you go into something as complex as a luxury pair of shoes, I see what time and effort goes into doing that...I now understand the value of that. And that's one of the things that I really want to pave forward, is introducing younger generations to really thinking about where their goods come from and how they're made."

"One of the things we're going to offer at some point in the future is a 'kids kit', where customers can actually assemble the shoes themselves, and think about what goes into it. It's pretty simple and straightforward but if I can get other people to think like I have and see through my eyes everything that I've experienced over the past year doing this, I think that would be a great value to society."

FUTURE POSSIBILITIES

The billboard vinyl Mr Tomczak uses to create Paper-feet is completely untreated, with consumers having the option to purchase either a 'plain' shoe (with the back of the advert facing out) or a 'patterned' shoe (with the front of the advert facing out). "Right now, every pair is unique, and because the billboards are so huge, when the shoe pattern is cut out of them, they're mostly solid colour combinations; just chunks of colours or letters. The only thing we add to it is our brand and logo, and every pair is also signed and numbered as they are a limited issue right now."

The potential of collaborating with large corporations is something Mr Tomczak is currently exploring. "We're looking to partner with billboard companies and advertisers who might want to co-brand and actually stamp their brand on the shoe and then use the shoe as a promotional product," he explains.

Mr Tomczak is full of enthusiasm for expanding his company while promoting social responsibility, and already has plans to create 'booties' for colder climates. "We're looking at creating a bootie concept, with an even thinner, more lightweight version of the material," he says. "I wanted to create something that's much larger than myself and has a greater impact on the world than the things that I had previously done so I'm really excited to share this with the world." 🌍

