

New technology for capturing 3D images of consumers' feet can help footwear companies deliver the right size first time, cutting down on the expense and inconvenience of returns from dissatisfied customers.

A solution to size confusion for online shoe shoppers

Swiss technology provider Unique Trend Developments (UTD) has developed a new online personal assistant to help consumers choose the right size when shopping for shoes on the internet.

Because of discrepancies between brands on shoe sizes, online shoppers have traditionally had few reassurances until now that the stated size for a particular model will be right for them. As a result, UTD has said, some footwear retailers and brands are experiencing return rates of up to 40% for shoes sold online. It says sizing problems are often "an obstacle that can discourage purchases".

UTD's Right Shoes works by giving consumers the chance to carry out their own 3D foot scan. The technology provider describes the result as "an identity card for your feet". Scanners will be available in select shoe retail outlets and, in the coming months, through a new smartphone app. The system will then be able to make an automatic comparison between the consumer's foot scan and stored data of the last used for each model and each size by participating manufacturers. When the smartphone app is in operation (successful trials have already taken place), users will be able to snap an image of their own feet using their handsets and receive a 3D image of their feet from Right Shoes.

When customers submit this data and specify the brand and styles they are interested in buying, the system shows graphically which size each particular model will provide the best fit for each wearer. Colour-coded diagrams show where on the foot there is likely to be too little or too much room with a particular size, helping consumers make a decision about whether to go a size up or a size down.

It doesn't have to be this way. Right Shoes scanning can help consumers and brands get sizes spot-on.

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Traditional Italian brands including Spernanzoni have been among the pioneers of the new technology. They want to increase customer loyalty and save on the logistics costs involved in returning shoes of the wrong size. CREDIT: SPERNANZONI

In the meantime, roll-out of the hardware, developed with Italian last technology provider Newlast, continues. After an initial presentation at the Micam exhibition in Milan in September 2012, a prototype of the scanning technology went on show at a conference on body-scanning in Lugano, Switzerland, in October. Within a few months, the first scanner was in place, in a high-end footwear store in Milan, the one that Il Gergo runs in Via Unione. More locations have followed this lead, including one run by high-end Italian footwear group Vittorio Spernanzoni (to which Il Gergo belongs) in Moscow, as well as in a second Il Gergo location, its outlet store in the outlet village at Il Castagno, near Civitanova in Le Marche, the most prominent footwear-manufacturing region in Italy and the company's home region.

The Spernanzoni and Il Gergo names are synonymous with high quality. The shoes are handmade and prices, for the men's collection, start at €240 per pair. Traditional skills and values are at the heart of what the company does, but, according to Elisabetta Conti, who handles communications and marketing for Right Shoes, it's no surprise that it should have stepped forward as a pioneer for her company's foot-scanning technology.

Ms Conti explains that figure of 40% for return rates comes from multi-brand online retailers, but she insists that it is indicative of a more widespread problem. All footwear brands want to get sizing right, in the sense of customers being able to pick out shoes that will fit well, because it leads to increased customer satisfaction and lower logistics costs, including the reverse logistics costs of having to handle all the returns. Online customers who are unsure often order the same shoe in two different sizes, to decide only after trying them on, just as they

would in a store. If it's free to send back what proves to be the wrong size, the consumer doesn't mind. But, of course, it isn't really free and someone has to pay for the shipment. To use digital data to match feet to shoe sizes more accurately will, clearly, be of great help.

However, there are other aspects. Footwear companies have to share data on lasts, sizing and styles with Right Shoes so that the technology provider can make an accurate match between foot and footwear. The shoe manufacturers that do this are added to a brand database that Right Shoes is running. This requires a degree of faith in the technology and in UTD. Il Gergo is not alone in already having taken the plunge. Brenta-based brands Nic Dean and Bellò have also signed up, as has Padua-based women's brand Nouchka and Le Marche-based golf shoe brand Morris.

There are two benefits to the brand. The first is that increased consumer confidence in the right fit will inspire increased brand loyalty. Less obviously, Ms Conti explains, the footwear brands have told UTD that they believe Right Shoes can help them combat unfair competition from counterfeiters, who use internet shopping platforms to pass off imitations as genuine, handmade Italian shoes.

Online shoe shopping is here to stay, as internet-only retailers Zappos, Zalando, Asos and Spartoo are making clear. France-based Spartoo said at the end of last year that it had secured €25 million in new funding to help it sustain growth and expansion. Its turnover increased 20-fold in the years between 2009 and 2012 and it now stocks 30,000 models from 700 footwear brands and has 12 million unique visitors per month.

In response, many brands with important retail businesses of their own have stepped up their online sales presence as complements to their bricks-and-mortar stores. Right Shoes appears to be a technology that can help buyers and sellers everywhere. 📍



Brands including Bellò and Nic Dean have found that pointing online customers towards Right Shoe for sizing will help them stave off competition from counterfeiters. CREDIT: MICAM

