

The institution of marriage is seen to be under serious threat in the western world. However, there are still plenty of young women—and their mothers—who regard a full dress formal wedding as one of the high points in life. While the bride's dress will usually be white or ivory, those of her bridesmaids will not, and so the problem of matching shoes arises.

A match for life

Rainbow Club is one of the last few dedicated makers of bridal footwear in Europe. The business was established in 1986 as part of the Stuart Marsh Shoes Group in the UK. The retail business was subsequently sold to Clarks in early 1990 to enable the company to concentrate on its specialist manufacturing. It opened its own dedicated manufacturing facility in 1999 and since then has worked to develop a strong brand image for its Rainbow Club, Gabriella & Lucido and Else ranges. It also offers added value services such as hand colouring and bespoke services, which enable modern-day brides to respond to sudden changes in fashion.

The factory currently produces 3,000 pairs of specialist bridal shoes per week, of which 35% (50,000 pairs per year) are exported. The UK is the main consumer, with 300,000 weddings per year. Other key markets include Eire, Germany, Holland, Norway, Sweden and Finland. Forty-six styles are available including children's and new mid season styles. These come in an adult range of 3-8 UK (36-42 Continental), with selected shoes available to size 9 (44). Children's sizes go from 5-2 UK (19-32).



Colouring

All shoes are made in ivory silk satin and/or off-white silk satin and then coloured according to the specific requirements of the customer. This is a handcrafted process, which takes varying amounts of time depending very much on the colour. With some golds, dark reds and shot silks it can take up to a full day to blend the exact shade.

New for 2005 is a hand-colouring service for the Else covering 10 of the most popular bridal shades. The retailer will hold a colour swatch and the colouring service will be at a special discount price as every little saving helps the overall cost of a wedding. Brides are also able to view the colour range on the company's website.

FOOTWEAR PROFILE: RAINBOW CLUB

Every care is taken to ensure the best possible colour match. Customers are asked to supply a 5cm x 5cm sample of the cloth to be matched with the request as to whether it is to be matched in daylight or artificial light, as this can make a considerable difference. In the case of 'shot' fabrics, the predominant colour has to be identified.

Even so an average of 300 pairs of shoes per week are individually coloured, with the peak season falling between April and June. The normal service offered to stockists is 10 days within the UK but a slightly longer turnaround time to Europe and Scandinavia as a result of carriage. As far as possible colouring staff are recruited with some previous experience in this area as well as an ability to be team players and having careful attention to detail.



Special effects

In addition to individual colouring, many of the styles are available with diamante trims from Swarovski. These range from hand beaded and sophisticated treatments based on ideas from leading dress designers, to diamante heart motifs and sequins—enough to gladden the heart of any younger bridesmaid. To complete its range, Rainbow also offers a limited range of handbags that can again be colour matched.

Distribution

Rainbow Club has 3,000 stockists throughout Europe, which it claims is more than any other bridal footwear manufacturer. To support these, it maintains a finished product inventory of 20,000 pairs of the key lines in the basic white and ivory colours. Of these, 26 styles are available in ivory, 19 in both ivory and white and one in ivory dupion. This is a highly specialised market and the field force of direct representatives and agents spread across all the European markets is trained to provide technical and marketing advice to the retail outlets, as well as presenting the current ranges.

Guarantees

Every bride wants a bright sunny day for her wedding as much as she hopes for a successful marriage. But what happens if it's extremely hot or it rains? Does the colour run from the shoes? Rainbow Club uses environmentally friendly dyes, so it does strongly advise the customer to apply a suitable fabric protector to help prevent colour coming off on to hot feet.

It cannot guarantee the colouring is waterproof in much the same way that it is not advisable to claim that any shoe is 100% waterproof (even a fully moulded plastic boot leaks if you tread on a nail). And, unfortunately, fabric protectors effectively prevent any successful re-dyeing. However, the good news is that it will 100% guarantee the colour match, provided it has been carried out on its own footwear products.

Niche markets

Here is a small company, which is obviously successful in its chosen market. The secret is again specialisation. If you can break into a specialist market and you work hard at it, you will gain specialist expertise and skills which make you become less vulnerable to competition. The Rainbow Club brand is well established within its own market area—something that counts for a great deal today. 

