

Veggie Shoes steps up to the multichannel challenge

By Ernie Schell

Robin Webb, owner of Brighton-based Vegetarian Shoes, celebrated 20 years in business last year. That's quite a milestone, given the high failure rate of so many small enterprises, particularly those in the retail sector.

In many ways, Robin's success reflects his ability to embrace innovation, find the fun factor in most things he does, and achieve difficult goals in the smartest way.

And there was also a little bit of luck. After labouring for a year, saving money to start his new shoe business, he went hitchhiking in Scotland on a final fling before setting up shop. The last ride he scrounged on his way home was in a car driven by a cyclist with whom he shared his dream of creating a new type of eco-friendly, leather-free shoe. The driver surprised him by showing him a new waterproof microfibre material used for yachting upholstery that looked and felt like leather, but was "breathable", unlike other plastics.

Combined with soles that Robin would make from recycled car tyres, he knew he had a winning combination. He set up shop in the North Lanes of Brighton, managing to make one pair of shoes per day, and Vegetarian Shoes was born.

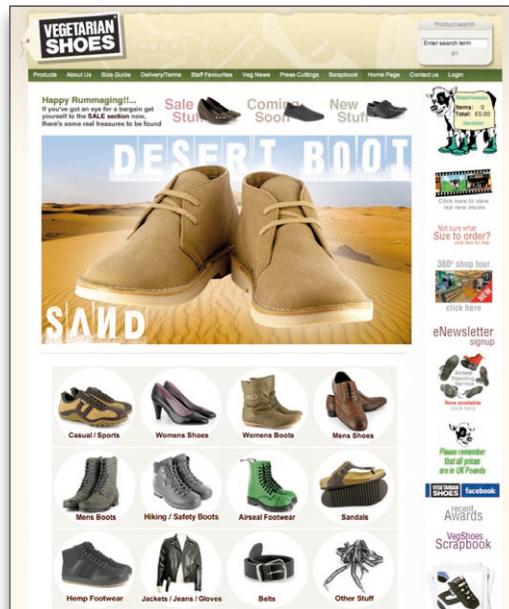
Up and running

Starting with a single style of lace-up shoe, the innovative footwear caught on, and the range of styles quickly grew. Robin also made boots, sandals, and belts from this new fabric.

At first, all shoes were bespoke, but as word spread he couldn't make them fast enough. He took his materials to a footwear factory to get the shoes made. And he soon discovered that selling by mail order let him bring his Veggie Shoe to every corner of the country.

Ever the innovator, Robin jumped into ecommerce in 1996. He moved his customer records and stock control to a primitive DOS-based computer system, and contracted with a college chum to program his first website, which was just an online brochure.

Within a year, the web side of his business took off beyond expectations, and he replaced both systems with a single solution for managing sales in his shop and online. This served him well into the new millennium, but by 2007, booking over 150 orders on a good day—many for more than one item—he had outgrown the limitations of the system. Worse, he was spending money on "support" but receiving no help at all in making the system work effectively.



A big step forward

He took nearly a year to research a replacement, finally settling on Cyrane, his current platform. "I was dreading the prospect of making a change," Robin says. "We have a staff of nine, and 1,500 SKUs. The idea of moving all our data and learning a new system was quite daunting. But we also knew we had to become PCI-compliant, so a change was not something we could put off any longer."

He still had the services of his college chum, Glenn, who helped reassure him on the technical side. And three key people from Cyrane who showed him the system proved vital in making a final decision.

Since the system was installed in 2008, Glenn has been in almost daily contact with one of the Cyrane trio. "We went from no support to the kind of support you rarely find from any vendor these days," says Robin. "They're professional yet friendly at the same time—which is exactly how I like to run my own business."

For Robin, the biggest plus in converting to the new system is that it works: "It does what it promises to do. It sometimes requires a little more effort than we'd like, and we still need to copy-and-paste in a few places, but these are issues that we can cope with, and can be dealt with when we're ready."

Apart from the vendor providing a robust website and good search-engine optimisation, the biggest benefit for Veggie Shoes has been Cyrane's reporting. "We had a visit from Customs and Excise recently, and they were impressed with the paperwork we presented to them, which covered wholesale, mail order, and web sales in the EU, as well as outside it. They

didn't even come back on a second day; their initial visit gave them everything they needed." Daily and monthly sales reports, stock re-order reports, and sales forecasting are other tools they now rely on to guide the continued growth of the business.

Marching ahead

Glenn spends about 20 hours a week working with the system, including setting up 360-degree photos of products. "It was a bit of a struggle to get that right, but we sell a lot of shoes from those photos, so it was worth the effort."

The system supports cross-selling and upselling, discounts, offers, and promotions, with full integration with Sage accounting. Veggie Shoes also uses it to embed videos, display animated slide shows, and present a "scrapbook" that helps to maintain Robin's personal touch. It can also support data feeds to third-party systems such as Pricerunner and Amazon, if the company decides to go down that road in the future.

Vegetarian Shoes has won many awards over the years, including Best Vegan Footwear Supplier in the UK Vegan Awards in 2010. "We're dedicated to making the very best products we can, in the very best way, and to giving our customers worldwide the very best selection and service," Robin is proud to say. "Having a system we feel confident can support us into the future is an important part of our overall formula for success. After all, we're still having fun doing this, and expect to keep on having fun at it for a good long time to come."

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