

New Frontier

Modern, fashion-driven looks are helping a new audience discover the therapeutic market. << By Barbara Schneider-Levy

Today's therapeutic brands are broadening their fashion horizons.

Once synonymous with footwear designed to meet the needs of older consumers with serious foot-health issues, market leaders including P.W. Minor and Aetrex are stepping up the styling of their lines to attract the broader baby boomer audience that now faces foot problems of its own.

Initially, women were the target of these lifestyle collections, but some brands are now bringing men into the fold with updated looks that offer the same therapeutic features and benefits, including extra depth options and extended sizes and widths.

For spring '08, P.W. Minor is launching Smart Casuals for men, a series of more fashion-driven styles. "We're attracting a different customer," said Gretchen DiFante, VP of sales and marketing for the Batavia, N.Y.-based company. "Until now, a man with an extra-wide foot has not had choices besides athletics. They will find additional options with this collection." However, DiFante was quick to note that these contemporary looks are not only appealing to a new generation of consumers but also to the company's client base of more mature customers, who are increasingly interested in fashionable styling.

Set to hit stores in February, the Smart Casuals collection will be available in sizes 7 to 15 in widths from narrow to 5E. Retail prices will range from \$135 to \$155. A companion line of men's upscale dress looks, to be produced in P.W. Minor's U.S. factory, is in the development stages for 2009.

According to DiFante, it was the success of the company's Smart Casuals line for women, introduced in 2006, that prompted P.W. Minor to move into men's. In fact, the women's collection was the company's strongest introduction in nearly three decades, comprising 11 percent of overall sales in 2006 after just six months at retail. "We expect the Smart Casuals category to make up between 35 percent and 45 percent of our total sales in the next five years," said CEO Hank Minor.

Like P.W. Minor, Aetrex Worldwide also is flirting with fashion. The company's best-performing collection has been its Essence line of stylish casuals and tailored looks for women, which debuted at retail in early 2007. "Women are a huge percentage of the market, so it was an easy decision to go after them first," said Evan Schwartz, president of the Teaneck, N.J.-based company. While there were plenty of footwear options available,



From top: A look from Aetrex's Gramercy collection for men; P.W. Minor's men's Smart Casuals series for spring '08.

Schwartz explained, there weren't many that addressed a woman's specific comfort needs, particularly when it came to her work wardrobe. "We conducted focus groups and heard loud and clear that women felt there were not a lot of shoes that fit their feet," he said. "Many professionals are on their feet a lot, and [Essence] can make a difference in their lives."

Encouraged by the positive response to the line's initial deliveries, Aetrex quickly followed up with the creation of Gramercy, a 10-style collection of cosmopolitan dress-casuals for men. Like its sister brand, Gramercy features Aetrex's two-layer footbed system with a performance in-

sole over its customized Mozaic insoles. The insoles include squares on the bottom that can be peeled off to relieve pressure in sensitive areas. "As the foot matures, you wind up with nagging problems," Schwartz said. "We're addressing the professional man and woman with comfort inside and out." The Gramercy line lands in stores this month with retail prices ranging from \$130 to \$150.

The addition of more fashion-forward product to their offerings also has allowed Aetrex and P.W. Minor to serve their existing retail base and attract new accounts. "Our goal is to approach stores that need more styling. Before, we didn't fit in with their product mix," said DiFante, referring to retailers that often turned to mainstream comfort brands with updated looks but in the process shortchanged their customers when it came to sizes and widths.

Rolling Meadows, Ill.-based retailer AA-EE has experienced strong sales of Smart Casuals for women, according to general manager Jeffrey Seidman. "Baby boomers want fashion," he said, adding that as the consumer group ages, it makes sense for brands such as these to serve them early on. And while styling has been a priority, Seidman said Smart Casuals continues to incorporate P.W. Minor's core comfort features, such as extended counters. "The shoes have all the same features and benefits in a shoe [style] a baby boomer would wear. They're a bridge between the shoes you have to wear and the shoes you want to wear," he said.

For Feet Sake in Milford, Mich., also has seen a positive reaction to the Smart Casuals line, prompting president and owner Traci Goodnough to pick up the companion men's line for spring '08. "It's a great alternative to someone who needs orthopedic shoes but doesn't want them to look orthopedic," she said. "It's a great casual shoe to wear with orthotics." For women who have been wearing full-length orthotics with athletic footwear, she said, Smart Casuals offers a more feminine option. "These women want to look like women."

Aetrex's Essence collection also is resonating with consumers. Russ Dotson, owner of Dale's in Daytona Beach, Fla., said the younger, more modern styling of Essence has been well received by both the store's core customers and a more mainstream audience. "The customer is generally 40-plus. It's a younger target than Aetrex had been [going after]," he said. For spring '08, the store will add Aetrex's Gramercy men's collection to its mix. "It's targeting a more professional customer," said Dotson.