Retail Innovation Shout Out: Merchandise Innovation in the Form of Knit Shoes by Nike and Adidas

by Traci Stapleton

Often, product innovation moves so quickly that looking back even five years ago feels like an eternity (life before smart phones?) Other times, innovation feels so obvious that it makes you wonder how the product didn’t come to market until now.

For me, that product is the newest in footwear, specifically for the soccer market. Machine-knitted socks date way back to the late 1500s, but machine-knitted shoes didn’t hit the athletic shoe market until early 2012 for the Summer Olympics. The knit running shoe, introduced by Nike, was a natural evolution for the market’s interest in barefoot running. More recently, both Adidas and Nike are offering boot-and-sock combo knit shoes - just in time for the World Cup.

Knit footwear responds to several issues that face both the consumer and manufacturer. Leather - natural or synthetic - or other less pliable materials must be pieced together (primarily by hand) through a very timely process that requires skilled labor, but knit footwear can be sampled and manufactured by programmable machinery, resulting in lower development and production costs. Also, fit issues can be frustrating to both the manufacturer and the consumer. Returns are costly, and result in reduced customer loyalty - a cost that can’t be captured directly but that will likely result in reduced future sales.

Knit shoes may give players increased touch and control on the ball, but the question is, will they give enough protection against contact injuries on the field?

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About the Author

Traci Stapleton
traci.stapleton@kalypso.com

Traci brings over 13 years of product development and sourcing experience with a focus in process improvement, change management and product lifecycle management (PLM).