

Going Toe to Toe with The Retail Stores How To Compete When Shoe Stores and Pharmacies Sell Orthotics

By Alan Berman D.P.M., DABPS DABPOPPM

Feel like putting up your dukes and sparring with retail shoe stores claiming to have all the technology needed to prescribe custom orthotics to alleviate foot pain and to eliminate foot problems? As doctors, it is sometimes difficult to watch patients who need a podiatrist's care trust their feet to a sales person who is not fully trained to diagnose, treat and prevent foot problems. The problem is compounded when the shoe chain has advertising dollars available to lure customers into the stores. Few podiatrists have pockets deep enough to launch a full blown advertising campaign. And is it really effective to take on area shoe stores and bring attention to their brand of shoes and orthotics?

Stay positive!

Remember, podiatrists look unprofessional when they get into the trenches with retail stores. Taking the high road can lead to a better position in the marketplace. The results may not be immediate, but here are some steps you can take to make sure you have the upper foot when it comes to going toe to toe with this new competition.

Cultivate your patient base. Make sure your patients know that you provide custom orthotics and that orthotics prescribed by a doctor are far superior to those available in the retail stores. This is especially important for patients with diabetes who may not know that you can assist them with insurance for their orthotics and in many cases for their shoes. Remind them that an ill-fitting shoe or orthotic can cause a blister which can turn into a foot wound. Ask your receptionist to talk to arriving patients, put up posters or display brochures in your office.

Develop a relationship with the retail store. As odd as this may sound, when you take time to see what's in store for orthotics customers, you will have a good idea about how your products and services differ. A chain store may agree to send you cases that they know they cannot treat—when there's a problem with gait, for example. Be sure to bring business cards with you so that you can leave them behind should they choose to refer patients to you.

Take it a step further. Offer to give training sessions for new salespeople. Inform them that podiatrists are the doctors to send customers to if they are experiencing foot pain. Remind them that doing this can save the life of a person with diabetes. Most lay people don't know the diabetes/foot connection and aren't aware that an ill-fitting shoe can lead to infection, amputation and even death if the infection is left untreated. You might consider doing a foot health seminar for the public in conjunction with the store—seniors are an ideal target for this information.

When a patient comes to you with a problem that you can treat with an orthotic, be sure to explain how your services differ from over-the-counter or store bought products. Tell them why your orthotics will be more effective. Explain why having the right shoe and the right orthotic will make a difference. Word of mouth advertising costs nothing and is the most effective form of promotion.

Use public relations rather than advertising to explain why your services are superior. Do you belong to a service organization? Are you will to speak at a luncheon meeting? There are often clubs that welcome speakers—target clubs whose membership matches your target market. For example, if you tend to prescribe orthotics to people over fifty, contact clubs for people in that age group—the Kiwanis and the Elks in many towns.

Is there a walk or run coming up in your community? Contact organizers and ask if they are helping participants train for the event. This is an excellent opportunity to address potential patients about the benefit of seeing a trained professional for the best technology as well as the best shoes.

Always emphasize that doctors understand the relationship between foot problems and problems of the knees, hips and back. Explain how orthotics help guide the foot through proper functions, allowing the muscles and tendons to perform more efficiently.

Are you a member of a national or statewide trade association? Ask for suggestions and look for opportunities to network with podiatrists who have been in your shoes and may have information to share.

Remember, the shoe store may ultimately be doing you a favor. They are reminding people that orthotics help. They've opened a window of opportunity for you. Now you need to alert people that not just any shoe or orthotic will do—and that you're the expert who can make sure they're getting the best shoes and orthotics to address their foot health needs.