

# SOCKS APPEAL

Sock sales skyrocketed during the pandemic as retailers found ways to sell more of this high-margin product. / By Carly Russo

When most people look for a silver lining in the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, very few will think about socks. But as strange and counter-intuitive as it may seem, run specialty retailers know that state-mandated safety protocols that could have significantly hurt business actually presented a new sales opportunity. Simply put, they sold a lot more socks.

That's because keeping customers safe has been a priority once in-store shopping returned and, being the creative retailers they are, stores found creative ways to boost sales while maintaining customer safety protocols — which generated more product exposure and big sock sales.

“Early on in the pandemic, when we weren't sure about how the virus was being spread, we required customers to change into new, clean socks when they came in to try on shoes,” says Tiffany Piotrowicz, owner of TerraLoco, Rochester, MN.

“As a result, our sock sales grew immensely.”

And even though TerraLoco has since stopped requiring sock try-ons, “because we have so many try-on socks for people, we are still seeing high sock sales,” she says.

A similar approach has been taken in many run specialty stores to ensure customer safety during the fit process, which as a result continues to lead to higher sock sales.

“At the beginning we required a purchase of a sock to try on shoes as Connecticut had a no-try-on, no-dressing room policy,” explains Megan Searfoss, owner



of Ridgefield Running Company, Ridgefield, CT. Her solution was to partner with a key vendor that allowed the store to discount the sock 50 percent to get customers into it.

“After restrictions were lifted we continued the requirement, but added the opportunity to let the customer use a try-on sock from us,” Searfoss adds. The upside: “Most take the sock at 50 percent off and end up buying more, if not at that moment then later.”

Getting the sock on the customer's foot is certainly the key to success in sock sales. Using socks as a safety measure in trying on shoes has completely changed the game in how retailers are introducing them to runners.

“Socks are so, so easy to sell when customers try them on,” says Piotrowicz. TerraLoco does a BOGO deal with most of its socks, which means that people are

typically buying four or more pairs at a time.

“As soon as a customer puts on a try-on sock and they say, ‘Oooh, these are so nice,’ we steer them towards the sock wall and tell them about our specials.”

These sock promotions are a common practice for retailers looking to provide the opportunity to purchase multiple pairs, especially for high-tech socks that typically come with a heavier price tag.

“There are occasional people who balk at the price, but with our everyday promotion of ‘buy three get one free’ most people will give them a try,” says Jane Alred, owner of 1st Place Sports, with five stores in northeast Florida.

High-tech might mean high price, but they offer benefits to runners' feet and optimize comfort with features such as moisture wicking fabrics, odor control and blister-resistant technologies. The best way to get runners to see past the price tag is to simply explain the advantages of high-tech versus low-tech.

“We talk to them about the importance of a tech sock and typically after they try it, they understand,” says Searfoss.

A corresponding sales method is taken by a Virginia-based run retailer who believes comparing the importance of shoes and socks together compels runners to want to learn more about the design and quality of high-tech options.

“Materials are moisture wicking, help prevent blisters, lifetime guarantee, comfort and look, etc., are all used in our sales pitch depending on the customer,” reports Ray Pugsley, owner of Potomac River Running

with nine stores in Virginia. “We often say, ‘If you are going to put in the time and effort to get a great pair of shoes, you should also give as much consideration towards the right socks.’”

### Education is Key

Not only is it important to educate customers about the unique qualities and design of high-tech socks, but it’s also vital to implement the try-on strategy during the sales process in order to get runners to truly feel the difference.

“Having try-on samples is the no brainer,” says Kristen Manske, manager of Varsity Sports, Baton Rouge, LA, who gives her sock suppliers a lot of credit for providing samples to give to the customers during the pandemic. “Then they are hooked,” she adds.

Alred agrees that getting sample socks on feet is the best strategy in getting runners to understand the benefits of high-tech socks.

“Asking runners what type of sock they prefer – cushioned, lightweight, tab, quarters – and giving them one to try on with the shoes helps them understand the difference in tech socks,” she says.

While COVID-19 certainly disrupted many apparel categories as people worked from home and demand dropped, socks managed to maintain their importance to runners and run retailers alike. The pandemic produced the ideal opportunity for people to pick up a new hobby or sport and running benefitted — as did the socks all of these new runners needed.

“We are seeing a whole new

demographic of customers. Most of these are new runners, walkers and just everyday people looking for comfortable shoes and it has opened the door for the sock conversation,” reports Manske.

And as socks became more of an upsell for run retailers, they have earned a more prominent place within the store to capitalize on this demand. As a result, retailers are strategizing placement to make sure runners are getting the best sock to pair with that new pair of running shoes.

“The sock wall is usually merchandised near the shoe wall, but we make sure it gets its own special look,” says Pugsley, who organizes socks by brand and then by style and color within each brand section, just like the nearby shoe wall.

Like Pugsley, Manske says that product placement is necessary in bringing attention to socks.

“We have an entire sock wall,” she says. “Well, we actually have multiple walls — a section for thick, thin, therapeutic and multi-packs. Our store is small and the socks are all around the store, but mostly close to the shoes.”

### Socks on Display

Bringing the attention towards shoes is a great way to catch runners’ eyes when it comes to socks, but sometimes the socks alone are enough to make for a captivating display, which can get the conversation going.

“It is something new to talk with customers about — something small that is often overlooked but can play a huge part in overall fit and comfort,” Pugsley says. “Plus, certain

## For the latest and greatest in socks for run specialty, turn to page 36.

styles and colors can add a fun and eye-catching element to the store.”

Though socks are a good conversation starter when getting to know a runner’s comfort and style needs, retailers report that they love showing runners socks because they are a great add-on sale as well.

“It’s a nice margin enhancer, and opportunity to up the UPT,” says Searfoss.

However, some sock brands have gained enough popularity to avoid becoming just an add-on sale. With some prominent brands taking the forefront, runners may gravitate towards retailers who carry well-known brands.

“We sell Smartwool, Balega, Injinji and Feetures,” says Piotrowicz. “We will occasionally have some of the major brand socks such as Saucony or Brooks. Injinji is my personal favorite. Balega is a great option for those that don’t like the tighter fit of many of the Feetures Elite socks. Smartwool sells better in the winter, but we move them pretty much year round.”

These brands offer options that cater to runners’ specific needs, which makes it easier when they come into the store and already know which brands will suit what they’re looking for.

“Feetures, Balega, Swiftwick and Smartwool are our four main brands — we also carry

our own branded socks from Sky Outfitters, CEP socks, and On socks at smaller levels,” reports Pugsley, who points out that each of these brands are great quality while also offering something slightly different so customers have a variety of fit and feel.

Maintaining a varied selection with different fits and feels is important, but sometimes when brands offer too many selections it can hurt retailers.

“My message to all brands, including sock makers, is to not make them in so many colors,” says Piotrowicz, who maintains that it is difficult to keep even basic colors in stock. “So when someone goes online and sees that their favorite sock comes in a fun stripe, for example, which we don’t have, we lose the sale to online.

“It’s extremely frustrating, especially now when so many things are backordered or delayed but can be found on the brands’ own website.”

Losing sales to online sites has been common for brick-and-mortar stores during the pandemic and in order to keep customers walking into their door retailers feel that the brands need to amp up the appeal and work together with their run retailer partnerships.

“Partner with your run specialty accounts to get the sock story out better so customers come into our stores already wanting them,” says Pugsley. “We do a great job in-store sharing why technical running socks are great, but in the age of digital marketing, online and social media, how can that story get out more broadly to create even bigger excitement, awareness and demand?” ■

## BALEGA



Balega **Support Socks** are for runners looking for support without having to wear a compression sock. The extra support bands surrounding the ankle and arch are constructed to create a non-restrictive, cradling fit that enhances comfort. The sock features oval cushion ankle protection pads that prevent ankle clipping and silicone grip pads that stop any foot movement. MSRP: \$18

**Advice for retailers from Paul Perrone, Global VP, Business Development.** "Have a well-articulated fit process your whole team follows. Ideally, that process introduces the sock as a key element to finding the proper shoe. If the sock is presented as an afterthought once the shoe has been determined, the customer is much less likely to purchase."

## CEP

The **Run Compression Sock 4.0** features new directional air channels in the foot, mesh structure in the calf and ventilation zones in the toe for maximum moisture management and comfort. MSRP: \$59.95

**Advice for retailers from Jared Finney, Director of Sales.** "Don't hesitate to bring up compression socks and sleeves during every shoe fitting. The benefits of compression are universal and can be applied to someone trying to complete their first 5K, an aspiring marathoner or a professional that spends hours a day on their feet. Most customers do not know compression can help them recover faster, fend off injury or reduce pain from prolonged sitting or standing."



## DARN TOUGH

• **Women's Checkpoint Micro Crew Ultra-Lightweight Running Sock.** This micro crew (top photo) is a shorter, more concise take on the traditional crew height — it peeks just above the top of a standard hiking boot. Featuring a fit that doesn't slip, bunch or cause blisters, this sock is fast drying and odor resistant and is made from a breathable Merino wool. MSRP: \$20

• **Men's Tempo Micro Crew Ultra-Lightweight Sock.** The targeted cushioning of the new Tempo men's running sock balances lightweight performance with micro crew coverage. Knit with climate-controlling Merino wool, it features a redesigned flex and arch support. Moisture-wicking and odor-resistant, the micro crew doesn't slip, bunch or cause blisters. MSRP: \$20

**Advice for retailers from Jake Largess, Brand Manager.** "Educate consumers on the thermoregulating benefits of Merino wool, plus the importance of a comfortable sock that has the durability for runs and fits right. Socks are just as important as running shoes."





## DRYMAX



The **Hot Weather Hawks Special Edition** was created in conjunction with elite ultra runner and JFK 50 Mile winner Hayden Hawks. The sock combines Drymax fibers with actual ePTFE (Polytetrafluoroethylene) fibers to limit heat caused by friction. PTFE has the lowest coefficient of friction of any fiber, making it optimal for keeping friction low between the skin and sock. MSRP: \$26

**Advice for retailers from Martin Hernandez, Specialty Sales Manager.** “Sell something unique. Break away from technologies available at big-box stores and major retailers. Stop being so fashion conscious and find technology that actually fulfills your customers’ needs and fixes their issues. They will reward you by coming back time after time.”

## FALKE

**RU Trail** stabilizes the ankle by a knitted bandage, which minimizes the risk of twisting. The quick-drying functional material keeps feet dry and the medium cushioning ensures sufficient padding while maintaining protection against blisters through reduction of pressure points and fiber mix. MSRP: \$22.95

**Advice for retailers from Kevin Hirsch, Director of Sales.** “Feeling is believing. The way we make and fit our products is different from everyone else. Placing the socks on feet makes all the difference.”



## LE BENT

- In collaboration with Australian ultra-trail warrior Lucy Bartholomew, Le Bent used its Definitive Fit System to help develop the high performance, low profile **Ultra Light ¾ Crew** sock. The sock has been constructed to provide maximum breathability, comfort and a stay-in-place construction. MSRP: \$24
- Ultra-light meets ultra-low profile in the **Run Ultra Light Micro** (in photo), which is constructed off the company’s Definitive Fit System to offer a precise fit coupled with the Merino blend that provides moisture wicking, breathability, odor control and itch-free comfort. MSRP: \$18

**Advice for retailers from Evan Blake, Marketing Manager.** “Pairing socks with shoes is a tried and tested method for ensuring people are provided the option to purchase a quality sock to complement the purchase of a performance shoe. Whether it’s pairing a performance shoe with an ultralight sock or a light cushion sock for extra impact protection, spending the extra time to add incremental support for the user will inherently add incremental growth to the footwear category.”



# OS1ST



• **WP4+ Wide Wellness Performance Sock.** Offered in no-show and crew, the extra wide wellness sock (top photo) provides wide feet with a custom fit and feel. Features moisture-wicking, soft bamboo charcoal, cushion for impact arch support and seamless for extra blister protection. MSRP: \$13.99-\$15.99

• **AC4 Active Comfort Sock.** Built with bamboo charcoal cushion and Skin Thin technology for run comfort, along with double tab, seamless, silver-ions for odor, custom woven for moisture wicking. MSRP: \$13.99

**Advice for retailers from Stephanie Lee, Marketing Manager:** “Make socks a part of the fitting experience by training employees to not only pair customers with the right shoe, but also the right sock. That’s the reason behind our Socks with Purpose — each sock has a clear benefit for your consumer so you can not only meet their needs with a great shoe, but also the sock that you pair with it.”

# SMARTWOOL

**Performance Run Cold Weather Mid Crew Socks** are a Merino blend and have mesh zones designed to keep feet warm during winter runs. With a run-specific profile and Smartwool’s 4 Degree elite fit system, with two elastics for greater stretch and fast recovery, these socks stay in place at every turn and up every hill. MSRP: \$21.95

**Advice for retailers from Corey Stecker, Head of Global Sales.** “Every new pair of shoes sold should be sold with a fresh pair of socks. Forget the try-on bin. Grab a fresh pair off the wall for the customer to get fitted. Guaranteed happy feet.”



# SOCKGUY

**Channel Air** socks feature four channels of air mesh and five channels of padded cushioning for a combination of support, moisture control and comfort. This ultra-plush line of socks also has an arch support to help reduce fatigue for runners. MSRP: \$10.95 – \$12.95

**Advice for retailers from Michael Foley, President.** “We’re noticing that customers are looking for something fun and different to put on their feet. White and black socks can be boring, so look for some color, pattern and fun to increase sales and inspire impulse buys.”



## SWIFTWICK



**Flight XT** features AnkleLock technology that supports ankles during repetitive movements and uses GripDry fibers that grip to shoes to minimize slipping. The medium cushion and compression provide comfort during high-impact movement. MSRP: \$19.99 Launching in Spring '22, the **Flight XT Trail** features the same support runners get from Flight XT, plus the addition of Merino wool, which moves moisture away from feet.

**Advice for retailers from Jason Barlow, Account Representative.** "Talk about what language your associates are using with their customers and when they bring socks up in the fitting process. Socks should be introduced very early in the conversation and the simple question, 'Have you ever used (insert product here)?' is an easy but powerful question to introduce most any category of products in your store."

## WRIGHTSOCK

• **Winter Run Anti Blister Sock.** The 2022 Winter Run Anti Blister (top photo) sock blends the warmth and breathability of wool and the comfort and fit of synthetic. With an outer layer made from up cycled wool (RWool) and an inner layer made from Repreve. MSRP: \$16

• **Coolmesh II.** 2022 Coolmesh II updated using Repreve post-consumer recycled fibers — two bottles worth of plastic waste are transformed into anti-blister socks. Available in tab, low quarter, quarter and crew lengths. MSRP: \$16

**Advice for retailers from Russ Coillot, Director of Sales and Marketing.** "To sell more socks we suggest adopting the 300 percent rule — 100 percent presentation to 100 percent of the customers 100 percent of the time. And presentation can mean just taking a pair off the wall for each customer to experience along with shoes. Making sure to put a new sock on the foot of a customer will dramatically increase your overall add-on sales — nothing feels better than a new sock in a new shoe."



## ZENSAH

The **Calming Sleep Sock** is the cozy, ultra-soft sock designed to help runners fall asleep faster and get a better, more restful sleep. Made with Merino wool, they are thermoregulating to keep runners cool when it's hot and warmer when it's cooler. Yarns such as Merino, Tencel and nylon create a breathable blend, ideal for extending sleep time and enhancing sleep quality. MSRP: \$20

**Advice for retailers from Ze'ev Feig, Founder and CEO.** "It's all about starting with a quality product. If you know this product is the best in the game, the next step is explaining that to the customer."

