

SAMPLE

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OUTDOOR : For retailer Matt Menely, a love of the outdoors inspired a shoe business dedicated to safeguarding the environment. << By Phil Adamsak

Name: Mountain Soles
Location: 1623 Southeast 12th St., Portland, Ore.
Established: December 1999
Owner: Matt Menely
Square footage: 1,000
Brands: Chaco, and looking to carry others this fall.



Matt Menely is out to fix things.

Sure, he salvages outdoor shoes at his store, Mountain Soles, but he's also focused on repairing and preserving the environment.

"I was an outdoor person first," said Menely. "When you spend a lot of time in really beautiful places, you are reminded that the only way you can keep those places that pristine is through daily activity and choices that you make. I've tried to work things into my daily life that make some sort of a small dent into my impact on the environment."

That commitment to nature is the driving force behind his store's shoe repair business, which makes up 65 percent of its income. A majority of these involve rock climbing shoes from brands such as La Sportiva, Five Ten, Mad Rock and Boreal. The remaining repairs are made on hiking and mountaineering boots from Vasque, Scarpa and Montrail, among others.

In this sustainability niche, Mountain Soles, based in Portland, Ore., is on a steep growth curve. According to Menely, sales have grown more than fivefold in the past five years, and the store is up 21 percent year-to-date over 2005.

To accelerate business even more, this March, Menely added footwear sales to his mix. But in keeping with his eco-friendly mission, the retailer has desired criteria for any brand he stocks: It must be resoleable, it has to have sustainable elements and it must be made in the U.S. (Why American? Because domestic shipping uses less energy, he said.)

But these are guidelines — not hard-and-fast rules. "I want the shoes to match at least one of the criteria," said Menely. "And I'm not being jingoistic about the national source; I just don't want to contribute to [unnecessary] consumption."

So far, Menely carries Chaco and hopes to add two more brands in the fall, including Birkenstock. Eventually, he would like footwear sales to make up 50 percent of total in-store sales.

Menely has been running Mountain Soles since 1999, when he bought the business. It was founded in 1979 by an adventurous cobbler who worked in a cabin at Mount Adams, 90 miles to the north in Washington state, and flew merchandise to pickup sites at Portland's outdoor stores. After buying Mountain Soles, Menely added a Web component in

2000, Mtnsoles.com. In October 2001, with the purchase of a custom-sewing operation, he expanded the business to Mountain Soles Outdoor Footwear and Fabric Repair. Menely operated the business out of a garage until opening his current retail location in August 2002.

Menely now has a respectable walk-in trade, supported by nominal amounts of advertising in neighborhood newspapers, word-of-mouth and referrals from outdoor stores. "It's up to about 55 percent walk-in," he said, noting that his consumers tend to be male outdoor enthusiasts between 25 and 40 years old.

For consumers who drop off their gear to be repaired, costs range from \$10 to \$90, with an average bill of \$50. According to Menely, repairing climbing shoes is the most time-intensive of all — taking about five days to complete — because he must first grind off the old sole and then adhere a new one via a heat process. Then the shoes are placed on lasts that have been hand-shaped by Menely himself and put in a press to sit under pressure overnight. Menely then cuts off any excess rubber and grinds the shoes again for a polished finish.

In contrast, repairing hiking boots can take less than an hour. Menely peels off the old sole, glues on the new sole and then places the shoe in a 360-degree press to secure the new components. "I give customers a rule of thumb that if a boot retails for over \$160, then it's worth resoling," said Menely, noting that he sources his soles from manufacturers and vendors such as Vibram.

Menely (who specialized in sculpture while earning a degree in photography at the University of Idaho), remains committed to helping preserve the environment both inside and outside of his shop.

His Website features a long list of sustainability activists, including such remote kin as electric-auto promoters. In addition, Menely is committed to recycling as much of the store's waste as possible. For example, he plans to contribute the rubber waste from the process of resoling to Portland, Ore.-based Nike's Grind program, which recycles used rubber into new materials used for sport surfaces such as tracks and tennis courts.

"When I come to work every day, I know that there are 40 pairs of rock shoes sitting on my counter that are not going to end up in the garbage can," said Menely. "That is the key to all the repair work we do — to keep them out of the landfill."



Above: A sign calls out services. **Right:** The footwear repair and retail space.

