



# Women's Sports Concepts Come on Strong

Retailers are rethinking their game plans to better serve active females. **By Thomas J. Ryan**

If anything, Wall Street discovered the active women's market in 2007.

Lululemon Athletica went public in a wildly successful stock offering last July and touted long-range plans to open as many as 300 yoga-inspired stores across North America. It opened 27 stores in North America in 2007, ending the year with a total of 81.

In addition, Lucy Activewear was acquired by VF Corp., which announced intentions to grow Lucy "into a global leader in women's activewear." VF sees room to open about 20 Lucy stores annually over the next decade.

However, Wall Street was also reminded of the sporting goods industry's long history of challenges in meeting the needs of female athletes. Last August, The Finish Line decided to close its promising Paiva women's concept, which at the time consisted of 15 stores and an e-commerce site.

But the industry is getting much better at selling to active women, at least according to those who should know better: women's-only athletic stores.

No longer looking to just "pink it and shrink it," vendors are coming up with more women's-specific product that offers appropriate fit, sizing, styling and performance features. On the downside, sizing that runs too small is still an issue for manufacturers, especially as an increasing number of women are rediscovering sports in their 40s, 50s and 60s. Also, some vendors still underestimate active women's appetite for high-tech performance gear, and many female consumers still yearn for more sports bra options.

But by and large, the owners of women's-only sports concepts interviewed by *Sporting Goods Business* agree that over the past few years, the improvement in women's products has been substantial.

"It's like night and day," says Lori Shannon, who founded See Jane Run in 2000. "The choices are so much better for women than five years ago. The market as a whole has stopped treating active women as a trend, but as half the population."

At retail, sports chains are also improving their approach to active women in recognition of the vibrancy of the gender. This includes stocking more women's merchandise and in many cases, establishing separate departments for females.

But women's-only sports stores are still considered niche, and aren't yet considering the unisex athletic stores or big boxes to be a significant threat. In many cases, a more welcoming boutique atmosphere, superior customer service (often from female-only staffs), deeper assortments, and numerous grassroots efforts to become ingrained in the local active women's community is setting these retailers apart.

Here, *Sporting Goods Business* presents a look at a number of women's-only retailers, and gets their take on what's happening in the women's market.

## SPORTEVE

In 2006, D'Lynda Fischer opened the only women's-specific fitness store in Culver City, CA, and admits that it's been a challenge, noting that the L.A. crowd can be "very fashion-conscious." Sporteve offers products for a variety of sports—including hiking, gym training, running, yoga, triathlon, cycling, swim and kayaking—and Southern California customers are used to defined specialty shops.

"If they're a cyclist, they go to a bike shop. If they're a runner, they go to running specialty. For yoga, they go to Lululemon," explains Fischer.

Besides having to explain the concept of an all-in-one women's sports shop, Fischer feels there is also a need to teach women that there is a breadth of product available to meet their performance needs.

"I don't think [women] know for themselves what they can get," says Fischer. "One of the reasons I started the store is because I started finding all this great product on the Internet, and they were all things I could never find in L.A. We don't know what it's like to have a fabulous wicking shirt. Nobody's been buying it for us."

Sporteve's 2,700-square-foot location focuses on premium merchandise using a "better, best" strategy. For instance, Arc'Teryx, Cloudveil and Mountain Hardware are key hiking product brands. One aspect that particularly stands out for customers is the rich feel of the store.

"[Sporteve] feels high-end for an athletic store," says Fischer. "It's very spacious. When you walk in, it feels like a high-end store and it has a good vibe to it. People feel comfortable walking in and don't mind trying on a sports bra and running around in it."

But the Sporteve experience ultimately comes down to the staff's ability to educate and work with customers to find the right items.

"Women often have no idea of what we have that suits them," says Fischer. "So even if women come in and don't know what they want, we have to figure it out. It's really a matter of education on our side."



Slowly, consumers are discovering the store. Like other women's concepts, Sporteve has benefited by getting involved in the community, regularly holding meetings for local triathlon groups, as well as hosting bra and wetsuit fitting events, and fitness workshops.

"We're all over trying to get the word out, and we now have some credibility," remarks Fischer. "People need to come to us and know about us and actually make the trip. It's going to take a while, but we're in it for the long haul."

#### TITLE NINE

This women's-specific retailer, which began as a catalog operation, now operates 10 stores in California, Colorado, Oregon and Washington, as well as catalog and e-commerce businesses. Title Nine's core customer is the 35- to 50-year-old woman "who's got a lot of demands on her time, and she is somehow figuring a way to get in a trip to the gym or a run on the trail," according to Missy Park, founder and CEO. But she also notes that her customers really reflect the company's employee makeup.

"The big thing for me is just that we are our customer," says Park. "If you walk into one of our stores, you'll find someone who's a lot like you. You can talk to someone who's doing the thing you do, whether you're slogging it out on a treadmill or you're running a marathon." She adds, "It's also about being passionate about what you do. I can't imagine selling widgets. We're just excited about the product, and how our customers are excited about their mission to get their workouts in and participate in sports or learn new sports."

Also inspiring to Park are the ways in which she continually finds that sports change lives, and how Title Nine often helps feed that passion. For instance, at last year's Title Nine Mother's Day 9K event, Park noticed participants wearing orange T-shirts proclaiming, "I'm with Mary." Park recalls, "At the end of the race, I found a woman with the 'I'm Mary' shirt. She told me that six months earlier, she decided to quit smoking and start walking with a goal of finishing this race, and she asked her family to join her. So this race really had a transformative impact."



Park has kept to her philosophy of serving active women since launching the first Title Nine catalog out of her garage in 1990, after finding product offerings lacking in both quantity and quality for female athletes. Title Nine's forte includes paying particular attention to fit—especially in sports bras—as well as creating comfortable environments where women can get information. Toward that end, Title Nine stores are purposely kept small at around 2,000 square feet.

"The main thing is, we keep it small so every customer that comes in has someone to talk to," explains Park. "We're also not in malls because we don't want all that traffic. Everybody that comes to our store comes in for a reason. We're not trying to sell them stuff; we're trying to answer their questions."

Another important aspect of the business is to understand the time crunch most women are under. That means being able to assist a nursing mom at 3:00 a.m. via e-commerce, and it also means allowing customers to "test drive" a sports bra with the option of returning it if it doesn't fit correctly.

"The biggest thing is being able to put yourself in her shoes and talk the same language," says Park. "Also, women don't buy brands, they join them. They want to see that we are [the same as they are]. For me, the biggest thing in marketing is making compelling statements—our Title9K and our cycle club are making a statement that we care about sports."

In the bigger picture, Park is excited to see more women's-only concepts arriving on the scene.

"There's plenty of room and the more players you get, the better," exclaims Park. "Each player has a unique take on the market."

#### OUTDOOR DIVAS

Outdoor Divas, which operates one store each in Boulder and Denver, opened its first store in Boulder in 2002. The company focuses on outdoor and fitness during the summer, and on snowsports during the winter. Outdoor Divas differentiates itself from other women's-only concepts with its focus on hardgoods, which comprise about 30 percent of the product mix. But, as Outdoor Divas owner Kim Walker points out, the company's success all comes down to how women are treated in the store.

"In the past, [a female consumer] might have gone to a traditional outdoor or snowsports store, and maybe wasn't treated too well. In hardgoods, guys are typically selling to women," explains Walker. "What we try to do is work with the customer, listen to what's she's saying, and really respond to her

needs. This is especially important in hardgoods. If you can fix somebody's boots and you can make their feet happy, you've got a customer for life."

Outdoor Divas has a boutique-like feel with soft lighting, clean and spacious rest rooms, and dressing rooms big enough to fit baby strollers and "sometimes the whole family," says Walker. The stores also have richer colors than a typical white-walled sporting goods store, and consistent merchandising around the Outdoor Divas theme.

Beyond offering a wide product selection, Outdoor Divas has been widely praised for its commitment to feeding women's passion for the outdoors through its paddle and climbing classes and clinics. It also regularly holds "Evenings With Divas" events in which women can explore an activity by listening to an inspirational female athlete. These efforts are designed to introduce women to new activities in a supportive, non-competitive environment.

"The idea is that if we can provide a comfortable environment to get [women] started, they'll stick with the sport," says Walker. "But at the store level, we also have to make sure they're getting the right product, because if they do, they're going to stick with the sport a lot longer."

Walker has noticed that other outdoor and snowsports stores are doing a better job of approaching women—particularly in creating separate sections distinct from men's. She believes this only validates women's-only concepts, and points to their potential.

"I think there's still a huge opportunity for stores like ours around the country," asserts Walker. "We're definitely seeing pockets of stores here and there, but we have a long way to go."

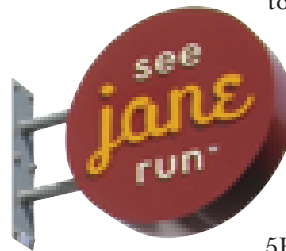
#### SEE JANE RUN

With one store each in San Francisco and Oakland, CA, and Boise, ID, See Jane Run is a running specialty store with a particular focus on providing correct fits for footwear and bras. Along with an ample assortment of women's footwear, each store carries more than 40 bra styles to ensure proper fit.

"The two things that women need are bras and shoes," says Shannon. "They can run in their husbands' T-shirts."

Her stores are also attracting more older women in their 50s and 60s looking to get involved in fitness—including many who are making 50th birthday resolutions to get back in shape. But the core customers for See Jane Run continue to be women in their late 20s through 40s. "It's someone who works out as a lifestyle, but isn't necessarily out there racing every weekend," explains Shannon.

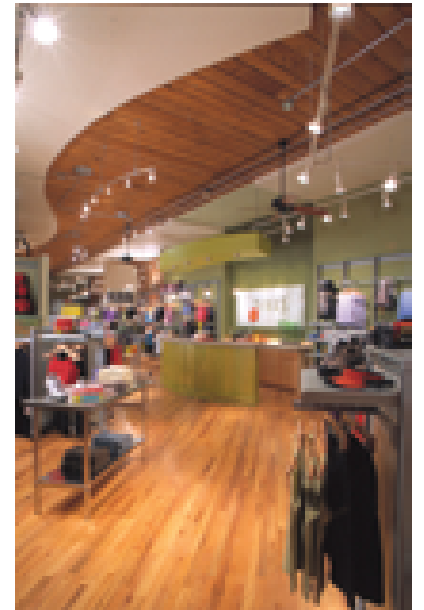
The stores, which feature a cleaner, more finished look than most traditional sporting goods venues, include ample dressing rooms that can accommodate strollers. Rather than spreading running footwear logos over the sales floor, the See Jane Run brand is featured throughout the store to create more of a boutique feel, as well. Signage also includes some of the company's inspirational taglines, such as "I run for chocolate."



A cornerstone of See Jane Run's mission is to educate and train women, which in turn encourages participation in sports. Such efforts include sponsoring running and triathlon clubs, as well as holding See Jane Run triathlons, half-marathons and 5K events. The retailer also runs a training program for women aspiring to participate in marathons and triathlons.

A big part of See Jane Run's success is due to an approachable staff that can handle consumers' questions, and that has the ability to educate women about merchandise. Shannon also believes it's important that her staff matches its target customer.

"If you're hiring a 22-year-old and that's the customer you're going for, that's great," says Shannon. "But if you're trying to attract the 35-year-old athlete—and that's something we do—you need someone older. A woman can



feel comfortable talking to someone her age about bras. They won't talk to someone 22 years old about bras."

The staff also has to have more patience when providing information to female consumers. Shannon notes that a woman might ask questions for a half-hour about heart monitors, and then come back the next day to ask more questions.

On the positive side, Shannon reports that female consumers who are treated well are very loyal and can exponentially promote the store to others through word of mouth. But, she adds, "On the downside, when you don't treat them well, they're not loyal at all. In fact, they can take you down as fast as they can build you up. Women can be real catty. I think men are a little less picky or more forgiving."

## LUCY ACTIVEWEAR

Michelle Lantow became president of the 61-store Lucy Activewear business in February. She believes the company's success is tied to its commitment to fit, style and performance, which is reflected in its product offering of pants and tops in lengths, and its fit range from body-skimming to relaxed. Exclusive fabrics—such as Lucy Tech, Lucy Flex and Lucy Lux—offer quick-drying performance, plenty of stretch, exceptional resilience and a soft, luxurious feel.

"We are constantly focused on delivering ground-breaking enhancements to lead the activewear market with the best-fitting pants available," asserts Lantow. "We have more styles and colors available in our fabrics than ever before. And they all perfectly compliment our customers' lives all day, every day."

Lantow also notes that Lucy has created a welcoming environment for women.

"We only offer women's activewear, so [the female consumer] tends to feel very comfortable in our store [because it doesn't have] the masculine influence [found] in so many other shops," says Lantow. "Our customer service is top-notch, with associates that understand the needs of each customer and that provide solutions through fabrication, fit, style and more. And the in-store atmosphere is infused with positive energy from the sales associates, to our signature Lucy orange, to our music selection." She adds, "We also support our customers in experiencing life. We introduce experiences such as Pilates or nutrition classes that allow them to learn more about the areas of health and wellness that interest them."



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Lucy was launched in November 1999 to fulfill an unmet desire for activewear that, in company parlance, "fits, flatters and inspires." Making its debut as Lucy.com during the dot-com craze, the brand

eventually shifted its focus to brick-and-mortar stores in 2001, and continues to find new markets in need of a store supporting the needs of active women.

"We firmly believe that the retail market for active women is still underserved with the fit, style and performance that she is demanding," says Lantow. She also points out that although active women now have more apparel choices, "there's still room for improvement." Lantow admits that it's not easy to meet the needs of women, and notes that plenty of retailers have struggled. Still, she believes Lucy's team has a clue.

"The best way for a retailer to meet the needs of active women is to understand their motivation and what inspires them," says Lantow. "Women are not smaller versions of men and they don't need pink to feel feminine. Women work out differently and have different goals, and these goals change with age."

## BETTYSPORT

Austin, TX-based BettySport opened its first door four years ago and today operates two stores. Unlike retailers such as Lucy and Lululemon, which predominantly carry their own labels, BettySport offers between 50 and 60 brands at a time. The stores also provide footwear and a deep assortment of sports bras. In contrast to See Jane Run, BettySport focuses on more casual offerings, and puts greater emphasis on sports other than running, including yoga, Pilates, gym training and swimming.

"We find our core customers are doing three or four activities," reports Craig Staley, BettySport's owner. "They might do yoga, they might work with a personal trainer at a gym, and then they might swim and run. We really appeal to an active customer."

The retailer's target consumers are ages 35 to 50, and have reached a point in their lives in which they have time to work out and have disposable income.

"We've never really had that beginner," admits Staley. "They're still going to Dick's Sporting Goods or Target because they're just starting out and don't want to spend some of the money."

One factor behind BettySport's success is that each store buys separately, based on local customers' needs.

"We really operate each store independently, although the stores are only 10 miles apart," says Staley. "We pre-order things, but another 20 to 30 percent of what we buy is at-once, based on what the customers want at each store." He adds, "We also special-order for our customers all the time. We might carry eight to 10 colors of a Nike style at a time, but they'll want another color. We're basically treated like a running specialty account, so we can get back into things."

BettySport's stores have a boutique feel that includes carpeting and dressing rooms with backlit mirrors. In the running footwear category, a strong commitment is made regarding foot type and gait analysis to ensure a proper fit. Overall, the staff also has to be able to educate women about the store's many products. For instance, each location carries about 20 varieties of black workout pants.

"Our stores don't get self-shopped," says Staley. "Women are going to ask more questions and be more thoughtful about the decision process. Women might spend an hour to think it through. They want to take their time and get it right."

Given the importance of providing ongoing education, employee retention has been particularly high on BettySport's agenda.

"We've done a good job of retaining employees and keeping people here that know our customers' names," says Staley. "I learned in the restaurant business what it's like to lose a good employee. You have to pay them and treat them well and provide them an opportunity for advancement."

Staley, whose background includes stints at Napa Valley Running and RunTex, came up with the BettySport concept after noticing how the running specialty channel "flipped" about five or six years ago, when women became the core customers. He estimates that today, women make about 65 percent of the purchases at many running stores. With the increasing popularity of triathlons among women, a similar shift is now occurring in bike stores.

"This created a void that we slipped into with our model, and I believe our model can exist in every city in the country," contends Staley. "I also think we can open up against a Lululemon or a Lucy. We sell different things. We do things differently. I think we complement each other."

## SPORTS HER WAY

With one store each in Towson, MD, and Alexandria, VA, as well as an online business, Sports Her Way's primary focus is women's lacrosse. The product mix is about 60 percent hardgoods and 40 percent softgoods.

"We're known for our customer service and the availability of every item for women's lacrosse," says Sue Heether, president of Sports Her Way. "The two months around lacrosse season make our year." For the rest of the year, Sports Her Way services field hockey, soccer, basketball and swimming, and also counts on the 25- to 35-year-old mom coming in for performance brands such as Sugoi, Under Armour and Nike.

According to Heether, one big reason that Sports Her Way has succeeded for almost 11 years is because it has created a welcoming environment for younger girls. This includes stocking many lower-priced items that girls can afford to buy.

"The little one may just be getting a small allowance, and she can buy three to five gifts for her friends, and they can buy something for themselves," explains Heether. But overall, the retailer focuses on addressing consumers' sports needs.

"We've only existed because we take the time to look our clientele in the eye," says Heether. "And if that young girl is 6 years old, our staff is on its knees asking questions like, 'Is this your first year?' and 'What's your favorite color?' That interaction is crucial. We've got to make sure we're making that little girl feel special. This is her time to shine."



Heether notes that many of those little girls have grown up to work at the store, and the store is now starting to see former players' children come in to be fitted. Such deep relationships are crucial to the company's longevity.

"We need to have customer relationships that go beyond just getting them what they need, because

Dick's Sporting Goods and The Sports Authority can get them what they need," says Heether. "We can give them information and attention beyond that to make a friendship rather than a customer relationship."

Just as importantly, "The thing that keeps people coming back is that we point them in the right direction," Heether says. "If we don't have an item, we tell them where to find it. Whether we make a sale or not, we have to meet their needs."

**UP AND RUNNING IN DAYTON**

Like many start-ups, Susie Stein found the inspiration for starting Dayton, OH-based Up and Running in September 2005 after finding that the marketplace wasn't filling one of her own needs. She didn't start running seriously until her mid-30s, and didn't run in her first marathon until reaching her 40s. In fact, she had to turn to her athletic sister to learn about running and gear.

"[My sister] told me about the brands and the fits and all the little idiosyncrasies that nobody tells you anymore," says Stein. "So, with Up and Running, I just wanted a place for women to feel comfortable enough to ask those questions. I wanted to do for other people what my sister did for me."

The store's core customers are between ages 30 and 50, with many looking to explore a new sport and rediscover fitness. Apparel comprises about 60 percent of the store's product mix, with footwear accounting for 40 percent. Beyond providing gear for running, cycling, triathlon, yoga, aerobics, walking and hiking, the retailer also has a strong lifestyle component represented by brands such as The North Face, Patagonia, Keen and Merrell.

The store's look is very clean, featuring hardwood floors in a much more relaxed setting than a typical running specialty store. It's slightly bigger than the average running store, too—measuring 2,500 square feet—in order to provide ample room for strollers and even wheelchairs. "You never feel packed in the store," Stein remarks.

Stein believes her highly knowledgeable staff is a key asset that helps women feel comfortable when shopping in the store.

"We don't have any 16-somethings. We don't have people that don't have a passion for the active lifestyle," says Stein. "We take a good 15 minutes just getting to know the customer, checking out their feet, and taking time to measure their arch. It's the same thing with bra fittings."

Stein also observes that today's busy women don't have time to search the big box stores for a particular size, or to try to learn

which apparel items would be most appropriate for a new adventure.

"Men are more likely to run into a store to buy a pair of shorts and be done with it," notes Stein. "But [a woman] wants customer service and she wants individualized attention. With all the time she gives to her husband, the kids and work, she deserves a few minutes." ■



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