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Woman's WORLD



In response
to a **STRONG** female
contingent, manufacturers
are designing snowshoe
lines just for them.

BY MARCUS WOOLF

The world's an uncertain place, but there are a few things I'm sure of—water's wet, sky's blue and women are very particular about their shoes. It's just a law of nature.

As it turns out, snowshoes are no exception.

Until about three years ago, snowshoe manufacturers catered mostly to men, producing shoes that women found aesthetically unappealing (meaning ugly), as well as uncomfortable.

But companies finally wised up. They conducted extensive research and overhauled their designs to create women's-specific snowshoes. Clearly, the work has paid off.

"Over the course of the first three years, our women's business has increased 300 percent. It's been fairly dramatic," said Kathy Murphy of Tubbs.

In 2000, Tubbs introduced three women's snowshoes in the Adventure series, and the line has now doubled. "REI has said to us that their single most popular shoe is the Adventure 25," Murphy said.

Retailers report that women's-specific shoes have sparked dramatic sales increases.

The Outdoor Industry Association's (OIA) Top-line Retail Sales Report, prepared by Leisure Trends, indicates that sales of women's shoes are outpacing sales of other models.

According to a survey of outdoor specialty stores, from 2000 to 2002, sales of all adult snowshoe units rose 4 percent. During this time, the number of units sold to women rose 26 percent.

Women's participation in snowshoeing increased 175 per-

cent from 1998 to 2001, according to the latest OIA Outdoor Recreation Participation Study prepared by Leisure Trends. Women's participation rose another 29 percent from 2001 to 2002. Women now represent anywhere from 49 percent to 60 percent of all participants.

THE WOMEN'S MOVEMENT

The meteoric rise in sales would not have been possible if manufacturers hadn't made some dramatic shifts.

Murphy said that Tubbs placed more emphasis on the women's market after it conducted significant market research. "We were trying to understand what [women's] barriers were to the sport. And their perception was that it would be very uncomfortable," Murphy said. "Their stride would be clumsy and cumbersome. So it was important to make shoes lightweight and ergonomic to ensure a natural, comfortable stride. Then we focused on keeping feet warm. We created binding systems that work with women's feet and don't constrict in the toe box."

The Atlas Snowshoe Co. began to study the women's market in 2000, says Karen Righthand, spokesperson for Atlas. "We did a study with Leisure Trends and polled walkers and hikers in the northern 36 states to gauge the market," she said. "The number for potential snowshoers was very high, and they were 56 percent female. That was a real wake-up call to Atlas, because we were selling two to one, men to women. That was the beginning of the evolution."

The evolution led to the introduction of the Atlas Elektra

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THE MAJORITY OF WOMEN ARE TAKING UP SNOWSHOEING AS AN ALTERNATIVE

series of women's snowshoes in 2002.

The Elektra shoes feature a frame that accommodates a woman's gait, which differs from a man's. Because women's thigh-bones angle more inward, their feet fall closer together. The Elektra allows women to walk in snowshoes without spreading their feet too far apart.

Not only are the frames designed for women, but the bindings are, as well. The Elektra 8 series includes the EZ8 binding, which was designed around a woman's last, and the Elektra 10 series has the ArchFlex binding to provide the added arch support that



women often need.

"Women seem to be very excited about the Elektra shoes. There's definitely a buzz about them," said Dan Long, director of development for Snow Leopard, an outdoor specialty store in Evergreen, Colo. "In winter, snowshoes are one of the most significant products," said Long, noting that sales of women's snowshoes have increased dramatically. "We've brought in a very strong line of women's snowshoes, and as companies get more specific with the women's snowshoes, we're bringing in more and more. The increase is coming because [women] see legitimate changes in the design of the shoes."

Murphy said retailers really have embraced the whole idea of women's-specific snowshoes, though that wasn't always the case. "Retailers were definitely skeptical at first, but now some are actually merchandising women's sections and are really attuned to this message," she added.

WOMEN IN WINTER

Two years ago, I attended a Winter Trails celebration in the Sierras and ran across a group of women

in their 50s trying on shoes. One of the women explained that the group was checking out snowshoeing as a possible activity that they could all do together in winter.

Manufacturers and retailers agree that this social aspect of snowshoeing really attracts women to the activity. "In our research, we've found that the social aspect is important," says Tubbs' Murphy. "They're able to recreate and carry on a conversation, whether it's with a friend, significant other, spouse or child."

Many women have taken up snowshoeing because they can share the experience with their family. This is certainly the case at The Michigan Snowshoe Center, which lies in a rural area 200 miles north of Detroit. Owner Ben Carr runs a system of snowshoe trails as well as a retail shop with 140 models of snowshoes. When asked about trends in sales of women's product, he said he's seen "rapid and continued growth."

"The orders that come in seem to be prefaced with, 'This is something I want my family to do.' It's like snowshoeing can become a bonding activity," said Carr.

Snowshoeing not only binds the family, but also raises the heart rate. Righthand and Murphy say that the majority of women are taking up snowshoeing as an alternative form of winter exercise. In fact, Atlas and Tubbs have successfully partnered with health clubs to promote snowshoeing.

"We're positioning the snowshoes for athletic women, for exercise," Righthand said. "One of the highest-ranking motivators for women to go snowshoeing is fitness."

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS

Snowshoe companies have certainly benefited from fortunate circumstances. Women enjoy great spending power, and our lagging economy has them turning toward less expensive forms of recreation.

But you have to credit the manufacturers for doing their homework to recognize the potential market.

"We didn't foresee the rate of growth, but we did see the possibility," said Murphy. "Part of the market research was just recognizing the purchasing power of women right now, not only in outdoor recreation, but in leisure activities for themselves and their parents."

Perhaps even more important, snowshoe manufacturers have, for the past few years, devoted great resources to increasing participation and raising awareness of the activity.

Along the way, they've learned to run savvy grassroots marketing campaigns, such as a new Atlas program designed to



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FORM OF WINTER EXERCISE.

promote snowshoeing and the Elektra women's line.

Launched in September 2002, the Atlas Explore Winter Workshops program includes 21 indoor workshops at stores and health clubs in Denver, Seattle, Portland, Ore., and Boulder, Colo., followed by on-snow outings. The workshops include a screening of a new seven-minute film called *Winter Escape*, which is meant to inspire women, while also explaining how to choose the right snowshoe.

The film is a good example of how snowshoe companies have shifted their marketing messages to reach women. Rather than rattling off a slew of technical mumbo jumbo, companies convey the emotional appeal of snowshoeing through hangtags, point-of-purchase materials and films. The workshops balance this emotional aspect with nuts and bolts information. Following the film, adventure racer Cathy Sassin provides basic information on exploring the outdoors in winter.

Righthand said the first workshop in Denver drew about 45 people the first night. "I expect that when we go back to the Colorado region we'll be slammed; we could have more than 100 people at some of these," she said.

Righthand is especially pleased that several outdoor companies partnered with Atlas to develop the film and workshops, including Mountain Hardwear, Montrail, Luna Bar, Petzl, National Geographic Maps, Subaru, Easton Technical Products and the Women's Sports Foundation.

THE PATH AHEAD

Expect to see more marketing campaigns speaking directly to women as manufacturers work to build this customer base. And expect to see companies expand their lines of women's snowshoes.

While he wouldn't offer specifics, Kris Kopowski, sales manager for Redfeather, said, "We're definitely expanding the women's category." As of now, Redfeather has the Sports Series Women with the XCW binding designed to fit women's feet, size 5 and up.

Crescent Moon is also considering the women's market carefully. "Women's sales have definitely affected our whole production strategy," said Jake Thamm of Crescent Moon. "We're more sensitive toward what women tell us they need."

That's a good idea. As Murphy points out, "We're seeing some real powerful shifts in women's sports participation."

One thing, though, will never shift—women will always be picky about their shoes.

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