

MILESTONE ISSUE

FAB CONCEPTS

What do a retail innovator and a rap superstar have in common? Longevity, for one. As Concepts marks its 25th anniversary, founder **TAREK HASSAN** reveals his secret strategies to **FABOLOUS**.



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CASE STUDY

BACK TO THE EARTH

OrthoLite aims to solve the footwear industry's big waste problem with its first midsole technology.

By Jennie Bell

When Glenn Barrett founded his OrthoLite insole company in 1997, the inside of a shoe was “a hot and smelly and sweaty place,” the CEO recalled recently to FN.

“I was introduced to a new material by a chemist in Taiwan — an open-cell breathable PU foam that wicks moisture and we put antimicrobial [features] in it. I figured this is an absolute natural to make it to be an insole,” Barrett told FN about the company's origins.

His gamble has certainly paid off. OrthoLite now supplies footwear insoles to more than 350 brands, from athletic giants like Nike and Adidas to fashion players such as Michael Kors, Kenneth Cole and Sam Edelman. And its business continues to grow amid the market-wide shift toward sneakers and comfort-focused footwear.

Throughout the firm's two-and-a-half decades, Barrett said innovation and sustainability have been two pillars of his strategy, illustrated by OrthoLite's decision in 2008 to manufacture its own material formulations and by its move at the start to incorporate recycled rubber in its products.

This month, the company took a major next step on both fronts by launching Cirql, an eco-friendly midsole foam that the company says is biodegradable, recyclable and industrially compostable. “Cirql is the world's first true soil-to-soil solution for footwear,” said Barrett during a press conference this month.

The foam — which will be manufactured in the company's



FDRA estimates 427.5 million pairs of shoes go into landfills each year

new Cirql factory in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam — is made from a biopolymer that has never been used before in footwear. According to Rob Falken, VP of innovation at OrthoLite, it is “made from responsibly sourced, GMO-free plants and other biodegradable materials, which is then formed in a chemical-free, zero-waste process with no curing.”

He added that unlike traditional EVA foams, which contain 10 to 15 ingredients, Cirql is a “mono material” foam with a single bio-based ingredient. “EVA foams have very little, if any, option for end-of-life for several reasons, but



Glenn Barrett

chiefly among them is because they are chemically cross-linked during their manufacture, and those many ingredients cannot be separated once foam,” said Falken.

By contrast, he explained, Cirql foam can be ground up and recycled to make new midsoles without any degradation to the quality of the material.

Andy Polk, SVP at the Footwear Distributors and Retailers Association, said the need for such innovation is paramount. He estimates that 427.5 million pairs of shoes are thrown into landfills each year. “Those shoes are full of plastics and materials that don't really degrade and cause greater environmental harm for decades to centuries. If we can start to use materials that can safely degrade and create a net positive for the environment — that is a huge win for our industry, consumers and the Earth,” said Polk.

He added, “If [OrthoLite's foam] can be reused indefinitely with the same performance, that is mind-blowing — that is getting us to actual circularity.”

According to OrthoLite, its

technology can be used to create midsoles for any type of footwear. The company hopes to begin collaborating now with brands and tier-1 factories with the goal to start product development in 2023.

Matt Smith, GM and VP of Cirql, who will lead the new division out of Vietnam, said the facility currently has the capacity to produce 150,000 pairs of midsoles per month, or 1.8 million pairs per year. “We have room to scale up capacity on-site,” he added. “And the partners that build our machinery have capacity to produce enough machines to reach an additional 20 million-plus pairs within a year.”

During his presentation, Barrett noted that partners have been asking for years why OrthoLite — with all its expertise in foam for insoles — didn't make midsoles or other cushioning components. “If we were going to introduce our first midsole foam, we were going to do it right,” he said. “OrthoLite Cirql delivers on our impeccable standards for comfort, performance and sustainability. And by focusing on an end-of-life solution, it brings a truly sustainable footwear future within reach.” ■