



Jodie Fox is co-founder and chief creative officer of web-only Shoes of Prey, which allows shoppers to design intricate shoes.

6 million pairs of shoes, each one custom-made

Jodie Fox couldn't find a pair of shoes she truly loved.

So she decided to design them herself.

The Australia native flew to a shop in Hong Kong where she designed 14 bespoke pairs in one hour. Back at the office, where she worked as

a lawyer, Fox's co-workers flooded her with compliments on her freshly minted shoes and asked her to design custom shoes for them. And that's how Fox got the idea for web-only retailer Shoes of Prey.

Fox teamed up with two Google Inc. employees, Michael Fox, her husband at the time, and Mike Knapp

to launch Shoes of Prey in October 2009. The e-commerce site allows shoppers to design every detail on a shoe, down to the color of a pump's piping. The pair is made on demand and then shipped directly to the customer in two weeks.

But of course, it takes a lot more than an idea to grow a successful

Shoe industry veterans scoffed, but Jodie Fox built an online business that makes each pair of shoes from scratch and delivers it within two weeks.

By April Berthene

The screenshot shows the Shoes of Prey website interface. At the top, there's a navigation bar with 'HOME', 'SHOP', 'CREATE', 'GIFTS', and 'SUPPORT'. A search bar contains 'BRIGHT AND SHINY' with a search icon. The main content area features a large image of a woman's feet wearing black strappy wedge sandals with white laces. To the right of the image, the text reads 'ALL TIED UP' followed by 'Easy wear. Stacked heel. Chic details. In stock. Over the Basil Collection.' Below this is a 'SHOP NOW' button. A dark modal window is open in the center with the text 'GET A LITTLE SHOE LOVE IN YOUR INBOX' and a 'CLOSE' button. The modal contains two input fields: 'Email Address' and 'SIGN ME UP'. Below the modal, there are three columns of text: 'CUSTOMIZE YOUR SHOE' (Pick a shoe you like, Choose your heel height, Select from 100+ luxe materials), 'FIND YOUR PERFECT FIT' (Sizing from 2-15, Half sizes available, Narrow and wide fits available), and 'HAPPINESS GUARANTEE' (Your shoes are crafted to-order, Delivered in just 2 weeks, Easy returns or repairs).

Rather than order inventory in bulk, Shoes of Prey lets women design their ideal shoe.

e-commerce business—especially one in which every product is unique. “The challenges were extraordinary,” says Fox, who now serves as the retailer’s chief creative officer.

For starters, not one of the three co-founders knew how to make a pair of shoes. The trio traveled and spent a lot of time with shoe manufacturers learning about the shoe construction process. They quickly discovered that it’s hard to scale a business when the manufacturer has to make one intricate pair of shoes at a time.

Most retailers order inventory in bulk rather than manufacture products “on demand.” Fox, however, saw this as an opportunity not only to let women design their ideal shoe, but as a way to prove that on-demand, mass customization is a financially savvy and ecological businesses model.

‘We see our customers are comfortable shopping online, and truly the future of mass customization for the near term is online.’

“They were relentless in terms of pursuing this vision of mass customization,” says Anna Henderson, who works in human resources at Shoes of Prey.

“It was also challenging in that we had a lot of people in the industry telling us the idea wouldn’t work,” Fox says. One particular supplier sent her an email that read, “I thought I should let you know that you’ll be out of business in three months’ time.”

Fox and her co-founders pondered if the supplier was giving them the right advice or if he was getting in the way of their good idea. But determination—and a touch of arrogance—prevailed and they eventually found a few suppliers who would make the shoes, Fox says. The victory, however, was small.

“It quickly became apparent that they could not scale with us at the pace we were growing,” Fox says.

And so the partners decided that if they wanted it done right, they would have to build the shoes themselves. On Dec. 24, 2014, Shoes of Prey opened its own manufacturing facility in Dongguan, a city in the heavily industrial Guangdong province of southern China.

Having control of its facility also allows the retailer to ship its shoes faster. Previously it took eight to 10 weeks, and now the retailer ships the product in two weeks. While this is still a far cry from Amazon Prime’s two-day shipping, Fox says customers are willing to wait for a custom-made shoe.

Close to 50% of Shoes of Prey’s sales are from U.S. shoppers, with Australia the second-largest market.

Manufacturing was just one challenge Shoes of Prey solved on its journey to prove the viability of on-demand mass customization. The role of the physical store was another. Department store chain Nordstrom Inc. opened Shoes of Prey Design Studios within six of its U.S. stores in 2014 and Shoes of Prey also opened a store in Australia. In 2015, Shoes of Prey relocated to the U.S. from Australia to make it easier to work with Nordstrom and other U.S. investors.

However, the stores didn’t perform as hoped, and toward the end of 2015 Shoes of Prey started to close them. The decision was a financial one, Fox says, as the stores consumed 25% of the company’s budget but contributed only 15% of sales. And when Fox looked at

A BUSINESS MODEL THAT CLICKS



Shoes of Prey’s online sales, in millions of dollars

Source: *Internet Retailer’s Top500Guide.com*

it that way, and knew the sales volume produced by the website, the decision was easy, she says.

“We see our customers are comfortable shopping online, and truly the future of mass customization for the near term is online,” Fox says.

To date, consumers have designed and purchased 6 million pairs of shoes on ShoesofPrey.com. The retailer has also raised about \$25 million in funds. Since the company began in 2009, the team of three has grown to 200 employees, which includes workers in the company’s manufacturing facility.

Thanks to the internet, when Shoes of Prey launched, it instantly had a global reach. Today, close to 50% of Shoes of Prey’s sales are from U.S. shoppers, with Australia as the second-largest market. After that it’s a mix of countries, with France, the U.K. and Japan leading the pack, Fox says.

This type of growth, however, would not have happened unless she and her partners were 100% focused on their customers, Fox says.

“It’s about stepping into the customers shoes,” Fox says. A terrible pun, she admits, but nevertheless true. ●

APRIL@VERTICALWEBMEDIA.COM @APRILBERTHEIR