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Change is Good: How Footwear is Overcoming a Resistance to Technology

By *Angela Velasquez*





3-D printed shoe

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The footwear industry may be proud of its use of 3-D technology, but the sector is actually reaping the benefits of more than 40 years of trials and errors from industries as far reaching as aerospace to tooth brushes—which have already explored and honed their 3-D printing techniques.

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“[Footwear] is literally one of the last industries to embrace this technology,” Chris Hillyer, Deckers Brands director of

innovation, said at 20th [UITIC International Technical Footwear Congress](#) in Porto, Portugal Thursday.

During a panel moderated by Footwear Distributors and Retailers of America ([FDRA](#)) president and CEO

Matt Priest, industry insiders discussed the footwear industry's weariness of adopting new technology like as 3-D rendering and printing, despite the fact that it pays off with faster production, better quality products and more inventive designs.

Nicoline Van Enter, creative director at design consultancy The Footwearists, said resistance to new technology often comes from management—not designers—because innovation can disrupt their entire process.

“There is no one size fits all solution for introducing new technology,” she said. While larger companies may have the resources to dedicate a team of employees to a new process such as 3-D sampling, mid- to small-size companies must decide whether they are going to make that time and financial investment, or seek outside assistance. Essentially, outsourcing that side of their manufacturing, Van Enter said.

Building shoes for the future requires 3-D rendering, a whole different skill set for designers that only know a 2-D world. The integration of 3-D software has been the biggest game-changer and challenge for Deckers Brands. Speaking frankly, Hillyer said employees at the company are “scared to death about what this will do to their careers and weekends.”

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He continued, “It’s a new thing for people to learn. After you work in career for years, you become very settled so when we present this to people, it requires a soft touch.”

Software is speeding up the manufacturing process and is delivering product that receives stronger reaction in the market, but Andreas Tepest, Deichmann head of global quality management, said Chinese factories have yet to understand the benefits of the technology. “It’s hard to convince factories in China to use this technology. People who’ve worked in 2-D for most of their careers need time to pick up on the technology,” he said.

Others take to it immediately and are eager to give up antiquated processes. An incubation team of young designers with no preconceived ideas about how footwear is designed or made have become somewhat of a technological pep squad at Deckers. In a reversal of roles, the fresh-faced designers are becoming mentors to the older generation. It’s a win-win situation, Hillyer said, as the young designers are gaining knowledge that will make them invaluable (and highly covetable employees throughout their career) and Deckers is advancing its production.

While sampling is speeding up, Tepest said the industry could also benefit from an information sharing platform that provides information quickly and accurately and only in places where it is needed. “I hope we don’t need another 40 years to use the next technologies,” he added.

Hillyer echoed that sentiment adding that communication between Deckers’ U.S. headquarters and factories in China can be a time suck, in spite of all the digital ways to stay connected. On average, Hillyer said it takes Deckers Brands 47 weeks to develop a shoe and he chalks up a lot of that time to communication. “You can actually have a baby in less time than it takes for us to get a shoe to a sale meeting,” he said.

However, Hillyer said 3-D designing is giving the industry the opportunity to communicate more clearly, not only with factory but also internally. “It’s a reality that we can’t afford to live without anymore,” he said.

That’s not to say footwear will become a human-less industry based solely on churning out cheaper product faster. “If we wanted to make the most efficient footwear, we’d all be wearing Crocs. Those shoes are like candy squirted out of a machine,” Hillyer said.

Handcrafted is still a valuable asset to the industry. “[The footwear industry] won’t become McDonald’s,” Van Enter said. Craftsmanship, like that which Portugal has built its footwear sector on, increases the emotional value of footwear, makes people want to pay for shoes and wear them for years. “There are certain things that a human does well and certain things that machines do well. The sweet spot will be where craft and mass manufacturing merge,” she added.

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