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kybun & Joya:

Health-Focused Brands Ready to Make Their Mark

MARY RUOFF

Carolyn Gey (pronounced “guy”), Managing Partner of kybun USA, has heard “story after story” from people whose pain and disability went away or greatly diminished after wearing the Swiss comfort footwear brand. “I don’t need a cane anymore,” a customer told her. “One 60-plus-year-old man started crying because he didn’t have pain in his feet,” recalls Gey, who’s also Chief Executive Officer of Joya Shoes USA, kybun’s less pricey companion brand.

“Like walking on air” kybun retails for \$390 to \$470 vs. \$220 to \$280 for Joya. “kybun is more of a medical shoe for people who are in severe pain,” explains Gey. “However, Joya has similar benefits and is a wonderful shoe, a great walking shoe.” Sold in more than 40 coun-

tries, it’s been available in the states for about ten years. That’s a few more than kybun, which is sold in 50-plus countries.

Both brands have a small U.S. footprint but are stepping up together to change that, largely by increasing sales through independent shoe retailers. Customer service and fitting skills at these often family-owned businesses are the perfect match for the health-focused brands, which were started, successively, by a father and son. “I’m a huge fan of the stores, what they do with the customers, how they fit their customers,” says Gey.

Positive Feedback from Independents

Like the executive, independent shoe retailer Terry Abeles of T. Abeles & Son in suburban Jackson, Miss., has seen kybun customers moved to tears. “They help people with so many different issues,” says the former pedorthist, who’s been selling shoes for 55 years. “People come in having had issues for years and years, or acute issues, like they fell or had an accident,” he says. “You get them in a kybun, and it’s like you flipped a switch. People are

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absolutely amazed.”

T. Abeles was a multi-brand store when it picked up kybun in 2016. Within a few years the brand accounted for an astounding 60 percent of sales. In 2019, the retailer began selling kybun and Joya exclusively, though it dropped the latter. Abeles is a Joya fan, but it didn’t fit the store’s niche: people who need footwear to relieve serious pain. Like some other kybun retailers, he offers a trial program that lets customers test kybun at home. The service fee is deducted from the price if they purchase a pair – most who opt for the trial do.

Abeles’ “kybun Superstore” draws customers from throughout Mississippi, the poorest state in the nation, and ships nationwide. Not surprisingly, shoppers often balk at the price initially. Many have worked in modest jobs that took a physical toll. “I can’t count the number of times people come in and say, ‘I won’t spend that,’ and 15 minutes later, ‘Thank you very much, I love these shoes,’” notes Abeles, who regularly gets referrals from health care professionals. “All the time they buy another pair after thinking they’d just stick with one.”

Local podiatrists often send patients to Soulier Shoes and Shoe Depot,



The kybun Magglingen Grey for men, with an overprint showing how the internal air cushion works. Most kybun men’s shoes have a companion ladies’ style.

sister stores in Brooklyn, N.Y., for Joya. A customer who bought a pair at Soulier Shoes credits the footwear with keeping him out of surgery. Whenever he passes by the men's shoe store, he pops in to say thank you. "The feedback is amazing," says store manager David Miller. "People who buy Joya usually come back for Joya in a different style or color." Both stores will soon sell kybun, too.

Shoe Technology Promotes Health

With thick, cushioned soles that mimic soft earth, like moss and sand, kybun and Joya are super shock-absorbing – and more forgiving to the foot and body than concrete and other hard man-made surfaces. When walked in, air moves through the honeycomb-like structure in the footbed, creating a "rolling" or "trampoline" effect that "micro" activates muscles in the back, feet and legs, improving posture, balance, gait and coordination as well as relieving pain. All of which promotes health and "well-being" – "kybun" is Korean for that.

Joya's patented shoe technology is a less aggressive form of kybun's. For example, kybun's "air cushion" soles are made entirely of soft polyurethane, enhancing the rolling effect, but Joya's only partly. kybun wearers with serious mobility issues may need to gradually adjust to the shoes. Because kybun soles are sensitive to humidity, the footwear needs to fully air dry if it gets wet. Information on wear and care is detailed in a pamphlet that comes with each pair.

Brand Websites Important for Retailers

Both brands sell direct-to-consumer (D2C) at their websites (www.kybun.us and us.joyashoes.swiss) and at Amazon.com, but ecommerce's importance extends far beyond the bottom line. It helps market the footwear to the benefit of brick-and-mortar retailers, stresses Gey. The websites have prominent store locators and are packed with detailed information about the footwear's technology, history and health benefits. kybun's site has scores of testimonials

Personal Glimpse

Carolyn Gey, Managing Partner kybun USA, CEO Joya Shoes USA

SRT: What's one of the most recent books you've read?
Carolyn Gey: I enjoy reading crime stories in German, especially when I am very busy with work. I bring the books with me from Germany, my native country. I recently read and very much enjoyed a book (in German) about artist Frida Kahlo. I also enjoy books from one of my favorite authors, Ian McEwan, an English novelist.

SRT: What's one of the most recent movies, television shows or streaming series, that you've seen?
Gey: I just watched two wonderful movies that I enjoyed. One was *Falling for Figaro* and the other *Frida*. In general I like movies with a good and interesting story.

SRT: If you could pick one person in the footwear industry to have dinner with, who would it be? Why?
Gey: There is no doubt it would be Karl Mueller Sr., the inventor of kybun (and MBT) shoes. Even though I had dinner with him before I would enjoy it at any time again. He is very inspiring and very passionate about everything he is doing. There are also many friends in the independent shoe retailer business that I would love to have dinner with, many in the Foot Solutions family. The owners and staff have so much knowledge and experience, and I like to hear their point of view and thoughts about footwear.

SRT: Do you have a "personal hero" from history??
Gey: I do not have one hero. There are so many incredible people in this world. I admire brave people that fight for justice and equality, especially women who set their mark in history, in politics, law, science, society and business.

SRT: What's one thing about you that would surprise most people?
Gey: I am also the Honorary Consul of Germany in Arizona.



(video and written): the airline pilot who found relief decades after his ankle was injured in a plane crash, a man whose disabling pain from illness was greatly reduced, athletes overcoming injury and improving fitness, and so on.

History of the Companies

Though separately owned, family is the tie that binds the brands, headquartered together in Roggwil, Switzerland. Influential shoe designer Karl Mueller invented the kybun (formerly kyBoot) shoe and launched the brand in 2007. A

year later his son, also Karl, started Joya with a business partner. The son is still at its helm, while dad remains kybun's Chairman of the Board after stepping down as CEO two years ago. Both companies make all their footwear; kybun has factories in Switzerland and Italy while Joya's is in South Korea. "They're growing more and more together," says Gey of the businesses. "They work closely together and develop products together."

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The senior Mueller previously invented the MBT shoe, stepping out the brand in 1997. His designs are based on the belief that feet are the foundation of good health and that well-being diminishes when factors of modern life, like prolonged sitting and walking on hard surfaces, cause fascia and muscles to tighten over time. He left MBT on amicable terms to continue perfecting comfort footwear. The seeds of his holistic approach were planted in the rice paddies of South Korea, where he lived in the 1980s, working as a restaurateur and food importer. His own aches and pains eased when walking on the fields' soft clay after seasonal rains.

Gey discovered MBT while working in the health and wellness industry in her native Germany in the early 2000s. Often in the states, she contacted the U.S. supplier and became its first sales representative, launching a pilot program that led to the shoes becoming the top seller at Foot Solutions franchises in the United States and Canada. When she met the elder Mueller at a Foot Solutions store in Scottsdale, Ariz., in 2018, he was unaware of her success with MBT. But the next year, after briefly taking



Left to right at the Swiss headquarters of kybun: Urs Koller, CEO of kybun; Carolin Gey, Managing Partner kybun USA, CEO Joya Shoes USA; and Karl Mueller, inventor of the kybun shoe, kybun founder, and Chairman of the Board of Directors.

over kybun's U.S. distribution in 2019, he tapped her to be its exclusive U.S. distributor. Joya soon hired her to handle warehousing and distribution and made her CEO of its U.S. arm last year.

Her duties include overseeing customer service for both brands, which have offices at the same Scottsdale location as the warehouse. "We have a great team here. We have very good shipping costs with FedEx," notes the wholesaler. "If it's ordered (up) until 2 p.m. our time, it gets shipped out that day. We really have it down." Aside from D2C clear-

ance sales, anything in the warehouse is available for retail partners to order: there aren't separate wholesale and D2C inventories. If a store wants to buy out discontinued items, Gey will try to work out a deal. As a small wholesaler focused on independent retailers, she has that flexibility.

Back On Track After the Pandemic

While the Covid-19 pandemic stalled efforts to increase the brands' U.S. sales, they're back on track. "I feel that we could have been where we are right

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Joya's Cancun II Blue for men, on model. Shock absorption detail shown on enlarged shoe.

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now in Summer 2020 if the pandemic did not hit," says Gey. As of Spring 2022, kybun and Joya together had about 75 U.S. retail partners, with two added each month on average. Some 45 sell Joya exclusively or primarily, the others do so for kybun. Neither brand has plans to partner with large online shoe retailers like Zappos.com. If Joya or kybun retailers sell online, they're welcome to carry the shoes there. kybun can team with stores to set up an online brand shop.

In this country the brands are sold in U.S. full and half sizes but not widths. While Joya can be worn with an orthotic, kybun can't be: the shoes themselves work to relieve pain and provide comfort and a healthy foot environment, without the rigid support typical of orthotic and medical footwear. Some styles are roomier and thus better-suited for wide feet. The brands are big on sneakers but also offer hiking and ankle boots, sandals, and casual dress shoes like Mary Janes and loafers. Many styles have speed-laces and several have side zippers – like kybun's sporty cute Nyon sneakers for women, with the toe cap in an offsetting color.

Among Joya's new offerings: Sven men's sneakers, with velour and perforated full-grain leather uppers, and Britt, its women's equivalent. Sneakers are the brand's top sellers for

women, including Electra, with boomerang-shaped plastic detailing, and Waikiki, with contrasting nubuck and mesh. Among the styles out front for men: the Cancun sneaker, in perforated velour or "tumbled" full-grain leather, and Traveler loafers, in nubuck or full-grain leather.

kybun has other products that were developed using the same health principles as the shoes, including socks, treadmills, exercise courses, seat cushions, and mats for standing and exercise. The soft cushions and mats (socks and mats are jointly marketed with Joya) do well in the U.S. market. T. Abeles sells lots of the latter, often to people who don't wear kybun footwear.

Along with promoting Joya and kybun footwear to the health and medical fields, Gey hopes to enter into marketing relationships with professional organizations whose members spend lots of time on their feet. "Joya has a much bigger market because of the price point," she notes. Training videos, informational materials and Zoom calls are part of the steep learning curve for kybun retailers. "When somebody starts, we have a pretty intensive onboarding process that is getting stronger and stronger," says Gey. "Sometimes there's this real hesitation because of the price. But you always have people who can use it. If you can sell it in Mississippi very well you can sell it almost anywhere." ■