



LET THE SUN Shine In

Open-air shoes—embellished, embroidered, and with a western kick—are hot summer styles.

BY SUSAN LANIER-GRAHAM

H.H. Brown's collection of reasonably priced mules and sandals caters to women in a slightly older demographic (ages 30-50)

NOTHING SAYS SUMMER BETTER than a great pair of flip-flops or sandals. The western market has long offered women a variety of sandal styles, but that market is now bigger and better than ever.

Several major players in the shoe industry, and some newcomers, are heating things up with creative designs in sandals, flip-flops and mules for summer.

Sandals go back thousands of years, but they've only recently started changing the fashion world. The term "flip-flop" for thong sandals was introduced in the 1960s. Back then, kids wore bright-colored rubber flip-flops to the beach. Soon, consumers were offered a few more selections, and flip-flops made of leather, wood and bamboo hit the market.

By the 1990s, thanks to a trend toward a more casual lifestyle, flip-flops and sandals showed up everywhere, even in the workplace. Today, they're a staple in the women's western footwear market each summer.

Footwear Becomes Fashion

One major change in the women's footwear industry is the perception of shoes as major fashion items rather than accessories. To meet that demand, the market has become more innovative with a variety of colors, materials, styles and designs. Before 1999, black sandals made up 80 percent of the sandal market. Today, black accounts for only 30 percent of the market, according to a Verdict Research study on footwear retailers.

Othell Welch, owner of Corral Boots, agrees with the research. "We're seeing a lot of color coming back," he says. "Browns and blacks are never going completely away, but at Corral, as well as many other companies, we're spicing things up a bit to provide more color."

Lorinda Van Newkirk of Van Glow says that color is an important part of her new Gypsy Soule line of sandals. "Some of our best sellers are red alligator and purple continues to be strong," she says. Even when the shoes are black, consumers want to mix it up a little. One of the most popular trends is toward black patent leather (see "Patent-Leather Revival," on page 74) and a variety of metallics.

Shoe materials are changing to meet the fashion-forward market. Some of Gypsy Soule's biggest hits are made from cowhide, tooled leather, alligator and metallic-coated leather.

Hand-tooled and handpainted sandals and flip-flops have been popular. Annette Milliff of Annette's Touch of Class uses handcrafting

to set her shoes apart from those of her competitors. "All of our leather products are hand-painted, signed and numbered by the individual artists, making each piece a unique and one of a kind item," she says. Corral Boots is introducing a new line of hand-tooled mules that will feature filigrees and tooled overlays.

Bling is not Dead

Even though there's less bling today than in previous seasons, bling is still a hot trend. Lorinda Van Newkirk sees the sparkle switching to a different part of the body—the feet. "Bling is not going away," she says. "Women invested money in those belt buckles and accessories, now they want the shoes to complement them."

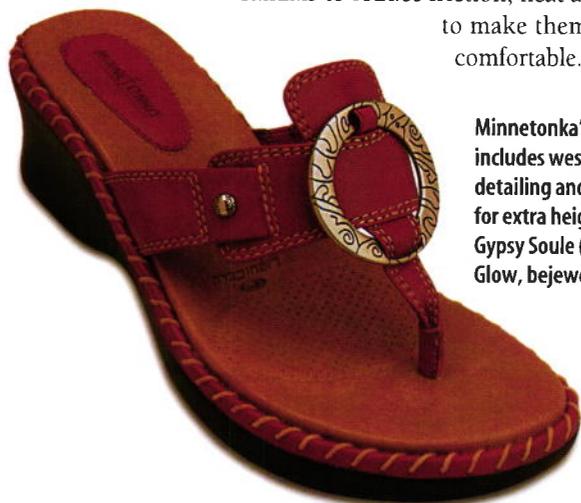
Swarovski crystals are still popular, but the trend also is leaning toward semiprecious stones, such as turquoise, along with fringe, silver ornaments and beads. Scott Sessa, president of Minnetonka Moccasin Company, says his company's signature embellishments, such as silver ornaments, beads, stones, filigrees and fringe, make the company's products poised for this popular trend.

Comfort and Convenience

While today's market is fashion-forward, consumers also continue to require both comfort *and* convenience. Barbara McFarland of H.H. Brown Inc. says that comfort is a huge part of the success of its Sonora collection. While some components of women's western fashion is on a decline, she argues that overall comfort combined with style is what makes a footwear line successful.

Corral's Welch believes that mules are a popular summer shoe because of their convenience, especially for those who travel. "You have to take your shoes off at the airport now," she notes. "Western-style mules are easy to take off. For example, many rodeo queens need to wear western boots when they travel. The mules let them create that look while still being able to get through airport security quickly."

Minnetonka now offers the new Colorado Collection, with two thongs and two slides, on a 1¾ inch sculpted wedge sole. Comfort is key, along with style. "What's especially exciting with this collection is the LiquiCell membrane technology that has been incorporated," says Sessa. "We've placed this at the forefoot of these sandals to reduce friction, heat and fatigue, and to make them exceptionally comfortable."



Minnetonka's thong sandal includes western-style detailing and a stacked heel for extra height under jeans. Gypsy Soule (r), from Van Glow, bejewels the flip flop.



(L-R) Body art for the feet: Annette's Touch of Class offers a tattoo pattern on an espadrille-style sandal. Borrowing from the vintage art seen on screened t-shirts, the company offers a unique take on your average shoe; the Western Cowgirl Sandal is a hand painted espadrill in chocolate swirl pattern with cowgirl pin-ups.

All Ages and Budgets

The popularity of sandals and flip-flops isn't restricted to a single demographic. Today's market offers something for every age and every pocketbook. While Minnetonka has a core demographic of 35 to 54-year-olds and H.H. Brown caters to women 25 to 40, Gypsy Soule shoes go out to "anyone from teenagers to grandmas," according to Van Newkirk.

Corral's Welch, however, sees a slight difference in color and





Sandal-Merchandising Tips

1. Buy a variety of colors of a single style, and buy several styles; offer sandals, flip-flops and mules.
2. Go to shows, study the market, and stay on top of trends. Be open to new ideas in the western-footwear market.
3. Be aware of today's crossover market to pull in women from outside the traditional western-wear market.
4. Sell shoes as fashion items rather than accessories by making them a part of the package, not an afterthought.
5. Dress up the shoes. Pair them with pants, like colors and complete outfits. Don't try to sell shoes by themselves.
6. Encourage upsales by showing women different colors of the same style or similar styles they can use with a variety of outfits.
7. Point out the advantages of slip-on shoes to customers who want convenience along with comfort and style.
8. Order products early, and encourage consumers to start thinking about summer footwear just as they grow tired of cold weather.
9. Wear the shoes, and encourage your employees to do likewise. The investment in providing your employees with the merchandise will pay off with today's visual shoppers.

H.H. Brown's Sonora collection of flip flops adds comfort and unique styling to the standard summer sandal. The moderately priced shoe prides itself on comfort.

pattern choices between the younger and older ends of the consumer spectrum. "While we sell across the board, those in their early 20s and younger prefer the brighter colors and all the embellishments while older consumers tend to want the solid colors," he says.

Price points vary as widely as the demographics. They range from H.H. Brown's Sonora collection of inexpensive comfortable shoes made in China to the moderately priced Minnetonkas—and on up to the high-end semi-custom styles available from Corral Boots, Annette's Touch of Class, Gypsy Soule and others.

H.H. Brown's McFarland says that the economy plays a large role in her company's pricing. "With the housing market, gasoline prices and overall constraint on consumer spending, the price point items are crucial to a successful product. We manufacture a large variety of items ranging from high end to low end."

Gypsy Soule's most popular styles are in the \$130 to \$150 range. Van Newkirk says that consumers are willing to pay that price when the retailer has the attitude that the shoes are worth the money. That, combined with a comfort fit and the ability to stay on top of trends creates a market for flip flops in that price range. Welch agrees: "Our products range



Minnetonka's stacked heel and detailed stitching are representative of the company's spring line.

from \$100 to \$350, and people see that the cost is reasonable for the quality of shoe they're getting."

Minnetonka offers most of their sandals wholesale for less than \$22.50. Sessa says this makes the job easy for the retailer. "This allows the retailer to get 54 or more points in margin. And, the consumer is pleased because she is getting a real value when you consider these are high quality leather sandals with comfort features."

Merchandising for a Visual Market

Annette Milliff of Annette's Touch of Class says that understanding the buyer is key to successfully merchandising sandals and flip-flops in the western-wear market. "People are visual buyers," she says. Her suggestion for selling? "Wear them. People love the uniqueness—they want to see it on."

Van Newkirk says the key to selling her Van Glow merchandise is understanding today's changing western-wear market. "Retailers need to understand the crossover in the industry to be successful," she says. "This is a world where Sheryl Crow and Carrie Underwood define today's cowgirl. She's edgy, fun and different."

She notes that if retailers have that same edgy, fun attitude and believe in what they are selling, they won't have a problem moving \$150 flip-flops. "In fact, these shoes are a lifestyle. Women wear them every day. If you get women to buy into that, they'll buy multiple pairs."

Welch encourages retailers to dress up the shoes. "The best way to sell them is to dress them up, especially with the summer mules," he says. "Put a pant over them to show the customers what the shoe looks like on her feet." He also discourages retailers from selling the shoes by themselves. "Put them with like colors, with other accessories. Dress them up."

Of course, the only way to sell sandals, flip-flops and mules is to first stock the shoes. Minnetonka encourages retailers to have a variety of styles on hand. "Our best sellers, such as the Silverthorne, have updated companions to create a package that will have strong sell-throughs," says Sessa. "That consumer who has always bought the Silverthorne now has the opportunity to get that look with a slightly dressier mini stack wedge bottom with our Silverthorne Wedge."

H.H. Brown's McFarland encourages her retailers to purchase early. "The best way to merchandise our summer products is to buy enough product early to allow the best form of advertising—word of mouth—to work its magic." 🐾

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Corral's mules easy to slip off on hot days are perfect under jeans for a cool boot look.



RETAILER RESOURCES	
Annette's Touch of Class Willis, Texas 936-856-7728 www.annettestouchofclass.com	Lucchese Inc. El Paso, Texas 800-637-6888 www.lucchese.com
Ariat International Inc. Union City, Calif. 800-899-8141 www.ariat.com	Minnetonka Moccasin Company Minneapolis, MN 612-331-8493 www.minnetonkamocc.com
Arohoe Rocky Comfort, Mo. 417-628-3143	Oak Tree Farms Carpenteria, Calif. 805-684-6248 www.oaktreefarms.com
Corral Boots McAllen, Texas 866-426-0001 www.corralboots.com	Old Gringo Boots & Belts Company Chula Vista, Calif. 619-575-2810 www.oldgringoboots.com
H.H. Brown Inc. Lebanon, Pa. 800-438-7026 www.hhbrown.com	Tony Lama Boots Fort Worth, Texas 800-545-8707 www.tonylama.com
Durango Boot Nelsonville, Ohio 800-848-9452 www.durangoboot.com	Van Glow/Gypsy Soule Weatherford, Texas 877-LORINDA [567-4632] www.vanglowjewels.com
Justin Boot Company Fort Worth, Texas 800-545-8707 www.justinboots.com	



Some of Gypsy Soule's biggest hits are made from cowhide, tooled leather, alligator and metallic-coated leather.