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## NEWS



### **Will Toning Shoes Be the Next Big Footwear Craze?**

**Still-Young Category Predicted to Hit \$100M This Year**

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NEW YORK (AdAge.com) -- Get in shape, without the gym. It's a potent marketing claim that has women opening up their wallets.

Skechers toning footwear

Toning footwear, shoes that promise to do everything from firming up muscles to alleviating back pain, are expected to become a \$100 million category this year. Yet, it's still a category in its infancy. Brands such as MBT, Ryn and FitFlop have earned a cult following, broadening their distribution significantly in the last year or two, and now mainstream brands such as Reebok and Skechers are getting in on the action. More major brands are sure to follow, said Matt Powell, a footwear analyst with SportsOneSource.

"It's still emerging at this point, but it's starting to feel like its going to be a really big deal," he said. "People are starting to talk about it the way they talked about aerobics back in the mid-'80s."

Mr. Powell estimates the category will reach \$100 million in retail sales this year. And though that's a fraction of the roughly \$1 billion walking category and \$5 billion running category, he says toning footwear is the kind of thing that could "catch on like wildfire."

"Pretty much everybody is aware of it, but some have chosen not to play yet," he added. "This could revive the walking category, which has been dormant for 10 years."

### **The concepts behind it**

The category is focused on two basic concepts. The first involves simulating walking on a soft surface, causing the wearer to use muscles not normally used when walking on hard surfaces. The second involves creating instability, causing the wearer to engage muscles in order to balance. Though the technology varies from brand to brand, potential benefits range from weight loss and more-toned muscles to improved posture and reduced cellulite.

Other shoe makers, such as Nike and Terra Plana, have previously released shoes designed to simulate barefoot walking and running to strengthen the feet. Toning footwear promises to affect body parts well above the ankles. That's not to say a toning shoe is a cure-all.

"We're not pitching it as buy EasyTone and your problems are behind you," said Bill McInnis, Reebok's head of innovation. "But it is a help and a bit of a shortcut, if you will. If you're walking around anyway, why not get this additional benefit?"

Plenty of women are buying into that logic, making it tough for retailers to keep styles in stock. But that scarcity is only serving to fuel consumers' appetites, execs say.

And that's despite stylistic challenges. MBT, Ryn and Skechers all still feature awkward-looking elevated bottoms, but new color combinations and styles, such as Mary Janes, are attracting customers. To the casual observer, Reebok EasyTone looks like any other running shoe, and FitFlop offers a range of colors and materials, including metallics and patent leather.



Khloe and Kim Kardashian pose with Reebok's EasyTone Mobile Tour vehicle.

Reebok, which launched EasyTone earlier this year, expects toning footwear will eventually become a core category for the brand. And it is ramping up production accordingly.

"It's definitely going to be a growth area for us and the industry in general," Mr. McInnis said. "[The target customer] is broader than we initially thought. There's strong appeal across age groups."

### **Seeing is believing**

For many, seeing -- or feeling -- is believing, which has led to an emphasis on grassroots marketing efforts, as well as a heavy emphasis on testimonials and instructional videos. Skechers' website, for example, features a lengthy infomercial extolling the virtues of Shape-Ups and demonstrating exercises and proper walking techniques. Skechers' efforts, which include Facebook promotion, testimonials and blog outreach, are not the norm for the brand, which typically relies on celebrities and traditional media channels.

Katie Neiman, a spokeswoman for FitFlop, says testimonials are at the core of the company's marketing, though it also embraces outdoor advertisements and consumer promotions.

Reebok, meanwhile, has been touring the country with samples for consumers to try on. And it has also tapped into popular digital portals such as SheKnows.com and Daily Candy. John Lynch, Reebok's head of U.S. marketing, said the company plans to give EasyTone plenty of marketing support in the coming year. "EasyTone is an important initiative for the brand and one which we believe has incredible potential," he said.

Across brands, basic shoes are priced between \$100 and \$110, while basic sandals range from \$50 to \$60. MBT and Ryn styles can cost as much as \$250 or \$300, however. Though some brands do offer men's styles, so far, the focus is on women. FitFlop plans to introduce a line for children in August.