

# FOOTWEAR PLUS

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## High Times

Ara launches highest heel yet for Spring '20.

**KNOWN FOR 70 YEARS** as being a leading comfort dress shoe brand, Ara is reaching new heights for Spring '20. As part of its Frauke collection in collaboration with German TV star Frauke Ludowig, Ara is releasing its highest heel yet.

"We have had great success with our pumps featuring our HighSoft construction, and we think women will love both the height and comfort they will find with the Frauke collection," says Sam Spears, president of Ara Shoes North America. "This collection exemplifies our goals to combine the highest quality and perfect fit with fashion forward design."

At 80 mm, or just over three inches, heels in the new collection stay within Ara's comfort ethos by using its HighSoft construction, which translates the feel of a running shoe through soft upper materials, flexible outsoles and padded insoles. For each pump, the heel counter wraps all the way around to just under the ball of the foot. The shoe is built around the counter, holding the foot in place for better stability. "These heels may not be typical Ara, but the fit, form and function is just like every other shoe in the collection," Spears says, adding, "Ara is owned by fifth generation shoemakers, and they make a shoe right."

HighSoft enables a bread-and-butter comfort brand like Ara to compete in a shrinking dress market, where customers demand both style and comfort. "We've had conversations with our customers and, while older, she doesn't want to be restricted to looking like how her mom looked when she was 55," Spears says. "Our women are looking for something that suits her lifestyle, wanting to look good and feel good, and not compromise one for the other."

In addition to the added heel height, the Spring '20 Frauke collection (\$210-\$225 SRP) will feature bright colors and sandal silhouettes introduced this spring. The versatility in colors and silhouettes is yet another step toward modernizing Ara, which is known best for its black dress shoes. "We've had this stereotype of being an East Coast dress shoe brand that sold primarily black shoes and Gore-Tex boots," Spears says. "Our Spring '19 collection looked like a peacock in comparison." Styles for Spring '20 include sport casuals in fun prints and pumps and ballerinas in bright colors. "People would walk by our booth and then back up, glance up at the brand name and then back at the booth because we were so bright," Spears adds.

The change in design direction has boded well for Ara, with this spring being the brand's single best sales season to date and Spring '20 bookings already showing signs of topping it. Spears reports its booth was buzzing at the recent FN Platform and all three days of the Toronto Shoe Show were booked. "At first we got a healthy dose of skepticism from buyers, but once we had them walking around in samples, they didn't want to take them off," Spears says. The increase in interest has encouraged Spears to ramp up marketing efforts. Spring '20 will see the launch of a redesigned website, facilitating independent retailer business with shop/finder systems and customer service to direct consumers to stores. "We have a fan base out there, we just need more women to discover Ara," Spears says. "Then the comfort sells itself." —*Aleda Johnson*

## Green Dreamer

OrthoLite adds sustainability expert to the team.



**CONTINUING ITS EFFORTS** to develop eco-conscious products, OrthoLite has hired Rob Falken as vice president of global innovation. With extensive experience in sustainable product development, Falken is the right fit for the industry's largest insole supplier. Going forward, OrthoLite will answer growing vendor and consumer demand for environmentally-friendly products.

"Since day one, we have prioritized sustainable processes and product, bringing solutions that give our brand partners the ability to address consumer demand for eco-conscious footwear," says CEO Glenn Barrett. "We know Rob Falken will be a huge asset as we work toward our ultimate goal of zero waste manufacturing."

Falken's resumé includes having conceptualized and developed the world's lightest and most buoyant flotation foam as well as 100 percent biodegradable and compostable alternatives to EPS for surfboards and watercraft. Since the early aughts, Falken has been working with flexible and rigid foam, including EVA, which ultimately led him to the footwear industry. "I branched into footwear as a contractor, gaining experience in sourcing, supply chain optimization and product development for a handful of large global shoe brands," he says, adding his interest in eco-friendly foam came by way of mixing natural fibers and composites to replace plastic-based foam—like the creation of an algae-based EVA foam. "My passion for innovation and sustainability go hand-in-hand," he says. "I won't invest my time and energy into developing something unless it will benefit either people or the planet, and preferably both."

Falken views the OrthoLite opportunity as a home run, for the industry and personally. "I'm absolutely thrilled to be a part of a company that prioritizes innovation in sustainability, and we're in a great position to make a huge impact as we develop new technologies," he says. OrthoLite's 400-plus brand partners worldwide offer a unique opportunity to do just that. "Through these relationships, our eco-friendly technology reaches hundreds of millions of consumers worldwide each year," Falken says. "Knowing that I have the ability to make such a tangible impact motivates me to invest the time and resources to really accelerate sustainable innovation and invention."

Thanks to OrthoLite's vertical integration model, solid infrastructure and strong financial footing, Falken has a strong foundation to start right out of the gate. "My job is to accelerate the development of new and innovative technologies in this space, and OrthoLite is uniquely positioned to continue to be a game changer in the industry," he says. In addition to the opportunity to make an impact, Barrett's management style and vision for OrthoLite's future was a key reason Falken jumped at the chance to work for the company. "Barrett leads by example, which is evident through the entire company," he says. "Joining the OrthoLite team is a dream opportunity for me." —*A.J.*