

Simple shoes leaps forward

Damian Joseph

Amid a boom in green style, Simple is launching BIO-D, a line of biodegradable EcoPure shoes that will dissolve after being buried in landfills.



Simple Shoes (DECK) has always been against something. When the company made its debut in 1991, it was against gaudy, futuristic sneakers and coveted logos. In 2005, it came out against using materials that trash the Earth. Both moves paid off handsomely, lifting sales. Now the subsidiary of Deckers Outdoors is turning against stuff that lasts longer than people do, with a line of biodegradable shoes set for next spring.

Rubber can take up to 1,000 years to decompose. Simple is cutting its lifespan to 20 years with its new EcoPure technology. Licensed from Bio-Tec Environmental, an Albuquerque, N.M., company, EcoPure is an organic compound with tiny microbes that eat away at the bonds that hold rubber, plastic, and EVA (a vinyl/rubber-like material) together. It works only under the hot and humid conditions of typical landfills and leaves behind nothing but dirt.



Simple is adding EcoPure to the soles of most of its shoes and flip flops, starting with a new line that highlights the technology: BIO-D. The company has plenty of reasons to think this will boost revenue. Its last green line—Earth-friendly shoes called Planet Walkers, which came out in 2008—helped push Simple's sales up by 27.4% last year, to \$17.2 million, from \$13.5 million in 2007.

Shipping boots to big retailers

National Sales Manager Brad Little hardly thinks Simple's eco-concern is the company's only reason for success. He says only 10% to 15% of its customers are green buyers. More important, he says, is designing shoes that are sufficiently good-looking that customers will pull them off a store shelf to begin with. "You have to compete on the same playing field as other companies—with materials and functions," he says. "If you're not on that level, sustainability isn't going to get you there."

Sales so far this year are flat for Simple, but Little attributes the dip to the sour economy. Traditionally, Simple has focused on lightweight sneakers, shoes, and flip flops, but stores such as Nordstrom (JWN) and Journeys (GCO) are ready to broaden their Simple Shoes selection to include heavier items such as boots. Last year, the shoemaker did well with the TOEest and PesTOE, two women's foldover boots that slightly resemble another of Deckers Outdoor company's biggest hits: UGGs.

Simple's moves come at a time when the entire market for eco-friendly clothing is growing. Both high-fashion designers and companies such as Patagonia and Sears (SHLD) have jumped in, offering products that work at the beach or boardroom. From organic and sustainable to recycled and recyclable, outfits are being constructed from all sorts of materials, even plastic water bottles. Check out some of the greenest, coolest clothes in our slide show looking at the latest in earth-friendly fashion.

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