

Bend Up Close: Dion Agee Builds Business With Sole

by K_Guice

Dion Agee, 38, has worked in retail for a dozen years. However, if anyone had told him he would own a fashion-forward shoe store when he first moved to Bend nearly two years ago, he wouldn't have believed you.

Dion Agee in his store, King of Sole Agee moved to Bend from Mammoth Lakes, California in November 2005 in search of his dream home. "I bought a home first and then couldn't find a job."

He thought with his wide range of management experience in various industries from commercial properties to retail it would be simple, "It wasn't as easy as I thought," he said.

When he couldn't find work, he decided to consider other options. "I switched focus from looking for a job to looking at starting my own business," Agee said.

He started looking around for a niche, something that the city needed. "There was a pretty wide consensus, there was no one really doing affordable, fashion shoes" he said. "So, I figured why not."

Agee decided he was going to make his own fate. "Or seal it," he jokes. "At least I knew right where I'd be for the next three years of my life."

Once he had made up his mind, Agee set forth putting together a business plan and searching for a name.

Finding the right name was vital and he was having a hard time finding a good fit. "Dion's Shoes just didn't have a ring to it," he jokes.

"I had been writing my business proposal and it was 3 or 4 a.m. in the morning and I couldn't go to sleep until I had a name," he recalled.

He laid in bed mulling over names: Bend Shoes, Fashion Shoes, Bend's Fashion Shoes. Then it came to him, King of Sole.

“I got out of bed when I had the thought and I wrote it down,” Agee said. “Then I thought, “Oh, someone has already got it.””

So he got online and started doing research. “To my surprise it was all available and I literally signed up for everything right then and there at 4 a.m. in the morning,” he said.

It wasn’t until the next day that he thought, maybe, he should get feedback from others. “So, I started calling people and ask what they thought of this,” he said.

Everyone loved it and Agee moved forward. He found a location on NW Wall St. and signed the lease in May of 2005.

From there he was the sole designer. Pun intended. He worked with a local artisan, Dave Custer to create the slick, steel sign and metal work around the store.

“Customers comment on how much they really like the layout and design of the store,” he said. “Aesthetically, it is a good looking store.”

Once he was happy with the backdrop it was time for the shoes. Keep in mind, Agee had never run a shoe store, but his customers would never know that.

He set out to find hundreds of fashionable shoes for women and men that were affordable and would rival the selection at Nordstrom.

On July 2nd the store opened with over 200 pairs of shoes from 25 different designers. “We have brands like: Chinese Laundry, Steve Madden, Restricted, Rocket Dog, Report, Groove, Kenneth Cole, BC and Mia, among other.”

“In general terms, it is the stuff you see in current fashion magazines, on celebrities, it is what women are wearing,” Agee said, “But it’s the affordable version.”

People tell Agee daily they are shocked at how reasonably priced his store is. "I have people who come in and say they have walked past the window for months and dared not come in thinking it was too expensive."

When they do come in and slip a pair on, they are happy to learn their new shoes will only cost them between \$19 and \$79.

The store also carries some accessories and imported chocolate.

Why chocolate in a shoe store? "As I was thinking about my main customer and imagining who they would be, the female shopper," Agee said.

"What does a woman like?" he asked himself. "Women like shoes and women like chocolate. So why not give them both in the same store?"

Agee wanted people to really enjoy their shopping experience. What better way to end a day of shopping than on a sweet note?

Some people don't get it," he said. "Others walk in and say, "Man, you are smart. You really understand women."

The store features chocolates from four countries, mainly with a focus on dark chocolate. "We have chocolate from France, Italy, Belgium and Germany," he bragged.

There are bite size treats from \$.40 to bigger bars for about \$4. "I often give a little sample size away with their shoe purchase," Agee said. "People get excited over it."

Seeing his customers happy has come to be one of the most rewarding aspects of his job. "One of my favorite things is when people are so excited they have to wear them out," he said.

"They actually ask, "Can I wear these out?" to which I always tell them, "Please do," he laughed. "It's like being a kid with your first new pair of shoes and you want to wear them home"

Looking back at the past year, while Agee wasn't originally drawn to retail, he says it has proven to be the right path.

"I think it is always hard to forecast your first year, it is always just a guess," he said. "But I think the store has performed better than I thought it would."

He has come a long way in a year and now he is focused on spreading the word and watching his business continue to flourish.

"I think I was meant to run my own business, I just needed to be in the right place at the right time and I was," Agee said. "I am very lucky."

Bend Weekly Newslink: www.KingOfSole.com

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