

# Kunitz Shoes Brings Show Biz to the Shoe Biz

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Kunitz Shoes in Alberta, Canada, has been serving up “Really Good Shoes,” since its doors opened in 1981. It was originally a children’s shoe store named “Kobbler King,” owned by husband-and-wife team, Dwane and Darlene Kunitz. A decade after opening, the business had established a following of regular customers and was ready for more growth – which came with exciting renovations, an expansion into adult shoes, and an exchange of the Kobbler King name. Dwane declared that the most successful stores were the ones that had the retailer’s name on them, and thus, Kunitz Shoes was established.

The store’s new name also inadvertently birthed its new tagline. Some customers didn’t know how to pronounce Kunitz, so began calling the business what it was – “the really good shoe store.” This influenced the brand’s long-standing tagline, “Really Good Shoes,” which came to represent their entire ethos for years to come.

Kunitz Shoes was passed down in the family and is now co-owned by Dwane and Darlene’s children, Morgan and Everett Kunitz. The brother-and-sister duo helped in the store as kids, and then took some time off in early adulthood to pursue overseas careers in the arts before returning to embrace ownership



of the store in 2015. What may seem like a complete career 360 actually resulted in a revolutionary fusion of theater and shoe retailing – a bold, wildly successful approach that transforms shoe shopping into a show-stopping performance.

## Setting the Stage

Kunitz Shoes currently has two simi-

larly sized locations in Edmonton. Their 5,500 square foot Southside store has been the nerve center and heart of their operation since 2000. This location has been expanded over time, growing into a retail shop with a beautiful selling floor designed with customers in mind – and a giant warehouse space for stock – all of which inspired a customer to dub it “the cathedral of shoe stores.”

Mid-pandemic, the Kunitz team was eager to propel their growth, and surveyed their customers to find out which area of the city could use more “really good shoes.” The resounding response was Edmonton’s West side, and in 2021, the doors opened at the new Kunitz Shoes West location.

“At the Southside store, customers loved seeing our extensive inventory and always exclaimed, ‘Look at all of



**Kunitz Shoes’ 5,500 square-foot Southside Edmonton location.**

## Kunitz Shoes' open concept West location.

these shoes!" Everett remembers.

Morgan chimes in, "People seeing our stock was our biggest asset, and we wanted to showcase it more at the new location. But, we didn't want it to have a discount feel. We needed to showcase our inventory but still have it look nice."

The Kunitz siblings know that trying something new can be the key to new success. After pursuing musical theater and ballet, they understood how to use performance and storytelling to surprise and delight an audience. With this unique perspective in mind, they designed the West store to "lift the curtain" on their business, giving customers a front row seat to not only an incredible selection of shoes, but also to the behind-the-scenes operations of Kunitz Shoes.

Everett describes the store as open concept, "with huge porticos that divide the stock spaces from the selling spaces. Customers can see our team walking through the shelving. We have beautiful, almost culinary-grade receiving tables so our shoppers can watch the operation happen."

Every detail in the new space was



selected to spotlight the shoe selling process as a production, including the lighting itself. Morgan explains, "We preserved beautiful fixtures from a previous location and used theatrical, warmer lighting on the sales floor to give the experience a high-end feel."

While browsing shoes, customers get to sit back and relax during their fitting – and enjoy the show. Everett gives an example: "We had 100 cases of Birkenstocks arrive the other day, and our customers got to be a part of the excitement of new products coming out on the floor as they were getting fitted."

Morgan adds, "We do our own product photography in-house, and the photography bench is visible to customers. They are able to watch the process and learn what it takes for us to get a shoe on our website."

In addition to experiencing what happens backstage at a shoe store, customers are able to browse Kunitz' selection of products, which Everett describes as incredibly deep. "We don't have every shoe for everything all of the time, but in the categories we do carry, we have a very deep selection. Style, comfort, and value must be represented in every piece of footwear that goes on the shelf. Our top-selling brands are **Rieker/Remonte**, **Birkenstock**, and our own private label. We have every season in Edmonton, including extreme and cold weather, which means people need a lot of shoes to live here, all tailored to specific weather and needs. We focus on depth within product instead of depth within brand."

## Engaging the Audience

A great performance captures the audience's attention, Kunitz Shoes focuses on creating a standing ovation experience.

Their typical customer is a woman aged 35-plus who travels, wants to be stylish, and knows what products



Everett and Morgan sling tasty treats – and deliciously colorful shoes – complete with a custom ice cream flavor at a local ice cream shop.

continued on page 24



## Kunitz Shoes continued from page 23

are worth. Morgan observes, “We can’t fudge the margin with them – they can tell what a product is worth when it’s in their hand. People traveling and online shopping are very savvy when it comes to what is popular and what has value.”

This means that Kunitz Shoes needs to stay savvy, too. They observed a trend of comfort footwear going athletic. Everett reflects, “We noticed that good quality, everyday leather footwear, such as a basic black leather shoe, was getting increasingly difficult to find. We started looking at smaller European factories and found good quality leather shoes in different categories, including dress and casual. We partnered with them to create our own private label products, and this has blossomed into over twenty percent of our business. This allows us to better serve our market by addressing needs for different products and having a tighter supply chain with less room for delays.”

“Once we had our own line, we started making customized products for Instagram,” Morgan shares. “Our ability to customize products, such as developing a fun, everyday collection to show that shoes for boring tasks don’t have to be boring, or collaborating with local indigenous artists or sports teams to customize a print, allows us to tell a story around the shoes that gives customers a reason to come in and something to talk about in the store.”

In addition to launching exciting new products, Kunitz Shoes also excels at developing fun ways to promote them. They regularly partner with local businesses to create collaborative, themed pop-up events, such as “Brews and Shoes,” which featured their shoes alongside a custom craft beer at a local brewery, and an ice cream pop-up, during which they dressed up like soda jerks from the 1950s and fitted shoes inside a local ice cream shop that developed



**Morgan pictured with a customized boot from the Kunitz Collection.**

a custom flavor to compliment Kunitz Shoes’ latest collection of products.

“Not only are these events a great way to connect with our customers and get out in our community, they’re wildly successful – and they also help us attract a larger audience by inviting people into a space they might not otherwise venture into,” enthuses Everett.

Morgan remarks, “At our local Folk Festival, we did custom laser engraving on Birkenstocks and sold over 300 pairs at full price. When our customers see us having fun with the business, buying shoes becomes fun.”

### Flipping the Script

Kunitz Shoes’ playful, innovative approach doesn’t stop with their custom products or pop-up events, it’s also how they approach their marketing.

They develop their own television ads with their in-house team, from ideation to production. “We produce the creative, write the storyline, and do our own photography and videography,” enthuses Morgan. “During a shoot, we’ll create content for commercials, get photos of our entire collection, and produce social media videos. We recently shot at a greenhouse in the fall with an ad that makes fun of the whole pumpkin spice life thing. Our ads are usually quirky and silly and fun – they have a bit of a

reputation.”

Everett muses, “Our careers in the arts gave us different creative ideas and work ethic. We know that once the curtain goes up, the show must go on. We are used to finding solutions and work-arounds on the fly – which helps us to be creative and try new things.”

“When you’ve been in the theater world, you’re so used to feedback. We’re not afraid of putting stuff out there that might fail. It’s how you find the most amazing ideas,” declares Morgan. “People are used to our creative ads, so they’re always pitching ideas to us. We sometimes ship shoes very far away, and my husband had the idea that we should create an ad about this. The next day, we received an order from a customer in Yellowknife. We called her to get permission to deliver her order in-person, and then Everett and I got on a plane and filmed content for an ad while hand-delivering her order, 900 miles away.”

### Secret to Success

In addition to their creative, arts-inspired mindsets, Everett says that data is one of the biggest drivers behind their store’s success. “Data in and data out is what allows us to thrive as a retailer. For a shoe to leave the store, it has to be ordered, received, photographed, and more. If the data isn’t in place, all branches will fail. Good, tight data control is

the biggest factor that has allowed us to try new things and be so creative. You can't have a pop up event without a POS. Every decision starts with a gut feeling, but should be backed up with good data."

Morgan laughs, "If we argue about something, we say we're just going to check the data. And usually we're both wrong, and the data is right."

She also attributes Kunitz Shoes' success to their adaptability and ability to be flexible. "Every day is a new day, and we're always thinking on our feet and solving problems as we go. You know what they say – the show must go on." ■



**Kunitz Shoes delights festival-goers with their Birkenstock Customization Station at Folk Fest.**