

Foot Solutions: "Doing Good Comes Back to You"

NANCY HULTQUIST



Ray Margiano

Many companies develop "signatures" —slogans, images, traditions—to help the public get to know them.

At Atlanta-based Foot Solutions, a company with 240 franchise operations, there's a traveling signature: a team of 25 runners who promote health, injury prevention and healing by running in marathons throughout the U.S. They compete in events anywhere that Foot Solutions has a franchise – and they use the marathons to help explain the Foot Solutions mission: helping people stay healthy through appropriate footwear choices.

Sue Bozgoz, a retired lieutenant colonel of the U.S. Army, coaches the Foot Solutions (FS) running team. She herself has run more than 50 marathons, and has helped thousands of runners become fit enough to compete. Back in September of 2006, Bozgoz was staffing a Foot Solutions booth at a marathon when she was approached by Mark "Dill" Driscoll, who wanted to talk with her about marathons. Driscoll's Atlanta-based company, ignition Inc., produces large events; at the time, he was planning a global marathon.

Bozgoz was intrigued enough to listen, and then to mention it to her boss, Foot Solutions CEO Ray Margiano. Margiano, too, was interested, and began researching the group Driscoll was working for: Blue Planet Run Foundation.

What he learned was that Blue Planet, a non-profit charity founded in 2002, intended to ensure that everyone in the world has safe drinking water. The global marathon was to be the first international event designed to start building public awareness and support toward their goal.

For Margiano, the cause was irresistible.

"We're involved in a number of different charitable efforts, so being involved and giving back is not new for us," he says. "But when I started doing research

Bottled Water: Aftereffects

Americans used 50 billion bottles of water in 2006, says Blue Planet Run Foundation. Of that number, 38 billion bottles were tossed away, unrecycled. It takes 1.5 million barrels of oil to produce 50 billion plastic bottles – the same amount of oil that could otherwise be used to fuel 100,000 cars for a year. It takes up to 1,000 years for disposable water bottles to decompose.

on the needs, and the number of people who don't have good drinking water or enough drinking water, I had to see the importance of what Blue Planet is work-

continued on page 14

Taeko Terauchi blazes through Escalante Canyon, Utah on behalf of safe drinking water worldwide.



Typical Projects

Blue Planet Run Foundation's Peer Water Exchange draws on field expertise, online communications, maps and local partners to build safe-water projects. Typical of the Foundation's first 135 projects are:

> Boqueron K'asa, Bolivia. The people of Boqueron K'asa want a water system. Last year, the municipality constructed two water storage tanks. The Blue Planet project is to finalize the drinking water system for the community. One public tap, 101 household taps, piping, spring capture and additional storage tanks will be built. In addition, residents will receive training in hygiene with an emphasis on hand-washing, and in operating and maintaining their water system. People impacted: 505. Cost: \$12,625.

> Port Loko District, Sierra Leone. Three schools in rural areas lack safe drinking water because wells are not working or have impure water. This project will create underground rainwater harvesting tanks for the schools, connecting the tanks to the school rooftops. Safer Future will teach the surrounding community how the tanks function and how to maintain the system themselves. School children impacted: 2,500. Cost: \$32,150.

> Maharashtra, India. Six identified villages and an estimated nine additional ones in a central arid region will be provided with a comprehensive water program that includes community organization, women's employment, education, and basic watershed development. Watershed Organization Trust will provide a system that eliminates the need for women to toil for several hours daily fetching water, by developing a source, overhead tank and gravity feed to community points in each village. People impacted: 5,000. Cost: \$100,621.



Foot Solutions is headquartered in Atlanta. To encourage fitness, the company sponsors a Nordic Pole Walking Team, which is excited at every opportunity to interest others and demonstrate techniques.

continued on page 14

Working from the bottom up.™



Inspired by nature.

Perfected by Vibram®.

Worn by everyone.



The success of Vibram has been built step by step on the conviction that the highest summits are reached without haste. Those who choose Vibram share this philosophy, which champions research and development. Vibram understands that real winning qualities are commitment, continuing research, and a pursuit for perfection.

WWW.VIBRAM.US • 1-800-VIBRAM7

Vibram® and the Yellow Octagonal Label are registered trademarks of Vibram S.p.A. of Italy. Quabaug Corporation, North Brookfield, MA is the North American manufacturer of Vibram soling products under exclusive license.

continued from page 12

ing toward. Millions of people are ill because they do not have access to safe water. Millions more do not have enough safe water to stay well. This is a really critical issue, and it's completely non-political. The objective over the next 20 years is to provide safe drinking water for 200 million people. How can you *not* want to help?"

Building a Track Record

Since its founding, Blue Planet Run has funded 11 non-government organizations (NGOs), which have begun or completed 135 sustainable safe water projects in 13 countries, providing clean water to an estimated 116,000 people. The Foundation works with user-friendly technology and local people, who take ownership in building, maintaining and running their new facilities and adopting the principles of safe drinking water, hygiene and sanitation. Much of the work is done via Peer Water Exchange, developed by Blue Planet Run Foundation as a grassroots online community where donors, NGOs and observers work together to manage and monitor rural water projects worldwide. The grassroots emphasis means there is no "bureaucracy" involved with the projects, which keeps operational costs down to a level that can be met by the Foundation's sponsors, and 100% of donations go directly to water projects around the world.

The first Blue Planet Run Foundation's global marathon began June 1, 2007, with a team of 20 runners, each taking 10-mile relay legs as they circled the globe. Their run covered 15,200 miles, through the U.S., Ireland, Scotland, England, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Austria, the Czech Republic, Poland, Belarus, Russia, Mongolia, China, Japan, and Canada. Runners ranged in age from 23 to 60; they ran for a total of 95 days, transported to their next baton exchange by car or airplane, courtesy of the Foundation's sponsors.

What Donations Fund

According to the Blue Planet Run Foundation, one out of every five people on the earth lacks safe drinking water. Nearly 2.2 million of them die each year as a result of water-borne illness—at a rate of 6,000 per day.

Blue Planet Run Foundation's goal is to bring safe drinking water to 200 million people by 2027. With corporate sponsors covering Foundation operating costs, all donations go directly to fund water projects. The Foundation tells potential donors ahead of time exactly what their contributions can do:

- > \$30 buys 500 bricks to line a well.
- > \$60 buys a cover to protect a well, so that water remains clean.
- > \$100 buys 2 kilometers (roughly one and a quarter miles) of pipe to deliver fresh water to a village.
- > \$250 buys a latrine for one family.
- > \$400 buys a shallow hand-dug well that serves 20 families.
- > \$1,000 buys a hand pump to pump well water (as opposed to lowering a bucket).
- > \$3,000 buys a rooftop system that collects water to serve an entire school.
- > \$5,000 buys a water tower that holds 7,000 gallons.
- > \$10,000 buys a complete water system for a village of 110 families.

Blue Planet Run Foundation emphasizes that, in the projects they fund, a \$30 donation can create safe drinking water for one person for the rest of his or her life. The Foundation is not providing band-aids, or shipping water in to temporarily solve problems. Instead, the Foundation is creating sustainable, low-tech solutions that will last a lifetime because the communities they serve are taught not just how to use them but how to maintain them – and the benefits to the community are clear.

For more information, visit www.blueplanetrun.org.



Women in India carve terraces to help in the capture of rainwater.

Photo courtesy of Rajesh Shah, Blue Planet Run Foundation.

Why a global relay marathon? The idea was to create an event that could capture the interest of people from every walk of life, on a worldwide scale. Running, as a fundamental method of transportation, and part of every culture, offered a globally understood symbol.

Supporting the Marathon

Foot Solutions provided support for the marathon in a variety of ways. "We sent poster materials to our franchises, and water bottles with information about creating safe drinking water. We handed out brochures and DVDs at events, and actively promoted the Run as a grassroots approach to making a difference. Many of our franchises became involved. They invited people to baton-passing events, and sent information to customers, and volunteered to serve as donation collection sites."

Foot Solutions helped select the runners, and even provided two from its own team. The company also did biomechanical analyses of the runners, and provided them with shoes and footwear

The Foot Solutions Store

Foot Solutions stores are independently owned, but provided with strong support by the franchiser. The typical FS store is located in an upscale strip center and has a population base of at least 100,000 within reasonable driving distance. It is open 5 1/2 days a week, during standard office hours, with Sundays and holidays off. It employs 2-3 people during its first year, with staff increasing as business grows.

Each store carries a core inventory required by the franchise, and a secondary inventory that covers regional and seasonal needs. At the corporate level, Foot Solutions employs a buying group and a review group that work the shows and make product decisions; individual franchisees receive invitations to participate in the buying and review panels. Stores have the option of purchasing additional inventory from a list of products and vendors that the franchise maintains.

Foot Solutions stores focus on adults looking for comfort and help with foot problems. Each store does special orders as needed.

"We're very focused on what we do," says CEO Ray Margiano. "We do not try to be every thing to every body."

products. And as a company, Margiano committed to donating \$10 for every custom orthotic Foot Solutions sells through the end of 2007, to be used for new water projects.

"I really like it that the money goes to the projects, not to staff the organization," Margiano says simply. "They work to keep overhead down, and they let people know that the contribution they are making goes to do what they intend it to do."

Margiano plans to stay involved with Blue Planet Run. Planning will begin in early 2008 for the next global marathon, which will take place in 2009, and go over a different route, including some different countries. "We hope to build momentum and grassroots support," Margiano says. "We don't expect this effort to be an overnight sensation."

Other sponsors include Dow, the chemical and R&D giant; Motorola, the international communications and

continued on page 16



David Christof dodges the crowds in busy Beijing, China.

© 2007, Chris Emerick, Blue Planet Run Foundation.

continued from page 15

Photo courtesy of Rajesh Shah, Blue Planet Run Foundation.



Young girls in Nicaragua try out their new water pump, installed in a BPR-funded project implemented by NGO El Porvenir (roughly, The Future).

wireless products company; Skype, which provides voice and video conferencing; and PayPal, the mobile payments processing pioneer.

Small Donations Make Big Difference

"Foot Solutions is certainly not in the same category as Dow Chemical," laughs Margiano, "but we can provide a lot of help in generating awareness. The objective in our involvement was to make reach-out reasonable. We wanted to help reach out to the masses of everyday people, not asking for big contributions, but looking for ways to simplify the process of making a small contribution. Blue Planet Run has an ambitious goal, but with a lot of individuals helping just a little, this is a way to make a major difference."

Foot Solutions is Margiano's second international franchise operation. His first was Heel Quick, a shoe repair franchise that included more than 700 locations in 34 countries. That led him into

the pedorthic marketplace. As he started visiting foot orthotic labs and facilities, and attending pedorthic meetings, a lot of the places he saw seemed dingy and dark.

"My idea was to bring things out of the back room and into the front, where

between the orthopedic stores and the comfort stores. We're able to bring a lot of knowledge to the table and work with customers who have problems and need time, but who also want to look fashionable. We're not high fashion and never will be, but we do spend at least 30 minutes, often 45, with the average customer."

4 per month, and Margiano expects to more than double the company's size within the U.S. in the next five years. He also figures to add five new countries a year to his operation, gradually building to 300+ outside the U.S.

Bridging Two Areas

As Margiano sees it, his company is "bridging two different areas. We fall right in



blue planet run
FOUNDATION

we could fit people properly and have consistency," Margiano explains. He began planning Foot Solutions in 1995, and rolled out the first store in October 2000. Currently, Foot Solutions operates in three countries, and has signed agreements for locations in 13 additional nations. Stores are opening at a rate of

Margiano requires Foot Solutions employees to take extensive training so they can assist their customers properly. "We focus on the people that most shoe stores really don't want to serve," he notes, "people with problems, who need time and expertise to solve those problems. It's knowledge of the people's

needs and bringing together an assortment of products that allows us to be a one-step solution to customers, whether its foot problems, or foot-related problems further up the musculoskeletal chain.”

According to Margiano, there are approximately 30 million runners in the U.S. “That’s a huge potential marketplace out there,” he notes. “We sell gear to athletes, to reduce their risk of injury. We want to be involved in how people can help themselves stay in the game longer. We provide education, and it’s paid off with a lot of people coming in to our stores. But that’s not really what it’s about. We’re out there to promote health and wellness, to help cut back the obesity epidemic and help people stay healthy.”

Emphasis on Education

In fact, Foot Solutions targets 18 health areas, ranging from heel pain to diabetes to arthritis to sport injuries. The company’s website provides information on symptoms and invites people with problems to seek help with their footwear. Foot Solutions has an education center in Atlanta, which is headed by William Faddock, DPM., C.Ped.

“We have a number of talented educators on staff,” Margiano says proudly, “and our facility was ranked Number 1 in terms of pass rate among people taking the pedorthic certification exam.” The center holds classes every month for franchisees and employees, and also opens up three times a year to people outside the company. In addition to teaching shoe fitting and modifications, Faddock’s team is establishing four advanced classes to be offered yearly, which go well beyond shoe fitting basics.

Foot Solutions’s national running team is a large part of the company’s educational outreach. Runners take part in events wherever Foot Solutions has stores. They set up tabletop exhibits, bringing in biomechanical evaluation



Kids at the Kansas City exchange point touch the baton that the Blue Planet Run team carried around the world.

equipment along with orthotics and arch supports and other devices to show people how their footwear affects what they’re doing. They talk up Nordic pole walking, encouraging adults to become more active, lose weight or feel healthier. They also go to schools and talk with students whenever possible. As Margiano says, “Kids look up to athletes, and they don’t have to be professional athletes. Athletes at every level can reach out to help people take better care of themselves and *feel* better.”

Foot Solutions also works with the American Diabetes Association, and with other outreach programs that are committed to helping people. As Margiano puts it, “If everybody contributes a little—and it really can be just a ‘little’ when you have everyone taking part—it makes change possible. Doing good comes back to you. Even if it’s just a simple gesture, it comes back. The world needs more of that.” ■