

Success Story: Akerman Shoes

By [Paul Anthony Arco](#), senior staff writer // [Spring-Summer 2013](#)

Discover a Rockford-based business that has spent 53 years giving customers its heart and sole, in the pursuit of quality service.



Gary Akerman helps longtime customer Frances Scalise to select a comfortable-fitting shoe. (Christin Dunmire photo)

The late Edgar Akerman was known for the careful attention he gave to people who came in search of just the right pair of shoes.

“He might have had one customer, but he had 15 boxes out,” says his son, Gary Akerman. “He was very outgoing and always dedicated to his customers.”

It was Edgar who founded Akerman Shoes, 1613 N. Alpine Road, Rockford, an independent shoe store that’s been part of the local business community for 53 years. He died 10 years ago, but his business lives on, thanks to son Gary, who’s president of the company and oversees a staff of six. Gary’s brother, Kent, joined the business 2.5 years ago after a career in machine shop work. Another brother, Jeff, worked in the family business until his death in 1984.

Before moving to Rockford, Edgar Akerman co-owned a shoe store in Oskaloosa, Iowa, for 15 years. In 1960, he opened Akerman Shoes in the Rockford Trust Building. He eventually moved to South Church Street, before relocating to East State Street in 1980.

These days, the store is located at the Edgebrook Mall, directly behind Mary’s Market, a location Gary considers ideal.

“We’re in business to keep customers happy and satisfied,” says Gary, who ‘dabbled’ in the family business as a young man, after working as a service representative for 3M Manufacturing. He joined his father full-time in 1985.

“It was a good time to join,” he says. “Dad wasn’t sure what he was going to do with the business. When I got involved, we expanded the lines, picked up new brands and remodeled the store. Today, we’re meeting a need in the community for people who are looking for a high-quality pair of shoes. It’s worked out well.”

Akerman Shoes sells a variety of brands, including SAS, New Balance, Birkenstock, Dansko, Naturalizer, Florsheim, Rockport, Hush Puppies, Evans and Daniel Green. It also carries accessories like socks and handbags, and Canadian-made winter boots by Toe Warmers.

In the early years, Akerman’s success was built largely on orthopedic shoes that featured padded removable foot beds, wide toe boxes and arch supports essential to customers with foot problems. “My father started out selling shoes that had no fashion,” Gary says. “He started expanding lines, which helped to grow business, prompting him to move a couple of times. He was always pleased with the way things were going.”

Most of Akerman’s customers are 40 or older, and in the market for comfortable shoes. “I don’t carry high-heel shoes,” Gary says. “They haven’t come out with a comfortable high-heel pair of shoes. Your feet don’t hurt when you’re young. As you age, your feet expand, and it’s difficult to find a shoe that fits your foot. When you find something, you get spoiled, and you tend to stick with shoes that feel good.”

Nearly 85 percent of Akerman’s customers are women, and many are longtime fans of the store. They come from as far away as Janesville, Dixon and Freeport. But they don’t just shop for themselves.

“Many women come in to buy a pair of shoes for their husbands,” Gary says. “Surprisingly, it works out quite well most of the time.”

When a customer finds a style of shoe that fits her well, she often buys it in more than one color.

The biggest change, over the years, has been the customer’s desire for comfortable, casual shoes, says Gary. Leather soles are out, having been replaced by synthetic leather, and dress shoes aren’t as popular as they once were. “Thinner soles may look more stylish, but you lose the comfort,” Gary says. “Shoes can look good, but they wear out and lose their support.

“Shoes are like tires on your car – it depends on how you drive,” he says. “The way some people walk or the way they’re built, they can tear a shoe up in six months.” The same shoes, on a different person, may last for years.

The shoe business is cyclical. Spring is a busy time, but sales slow in midsummer. Business picks up again in the fall, when new product lines are released, but it comes to a grinding halt when the first snow starts to fly. “People tend to weather the winter and hang onto their shoes until spring,” Gary says.

Many independent shoe stores have gone out of business. “There are just a couple of us left,” Gary says. “Big-box stores only carry medium widths. We sell AAAA to EEEEE. We go up to a size 20.”

Despite economic swings and changing customer tastes, Gary has never worried about keeping his doors open. He and his staff just keep satisfying their customers every day. Customers know Akerman’s is as reliable as ... well, an old shoe.

“All you can do is sell what you have and let people know that you have quality products,” says Gary. “And let them know you’re available when they need you.”

Most of Akerman’s shoes are made in the U.S., Canada and Germany. They vary in price. “When you put stability, comfort or cushion in a shoe, you’re going to get a quality shoe,” says Gary. “There are shoes on the market that are cheaper, but they don’t have extra features or support. You get what you pay for.”

Gary offers a few basic tips to shoe shoppers. “Ask yourself how often you’re going to wear them and for what occasions,” he says. “Be sure the shoe is wide enough. The side-to-side fit of the shoe should be snug, not tight. You don’t want them too tight and you don’t want them too loose.”

To avoid painful problems, carefully consider the shape and size of your feet. Shoes should conform to the shape of your feet; your foot should never be forced to conform to the shape of a shoe. Shoes that are too narrow or too wide can lead to blisters and calluses. Gary receives calls every day from potential customers who are looking for comfortable shoes that won't cause corns or other foot maladies. He works closely with local podiatrists.

"It's professionally rewarding when customers come in with sore feet and walk out smiling because they feel so much better," Gary says.

Without question, that's how his father felt all those years. Edgar Akerman worked up until the day he died. And at 88, he still had a soul for shoes.

"The customers always came first to my dad," Gary says. "They're important to us, too. I think he would be proud."

As for working as long as his father did, Gary can't make that prediction. But he has no plans to go anyplace soon.

He says: "As long as people need our shoes, we'll be here."



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