

Bad Economy Boosts Shoe Repairs

By JOCELYN ANDERSON

NEW YORK — Shoe repair shops are one of the few businesses reaping the benefits of a down economy.

Most of the country's 7,000 stores have seen a bigger-than-usual spike this winter, according to industry insiders.

"You will tend to see it when there are recessions. During tough times, people tend to conserve more," said Jim McFarland, spokesman for the Shoe Service Institute of America and owner of McFarland's Shoe Repair in Lakeland, Fla. "That's one way of conserving."

At Brooks Shoe Service in Chicago, business for 2008 was up about 10 percent over the previous year, and the store expects

2009 to be more prosperous.

"Now that times are tough — this is the worst economic downturn I've had in my 52 years — people are looking for ways to save money," said owner Mike Morelli. "This business is adversely reactive to the economy. The worse it gets [out there], the better it gets [for us]."

Morelli said most customers are bringing in expensive shoes in an effort to avoid buying new pairs, while some are taking preventive measures to extend the lives of their shoes.

Nick Valenti, owner of B. Nelson Shoes in New York, said he also has seen solid demand, with more people wanting to repair their shoes rather than buy new ones. Still, he acknowledged that traffic levels have been scattered because there are fewer

consumers working. "People are getting laid off, so it's hard to figure out."

Mail-order shoe repair is also becoming more popular, with many stores offering their services online.

"Our site has gotten about 2,000 hits [this winter], while all summer long it probably didn't even hit 1,000," said Tony Hill, owner of Hoover Shoe Repair in Hoover, Ala.

Considering the online opportunities, some shoe vendors have gotten into mail-order repair. Allen Edmonds' "recrafting" program allows customers to send in their shoes to be rewelted, resoled, reheel and refinished.

"Relative to shoe sales, we've definitely noticed an increase," said Paul Grangaard, CEO of Allen Edmonds. "What's happened is sales of new shoes have been challenged in

the last two months, but the recrafting has stayed very strong."

Mephisto offers a similar service for its shoes and sandals. Michael Crosno, CEO of Mephisto USA, noted that the repair program was even more important during this difficult economic time.

"It's a long-term approach to building loyal customers," said Crosno. "It's not a quick sale. Once we build that loyal customer, we become the shoe of preference when they go back in the marketplace to buy."

Crosno added that the Mephisto refurbishment gives consumers the chance to get a virtually new pair of shoes for a fraction of the original purchase price (\$50 to \$140 compared with more than \$400 for some of the originals).