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## MICHIGAN'S MAVERICK

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Retail  
Spot-  
light

The Elite Mr. Alan's retail chain has ditched the traditional playbook — and the sneaker world is taking notice. **By Riley Jones**

Retail is in a difficult moment, but don't tell that to Elite Mr. Alan's CEO Jacob Bishop.

At a time when the footwear industry often feels sluggish and stale, the Michigan-based retailer is thriving by transforming the age-old shopping experience, engaging its customers through technology and storytelling, and giving back to the community with philanthropic efforts.

"The traditional guys who are just selling commodity-type products are having a harder time," Bishop said, "but I believe the retailers who are focused on customer experience are growing and having a lot of success right now."

Elite Mr. Alan's used to be one of those "traditional guys." The retailer, formerly known as Mr. Alan's Shoes & Sportswear, was founded in Southfield, Mich., in 1974 by Bishop's father, Alan — whom Bishop calls one of his

biggest mentors.

Growing up, Bishop and his brother, Adam, shared an affinity for the footwear business. But rather than follow in their father's footsteps, the brothers launched in 2007 Soles Inc., a high-end sneaker boutique in Florida. It quickly became a go-to spot for celebrities, thanks to its close proximity to a recording studio owned by hip-hop artist Pharrell Williams.

"That's what gave us a little wind in our sails, so we had a lot of momentum going there," Bishop said.

In 2012, Bishop decided to take his newfound business acumen back

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JACOB BISHOP, ELITE MR. ALAN'S

to Michigan, merging the Soles Inc. brand with Mr. Alan's Shoes & Sportswear. The company began to evolve, kicking off a lengthy growth period that's seen it become one of Michigan's premier athletic destinations.

During the merger, Bishop and his team gutted every location they had, remodeling the stores from the ground up and calling upon local manufacturers and suppliers for fixtures. "The Detroit economy at the time was down, so supporting the local manufacturers was important to us," Bishop said.

Growth was swift and sizable. The brand has doubled in both store count and revenue since 2014, according to Bishop. And in 2016, Mr. Alan's Shoes & Sportswear rebranded as Elite Mr. Alan's, boasting 14 locations throughout Michigan. It also continues to operate other doors throughout the country (see sidebar).

Along the way, the retailer has fostered strong relationships with vendors, including Fila and Starter, and gained access to highly sought-after exclusive product, such as Kanye West's Adidas Yeezy Boosts.

The store's rapid growth also caught the attention of Nike, which chose Elite Mr. Alan's as one of a handful of retailers to stock its 2016 Doernbecher Freestyle Collection. With proceeds benefiting Portland's Doernbecher Children's Hospital, the annual Nike collections consist of sneakers designed by patients and are in high demand among retailers and consumers alike.

"Elite Mr. Alan's is a key retail destination serving the Detroit consumer with a premium customer experience," said Nike communications manager Heter Myers. "Additionally, the store's leadership team has a deep connection and commitment to fostering meaningful change in the larger community, including fundraising support for clean water in Flint, Mich., school supply giveaways and more."

Angelo Parenti, vice president of Fila Heritage North America, echoed Myers' enthusiasm: "Elite Mr. Alan's is a partner that allows us to amplify our brand efforts in a region of the country that is very meaningful for us."

Going forward, Bishop has even bigger aspirations. In 2017, Elite Mr. Alan's aims to open 14 new locations, including its first store in Chicago.

"Today's customer is smarter, they're more sophisticated and they get information a lot faster than they ever did," he said. "As a retailer, it's our challenge to try to keep up with them."

### AN ELITE TRIO

The three retail brands under Elite Mr. Alan's umbrella:

**Elite Mr Alan's:** High-end sneaker boutique serving Michigan with 14 locations throughout the state. Specializes in customer experiences and hard-to-find shoes.

**Soles Inc.:** Florida-based sneaker boutique known for its famous clientele with four locations in the state. Founded in 2007.

**Pogo:** High-end athletic retailer specializing in women's product. One door in Birmingham, Mich., with plans to expand to five locations. Founded in 2011.

