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Kizik's Hands-Free Tech Is Coming to New Balance

As demand grows for slip-on sneakers, HandsFree Labs is bringing its technology to one of the world's biggest footwear brands.

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Kizik parent company HandsFree Labs has announced a licensing deal with New Balance to incorporate its step-in shoe technology into the brand's sneakers, with the first shoes expected to launch in the spring of 2027. The collaboration comes amid increasing consumer demand for sneakers that can be slipped on and off without bending over or tying and untying the laces.

The partnership with New Balance took more than a year to come together, according to Gareth Hosford, CEO of HandsFree Labs and Kizik. “Integrating a mechanical innovation into footwear isn’t something you rush; it requires close engineering collaboration, product testing, and alignment on how the technology fits within a brand’s product roadmap,” he says. “Both teams took the time to ensure the result meets New Balance’s performance and design standards while leveraging the hands-free technology platform developed by HandsFree Labs to deliver a truly seamless step-in experience.”

Founded by serial entrepreneur and inventor Mike Pratt, HandsFree Labs sells its own step-in sneakers under the name Kizik. The casual shoes became a quick hit with busy parents and travelers passing through TSA checkpoints.

Pratt previously co-founded the athletic bag company Ogio, which he sold to Callaway Golf for \$75.5 million in 2017. That same year, he

create hands-free shoes with the fit and support of traditional footwear.

“From the beginning, we viewed hands-free technology as a platform innovation, not just a feature for a single footwear brand,” Hosford says. HandsFree Labs holds or has pending more than 200 patents, employs a full-time patent attorney, and runs an innovation lab at its Linden, Utah headquarters, where teams develop and test new materials and designs.

The company’s business model “combines startup-style innovation with industry-scale reach,” Hosford says.

“Our owned brand, Kizik, allows us to bring innovations directly to consumers, validate them in the market, and continuously improve the technology,” he continues. “Licensing through HandsFree Labs then enables that innovation to scale through global brands that already have deep distribution, performance credibility, and distinct consumer audiences.”

The majority of HandsFree Labs’ revenue currently comes from Kizik, but licensing is becoming a significant portion of the business, Hosford says. The partnership with New Balance marks the company’s third licensing deal. It also has partnerships with tactical

which also invested an undisclosed sum in HandsFree Labs in 2019.

Hosford says the company's growing list of partners won't create conflicts with one another or with Kizik's core business. "We think about the technology more like an ingredient platform than a finished product. Our partners design shoes that reflect their own brand DNA, consumer base, and product categories," he says. "Our patent portfolio allows us to adapt the hands-free mechanics to each use case, which naturally results in different product experiences."

"At the same time, we're intentional about how we structure our IP," he adds. "While we license elements of our technology to partners, we also retain certain patents and proprietary innovations exclusively for Kizik."

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Kizik hit No. 407 on the Inc. 5000 in 2024—and by then it was generating more than \$100 million in annual sales. But the company's success hasn't come without speedbumps: HandsFree Labs is currently suing Sketchers for patent infringement in the United States and Europe.

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