

Editorial

Our Market Is Swayed by Outside Factors More Than We Think

For the past six months we've been hearing that our industry is not experiencing the dramatic downturn that other markets have felt. When asked what to attribute our relative stability to, a common answer is that the industry is immune to the negative factors affecting the economy.

Indeed, the industry tends to operate in a bubble. We consider ourselves unique and therefore independent of outside influence. We believe in our he-

roes, the Levis and Lances of the cycling world, and that they will inspire others like us to continue buying bikes despite a change in income or savings. We trust that those that speak our language of grams and millimeters will be swayed by that next design improvement.

But what little evidence we can glean from industry statistics suggests these aren't the people driving retail sales right now. In fact, it's consumers whose motivation is unrelated to bicycling that

are buying. Increasing concern over the environment, health issues and urban congestion is creating a new type of consumer that's inspired by passions outside of our sport.

It would seem that the industry is not as insulated as we might think. Rather, the case may be that we, too, are being pushed down by negative economic changes but other positive trends are keeping us afloat.

To take advantage of outside trends,

we must break out of our shell and identify potential partners. We need to create relationships with health organizations, environmental organizations and parent groups. We ought to look for new opportunities to promote our products such as health fairs, organic living publications and health food stores.

If we hope to balance economic pressures with social movements, we have to accept that we are part of a larger community and immerse ourselves in it.

Guest Editorial

Forge Local Alliances to Build Political Punch of Multiple Shops

BY ALAN SNEL

Tampa bike commuter Picot Floyd couldn't believe it. A developer had extended a traffic island from a side street into the bike lane along a road he took to work outside Tampa, Florida.

Floyd contacted SWFBUD (South West Florida Bicycle United Dealers) for help.

As SWFBUD director, I got Floyd's call and then biked that road the same day. Floyd was right: the concrete island that was extended into the bike lane forced cyclists to veer into the traffic lane. I called the county and two days later the developer called me. He apologized and promised to remove it. A week later, the bike lane was clear and safe again.

Welcome to the advocacy world of

SWFBUD. I organized this coalition of Tampa Bay stores so we can lobby with one unified voice to grow bicycling in our market and to also organize a festival, the Bicycle Bash by the Bay. SWFBUD has eight shops and one lawyer.

Each member store pays a monthly fee for me to represent their collective voice. Instead of one dealer speaking at meetings or writing a letter, we have the political punch of multiple shops.

SWFBUD recently:

- Lobbied Tampa City Council to build more bike lanes and appoint a bicycle point person.
- Asked the Hillsborough County Commission to extend the Upper Tampa Bay Trail to connect with the Suncoast Trail to create the longest continuous trail in Florida.

- Requested the Tampa-Hillsborough Express Authority to close the upper deck of its toll highway on early Sunday mornings to allow bicyclists.

- Convinced a regional transportation authority to include pictures of bicyclists in all brochures, fliers and Web sites and lobbied it to include bicycle facilities at all transit stations.

- Prompted the Tampa Police Assistant Chief to advise police to cease stopping bicyclists from crossing the Gandy Bridge, which connects Tampa and St. Petersburg.

Now I am exporting the SWFBUD model to other regions. I am looking for markets where bike dealers would like to work together to lobby for improved bicycling conditions and possibly put on a bicycle festival.

Local dealer groups like a SWFBUD can identify issues, plot a game plan and execute a lobbying/advocacy schedule.

Local dealers need to transcend competitive concerns. Uniting behind a single banner will give dealers a political edge at town hall or at the county commission meeting when it comes to building bike trails, striping bike lanes, improving bicycle facilities and playing the role of bicyclist watchdog. The bottom line: customers won't buy your products unless they feel there are safe places to use them. That's why bike dealers need to forge political bonds.

If you are interested in discussing how a SWFBUD alliance can be adapted to your market, contact Alan Snel at alansnel@yahoo.com or (813) 468-0064.