

Dallas–Ft Worth Dealer Tour



Leading-Edge Texas Retailers Shore Up Strong Recreational Market



One thing Dallas-Fort Worth is not: a commuter market. The distance between the two major city centers spans some 35 miles and the entire surrounding Metroplex encompasses a whopping 14,000 square miles.

The vast distances alone make it extremely difficult to commute by bike. That, combined with wide roads with no bike lanes or shoulders, discourages even the most seasoned road warriors (see advocacy story page DT-20).

“Dallas-Fort Worth is not very user-friendly—you have to really be dedicated. This is not Portland or Minneapolis where people are doing a lot of commuting,” said Steve Mattil, vice president of bike for Dallas-based distributor Hans Johnsen Company. “People here are more recreational minded than commuter minded.”

What Dallas lacks in commuting business, it makes up in strong

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Leading-Edge

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recreational business. Storeowners in Dallas can thank local paved trails for much of that business. Retailers visited on the BRAIN Dealer Tour last month reported strong sales of hybrids that they attributed largely to the popularity of the Katy Trail, the White Rock Creek Trail and White Rock Lake, which offers a popular recreational road loop for cyclists of all levels.

"To be in a metro area like this and have a resource like that for cycling is amazing," said Bicycles Plus store manager Dallas Perry of nearby White Rock Lake.

Wet Weather

Over the course of three days of shop visits, we got a rare taste of wet weather. But despite a year-round cycling climate, rain has a big influence on retailers here.

After heavy rains, mountain bike trails close for three to four days. Volunteer trail stewards with the Dallas Off-Road Bicycle Association manage and encourage respect for the trails.

The local soil is caliche clay that doesn't tolerate water well. "It's like peanut butter," said Jim Hoyt, owner of Richardson Bike Mart. According to Hoyt, a rainy Saturday can mean a difference of \$60,000 in sales compared to a dry Saturday.

For Hoyt, it's a matter of waiting for a sunny weekend to recoup lost sales. For others, the fragile trail conditions have dictated a change in business strategy.

Mad Duck Cyclery sold primarily mountain bikes until two years ago when trails were under water for most of the winter. "You really can't ride wet trails here because it's clay. We really had to diversify," said co-owner Clarence Muller.

Local Legacy

Longstanding retailers in the Dallas market have been under the same ownership going back as long as 30 years. The legacy of many of the major players goes back to the Schwinn era.

Hoyt relocated to the Dallas area in 1971 to rep for Schwinn. "My job was to get lawn mowers out of bike shops," said Hoyt. During ten years as a regional rep he was responsible for a territory that opened a dozen Schwinn Total Concept stores.

Among his customers was Plano Cycling and Mower, which he worked with over an eight year period as the Schwinn territory sales rep. Now renamed Plano Cycling and Fitness, it's a market anchor that's been in the Gurney family since 1973.

Bicycles Inc. owner Lee Ericson opened his first store 30 years ago and along the way snapped up a Schwinn shop as part of its expansion into a four-store chain.

And Hoyt left Schwinn in 1980 to purchase one of five Bike Mart locations from its previous owner. Richardson Bike Mart carried Schwinn for years as it ascended into a position of market leadership.

These mega stores dominate the competitive Dallas retail landscape. With sizes ranging from 26,000 square feet at Bicycles Inc., to 36,000 square feet at Richardson Bike Mart, they are some of the largest shops in the country.

Along with size and selection, shops like Richardson Bike Mart and Plano Cycling take merchandising and design cues from mainstream retailers. Aware they're competing with national chains, they offer inviting, well-merchandised clothing and accessory sections that capture best-in-class approaches.

"There are a lot of guys running not just a good bike business, but running a good retail business," said Hans Johnsen's Mattil.

"You saw a lot of good retailers that know that they're competing with other interests and people looking for their dollars. They've got to have an environment on the leading edge of retail. For some of those shops it doesn't matter if they're a bike business or a fishing business; they've got a good handle on how to appeal to consumers."

Newer shops in the area have tried to differentiate themselves by focusing on high-end products and offering customization. Owners of boutique shops such as Mad Duck Cyclery and Knobies and Slicks are corporate dropouts from the thriving telecom industry in Dallas that includes companies like AT&T, Verizon and Nortel.

Like established shops in the area, they bring an emphasis on sales and customer service tools gained from a former life. And they welcome the low-key lifestyle of the retail business. "This is long hours, but it's not stressful," said Bud Zarsk, owner of Knobies and Slicks.

Richardson's Hoyt said he's seen a lot of storeowners exit the market over the years that didn't have the stamina needed to engage the market. But he welcomes newcomers that maintain pricing and bring retail integrity.

"I want to see more strong independent retailers because it makes the whole pie bigger and then everybody's in better shape," Hoyt said. —*Megan Tompkins*