

Define What Sets You Apart and Create a Plan to Improve On It

Among the Top 100 Bicycle Retailers, the only consistency appears to be the lack of it. When asked what set them apart, every retailer on the 2007 list gave a unique answer.

Each of the Top 100 retailers excelled in at least one area, whether it was providing skilled mechanic service, expert fittings or knowledgeable sales help.

Some backed up sales with incentives ranging from satisfaction guarantees, to low-price guarantees to extended warranties.

Many engaged in the community by providing in-store clinics, sponsoring Tour contests, supporting local charity rides or leading group rides. Others

supported local advocacy efforts.

When it came to product, some stores specialized in categories such as road bikes, mountain bikes or family products. Others diversified into multi-sport or fitness products. For some, success meant partnering with a major supplier and reducing inventory, while for others it meant diversifying vendors and offering a wide selection.

Some shops relied on longevity within the community and multi-generation ownership to succeed. Newcomers made headway by creating new business models and taking novel approaches.

For many shops, success hinged on

their people. Retailers reported having staff employed for more than 10 years. Some emphasized that employees are enthusiasts who live and breathe the cycling lifestyle; others stressed that employees come from all walks of life, not just cycling.

Most retailers focused on satisfying their customers' needs above all else.

Despite the variety of answers, what is common amongst the Top 100 is their recognition of their strong suits and efforts to constantly improve in those areas.

You may not be a Top 100 retailer, but you can strengthen your business by creating a strategy for continuous

improvement.

Find your strengths: What do customers come to you for? What makes you different from other bike shops?

Develop goals: Once you've determined your strengths, set goals to improve in those areas or other areas. Make your entire staff aware of and committed to achieving those goals.

Improve: Focus on making continuous and incremental improvements to help you reach your goals.

As in any business, setting benchmarks for improvement helps in reaching goals. The trick is sticking with those goals. But as any Top 100 retailer will tell you, those that do, find success.

Guest Editorial

Consumers' Voices are Silent but Present in Top 100 Voting

BY JJ RUDMAN

One of our goals for the Top 100 Bicycle Retailer voting is to have a public, fair, repeatable and quantifiable methodology. For those not familiar with the voting, more than a dozen of the top original equipment and accessory manufacturer sales reps cast votes for the top three retailers in their territories in three criteria: market share, community outreach and store appearance. Retailers also contribute to the list and may vote for the best retailer in their state and nationally.

We always look to improve upon our methodology and welcome input from the entire industry. One of the more common suggestions we receive is to include consumer voting. Unfortunately, cost and feasibility to survey a truly representative, random and sta-

tistically significant sample of specialty bicycle store consumers across the country are exceedingly prohibitive.

Ultimately though, isn't the industry simply responding to and recognizing how consumers have already voted with their money and loyalty?

When the 2006 Top 100 Bicycle Retailer list was published, I received a call from a retailer concerned that one of his peers was on the list. He said the majority of his customers had previously patronized this peer but were fed up with poor customer service and inept mechanical service.

This retailer was a relatively new shop and his peer had been around for many years. I assured him that his peer would likely not remain on the list long-term, as its sales and reputation would fall due to poor word of mouth

and declining business. This would be recognized by the voting reps. His efforts, if successful, would also be recognized by the reps voting in his territory as his business grew.

Few shops start off immediately with their preferred brands, community presence, loyal customers and good word of mouth. Building a solid clientele and reputation is a long and hard process that not all shops achieve. As we all know, many fail outright or never quite build the business they envisioned.

Shops also don't remain successful simply because they have a major bike brand or were once known as a great shop. Without building, maintaining and growing a strong customer base, a shop won't thrive and thus impress the industry whose reps vote for them.

And without exceptional and consistent efforts, a retailer will not maintain a place on the Top 100 Bicycle Retailer list. As proof of point, the peer of the retailer previously mentioned did drop off the list for 2007.

Yes, the Top 100 Bicycle Retailer list is based upon voting by the industry, but the retailer ultimately thrives because of its customers, not the industry. If customers are consistently voting with their money, continued patronage and word of mouth, that's what ultimately builds and maintains a shop. The industry simply responds to retailers that best serve their customers.

JJ Rudman is the director of market research for Boulder Sports Research, which conducts the survey for the Top 100 Bicycle Retailer list.

SHOP TALK



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