Bay Area Dealer Tour

We went multi-modal in late January as we canvassed the Bay Area, visiting 15 shops in the East Bay, Marin County and San Francisco and tallying 75-plus miles in the saddle over three days.

The BRAIN Dealer Tour kicked off with visits to Berkeley and Oakland shops; we crossed the San Francisco Bay via ferry in the morning and returned on the BART rail at the end of the day, wrapping up with good beer and Mexican food at the Chrome Industries headquarters in the city.

Day Two we glided across the Golden Gate Bridge on our journey to Marin County. Mountain bike pioneer Joe Breeze joined us along the way and the WTB staff ambushed us with cowbells in front of their headquarters in Mill Valley as we rode by. It was a photo finish as the sun set behind Mount Tam on the ferry ride back to the city.

The folks from the San Francisco Bicycle Coalition (SFBC) routed us around the city's steepest hills on the final day, leading our group on a 20-mile jaunt around San Francisco, where we took in the Presidio, the Painted Ladies and sampled freshly painted green lanes on Market Street.

We took plenty of photos and asked lots of questions. We hope you enjoy the profiles and business stories in the following pages.

Special thanks to our jovial ride leaders from the East Bay Bicycle Coalition, the Marin County Bicycle Coalition and the SFBC.
SERVICES BY THE BAY

By Steve Frothingham

If you want to know the kind of customers a bike shop serves, talk to their service managers. On the BRAIN Bay Area Dealer Tour, we explored a variety of stores, most easily categorized from the front door, if not the curb.

But while all the stores’ repair areas include the same basic tools—and labor rates varied surprisingly little—the tech departments serve widely different demands from their clientele.

At historic shops in San Francisco, Berkeley and Sausalito, Cincan- napo connoisseurs rummage for vintage parts and pay for full-bike restoration jobs, complete with custom-made decals.

City hipsters, seduced by brown leather, black denim and high-polished aluminum, look for help converting modest single-speed bikes into stylish urban machines.

Affluent roadies in the city and in Marin County expect pro-level, white-glove treatment, preferably performed by someone with a deep-racing pedigree.

On both sides of the Bay need fast turnaround—sometimes even free quick repairs at curb-side.

And in the mountain bike motherland of Marin, the ability to rebuild suspension pivots or tune a shock are skills you can take to the bank.

‘People ride the crap out of their bikes’

At Oakland’s Bay Area Bicycles, the clientele consists of commuters and families, many without deep pockets.

Service manager Jim Adams said his customers expect quick turnaround and affordable replacement parts.

“People ride the crap out of their bikes here, and they’re looking for durability and longevity out of their bikes, and they ride year-round,” said Adams, who got his start working in shops in Ohio and Kentucky.

During the season, the shop can turn around all major repairs in “three days, max,” Adams said, and half that in winter.

Adams keeps a deep selection of affordable pre-built replacement wheels, and he tries to have shop-built wheels available to fit most bikes. “On slow days we build wheels,” he said.

Bay Area offers tune-ups for $80 and generally charges $60 an hour for service off the store’s ratesheet.

Only a few years ago, service produced half the store’s revenue, but under its new owners it’s selling a lot more bikes and service now accounts for about 15 percent of sales, still well above industry norms.

‘An anomaly’

Berkeley’s Missing Link is an employee-owned co-op and a city landmark. Its tech department is primarily in the storefront, the main store, and serves cash-poor U.C. Berkeley students and vintage bike enthusiasts, said Charles Betz, who has worked at the store since 1981.

“We are an anomaly,” Betz said. “We work on a lot of old bikes.”

The Ance’s rafters are full of Sta-Tru replacement wheels as well as a variety of old bike parts and frames, from a mid-’80s Morgan Cycles Mongoose to a vintage Masi.

“We get a lot of old bike enthusiasts who help us with projects,” Betz said.

Many of the enthusiasts have a taste for European parts and the department has invested in a Campagnolo 11-speed chain tool, although Betz concede the $150 device has popped just a few pins.

He’s more proud of a custom Campy hub bearing race remover that he made out of a cut-down 1 1/8-inch stem. Missing Link’s hourly labor charge is $70.

Making ‘old turds’ bike new

Tim Bikes in Mill Valley is in the mountain bike’s Holy Land, and the service department sees a wide variety of road machines, from handmade Steve Potts frames to the latest long-travel full-suspension rigs. Many arrive in a sad state of affairs, and service manager George Travin takes pride in being able to return them to running order.

“We can take an old turd and make it ride like it’s brand new,” he said.

Shock and fork repairs, rebuilds and tunes are a shop specialty. For this kind of work, area enthusiasts can be relatively patient (compared to city commuters), and turnaround can be up to two weeks during the summer, Travin said.

“Can’t be any longer than that; we don’t have room to store the bikes,” he said.

Tim Bikes’ hourly labor rate is $90.

“Rent here is really high,” Travin explained.

Dollar a minute

At San Francisco’s Box Dog Bikes, the service department gets a mix of demands, from time-crunched commuters to folks doing restorations and conversions of randonneur and touring bikes.

Mechanic Geoffrey Coburn said the store generally charges $1 a minute for repairs, which suits the needs of both types of customers.

The store’s urban clientele has needs beyond quickness. A Svenzall comes in handy for chopping bars and basket stays, and a shop specialty is turning used chains, wrapped in used inner tubes, into saddle theft-prevention devices.

Bay Area Bikes, Oakland

Employees: 8
Sales floor space: 1,600 square feet (Oakland main store); 2,000 square feet (Pittsburg store)
Emphasis: Commuter, family
Main brands: Giant, Raleigh, Trek, Dahon
Years in business: 9
Owners: Glenda Barnhart, Clay Wagers

Bay Area Bikes has the look of a store in the middle of revitalization, much like the Oakland neighborhood it calls home.

The shop is the only one and no pretense; it’s packed with bikes for families and commuters, from Giant and Raleigh, plus folders from Trek, Dahon and Brown.

Glenda Barnhart, a high-tech industry refugee, bought the store with retail ller Clay Wagers five years ago. It’s near Oakland’s “auto row,” next to a posh Audi dealership, but also near some closed-up storefronts. Barnhart noted that Whole Foods was opening nearby, which gave her hope for the neighborhood.

When the pair took over the store, it had about 15 bikes on the sales floor. Now there are about 800 bikes, and they’re already expanding, with a second store 30 miles away in Pittsburg, and a rental and service location near Oakland’s Jack London Square, a growing tourist destination.

The shop’s clientele includes many folks who commute across the Bay into San Francisco every day. It’s a commute that includes a stint on a ferry or on the BART train for most, which explains the store’s wide selection of folding bikes.

Neither of the storeowners has a car, although they have a business vehicle that occasionally gets used to shuttle inventory to or from the Pittsburg store. They often use a cargo bike to move stuff to or from the rental location.
City Cycle, San Francisco

**Employees:** 12, 20, seasonally
**Sales floor space:** 2,500 square feet (San Francisco store); 6,000 square feet (Marin store)
**Emphasis:** High-end road; more mountain bike at Marin location
**Major brands:** Trek, BMC, Seven
**Years in business:** 27 in San Francisco, but 3 under current ownership; 6 in Marin

Owner: Cory Farrer

Cory Farrer bought City Cycle three years ago.

City Cycle is in the middle of change, although one suspects it always is. Owner Cory Farrer is looking to make his San Francisco location his own, three years after buying it from the estate of legendary city retailer Clay Mankin, who died suddenly in 2005.

At the same time, Farrer is looking to rebrand his Marin County location, which was formerly known as Paradigm Cycles. Farrer moved that store into a larger space last year and renamed it City Cycles.

"We are working on letting people know who we are, and we are not Paradigm anymore, and we are not the original City Cycle, either," he said.

Mankin had built his store into a high-end destination for custom road bikes, and Farrer is hanging on to that rep, emphasizing bike fit and service, although he has added Trek to the store's offerings to reach more accessible prices.

The Marin County location has a long history of reputation for top service, too. It started out as Gravy's Wheels, which sold custom wheels to clients across the country. So Farrer has nurtured its reputation for high-quality wheel building and keeps a healthy inventory of parts at both locations. The store website still features a custom wheel ordering feature, and many of the high-end bikes that leave City Cycle feature wheels built there.

Just months after moving into the new Marin County space, Farrer is planning a remodeling of the city store, changing its bike displays, repainting the walls and adding more art.

"You can't stand still," Farrer said.

**Specialty: 'Being awesome'

City Cycle is proud of its experienced service staff, particularly its wheel builders. That pride, combined with high rents at its San Francisco and Marin County locations, justifies the store's $100 hourly labor rate, the highest we encountered on this Dealer Tour.

"A lot of people come to us for service. We'd like to have them buy their bikes from us and come for service, but if they buy somewhere else and then come to us, we take that too," said owner Cory Farrer.

Service contributes 10 to 11 percent of store revenue, he said.

"The service department is one department that always stays busy, no matter what time of year it is."

Service, wheel building and bike fit all contribute to the store's reputation and revenue and Farrer likes to say his locations have just one specialty: "Being awesome."

**Curbside repair**

Huckleberry Bicycle is on a major downtown San Francisco artery, Market Street, which remains a bike commute freewheway despite heavy auto traffic, buses and ever-present streetcar tracks that keep bikes on their toes.

The store's clientele is similar to Box Dog's—a mix of commuters and urban bike connoisseurs, although Box Dog is located on a quieter street.

Huckleberry takes advantage of its location by offering free repairs from 7:30 to 9:30 weekday mornings at a former newsstand kiosk.

The pop-up service stand handles minor repairs such as flat tires, creaks, brake tightening or derailleur adjustments.

"We've gotten flak for giving up free repair, but we want to keep people moving and happy," co-owner Zack Stender said. "People love it. We get a lot of comments on Twitter and Facebook."

The store's service department also keeps busy helping customers convert road bikes into urban commuters. Huckleberry will often take a traditional drop-bar road bike from a brand such as Masi and add wide-sweep handlebars, racks and baskets. A wide array of leather saddle and handlebar tape gives customers opportunity to add a little style.

Huckleberry's hourly labor rate is $65, one of the lowest we encountered on this Dealer Tour.

Huckleberry Bicycles, San Francisco

**Employees:** 12, including three owners
**Shop floor space:** 2,000 square feet; adding 1,500 square feet next door
**Years in business:** 1 year, three months
**Emphasis:** Urban/city bikes and apparel; some road, 'cross and touring/llandnoering
**Main brands:** Masi, Redline, Salsa, Civia, Cannondale, Felt, Pinarello, Brompton
**Owners:** Zack Stender, Jonas Jackel, Brian Smith

With a little over a year under their belt, the three owners of this shop have hit a home run with locals. Maybe it's their generosity—they give out free repair weekday mornings—or it's their uncluttered, modern but warm store where city hipsters and roadies can both feel at home. Or, it could be their location on Market Street, a heavily trafficked bike commuter route. Likely it's a bit of everything, but this new kid on the block has the city folk buzzing, according to co-owner Zack Stender.

Huckleberry is one of a slew of new businesses moving into this historic but rough downtown neighborhood that's gentrifying and seeing booming growth. The store sells mostly urban and commuter bikes and apparel—a successful mesh of cycling culture and cycling culture. It has hands down the widest selection of cycling jeans of all the shops visited, including $110 pants by Cadence and a $400 jacket by new Japanese brand Pedaled, next to matching accessories like Brooks saddles and bags.

Stender said stocking high-end softgoods was a big investment and risk but he claims the stuff sells well because it doesn't look like cycling gear.

He said bidding is becoming classy and fashionable, not just a low-budget way to get around town, and there are buyers looking for locally made but practical goods.

The owners seek out unique products like San Francisco-based Betabrand, a women's apparel line that only sold direct online. Huckleberry worked a deal to sell it at the shop; Betabrand also makes Huckleberry's branded line of casual pants and shirts.
RETAILERS GET CREATIVE IN SPREADING THE WORD

By Toby Hill

Retail chain Mike's Bikes has the marketing and promotional muscle most shops would kill for.

Its marketing and community engagement staff numbers six people, one of whom is dedicated almost full time to social media. Staff members are out at events every single weekend. Mike's supports NICA high school racing teams in all the communities it serves. And the retailer's own local road race team is the most successful men's elite squad in the Bay Area, according to marketing director Davin Pukulis.

"We feel strongest about in-person interaction. People are saturated with media these days," he said.

Of course, all this comes with the scale of being the Bay Area's largest specialty bicycle dealer, having grown from a single store in Marin County in 1965 to 11 locations spread from Silicon Valley to Sausalito, over to the East Bay and inland to Sacramento.

Bay Area retailers without such resources have had to find more modest ways to draw attention to their businesses, often on a shoestring budget. Some pay little mind to marketing or advertising at all, instead banking on word-of-mouth to build their customer base.

That's exactly how Oakland commuter and transportation retailer Tip Top Bike Shop has operated since opening in 2007. Outside of a sporadic e-newsletter augmented by a smidge of Facebook posting, owners Richard and Charlotte Ocelerich rely almost entirely on word-of-mouth, commuter traffic on nearby bike thoroughfares connecting downtown Oakland and Berkeley, and good old-fashioned neighborhood loyalty.

"It's a big city, but there are neighborhoods here and people are really proud of their home in San Francisco's Midmarket section, sandwiched between the SOMA and Tenderloin neighborhoods, both notorious for seedy hotels, prostitution and prevalent drug use, Smith said.

With little money to spend on advertising, the owners instead leveraged social media for free marketing, highlighting the shop's attractive storefront, bright welcoming layout and high level of service. Early fans helped raise the shop's profile by moving Huckleberry up to a five-star rating on Yelp.

Back at Mike's, the company's considerable resources can be a double-edged sword. "Our numbers continue to be so strong because we have such broad appeal," marketing manager Pukulis said. But that broad appeal also raises concerns about maintaining "authenticity" with enthusiast cyclists, Pukulis acknowledges.

So all of Mike's Bikes' promotional photography, including its summertime "I am Mike" bus ad campaign, features shop employees in local ride settings.

That ethos extends to Pukulis' marketing team as well.

"We made it a point to serve cycling enthusiasts every point of the way," he said. "The entire marketing team rides and races together."
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ONLINE SALES A TOUGH NUT TO CRACK

By Lynette Carpit

A mong Bay Area retailers, Wrench Science has sunk perhaps the most time and money into its mail-order and online sales model. Owner Tim Medina has built his business around enabling customers to build their dream bikes on the Wrench Science website.

Customers use the site's online configurator to pick a frame in their size and color and every conceivable part on it—from the brake pads to the handlebar tape and even inner tubes. The software ensures all the parts chosen are compatible and also tallies the weight and price of each part as it's added. Bikes are then shipped to the customer; about 20 percent are picked up in the store.

Medina said the programming was a considerable investment and had to be built from scratch. But 11 years in, his idea is delivering profits. Wrench Science has seen double-digit growth since 2006, he said.

That success is unheard of for most other retailers in the Bay Area who are selling online.

Bay Area Bicycles in Oakland has a SmartBike website and signed up for Supplier Sync, which allows it to show more of the products its suppliers carry as being in stock or in warehouse. Its POS system is synced with the site, showing real-time inventory. It can't sell complete bikes from its suppliers, which forbid those sales, but co-owner Glenda Barmhart said Bay Area Bicycles has an exclusive to sell folding bike brand Tern online on the West Coast. And it works with Shopatron to fulfill sales of Saris and Dahon products that customers make through those suppliers' websites. Still, online sales make up less than 5 percent of its business.

“We’re hoping it will increase this year,” she said.

Cory Farrer, owner of City Cycle with stores in San Francisco and Corte Madera, has had a SmartBike website for years, but more recently signed up for Supplier Sync. He said his online sales have seen a small bump as a result.

“We’re selling things that we wouldn’t have sold. Like today somebody in Texas placed an order for a couple of forks. One of them was in stock at QBG’s warehouse and one was in stock at BTH, so we emailed him and said there would be a delay until we get them from the warehouse but we’re going to sell these forks we otherwise wouldn’t have,” he said.

“It’s not knocking us over, but it’s helping us capture sales we weren’t capturing before,” Farrer added. “Online shopping is not going away. So if you’re not at least embracing it to the extent that you can, you’re not thinking about the future.”

Farrer learned long ago to temper his expectations for online revenue and doesn’t have the internal infrastructure—including a dedicated web person—to handle big Internet volume. Plus, he admits he will never be competitive on price.

“To me it’s an enhancement for local customers; we give them the convenience of shopping online,” he said.

For Studio Velo, its web store allows it to reach customers globally, said Scott Penzarella, and the Mill Valley store sells quite a bit to customers in Australia, Japan and Europe who are willing to incur the shipping costs. Most of what it sells is soft goods, including apparel and lots of nutritional supplements. He says the shop chooses to sell brands, like Capo, where it can be competitive, meaning the supplier enforces cooperative. Box Dog also sells its house brand—a Pelican randonneur bike and frame set—on its website. Its virtual inventory caters to commuters, tourists and rando enthusiasts.

American Cyclery’s Kimo Taguchi said most inventory they sell is available through small suppliers. “We’re selling products we designed for Soma and Merry Sales, unique items from small importers and that are available in small batches,” he said. “The price isn’t going to be the lowest, but these are unique, hard-to-find items on the Internet. We try to stay away from products that are price competitive.”

And, as Taguchi and others noted, Internet sales are complementary and an extension of the store more than a core revenue source.

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Wrench Science, Berkeley

Employees: 15
Shop floor space: 4,000 square feet
Years in business: 13 years total; 11 as online/mail order
Emphasis: Custom high-end road and mountain bikes
Main brands: BMC, Colnago, Ibis, Moots, Pinarello, Niner, Knolly, Yeti
Owner: Tim Medina

Tucked away in an industrial part of Berkeley, Tim Medina’s store is easy to miss. But that suits Medina just fine, as most of the store’s business is mail order and online.

“It might not sound like the most inviting thing, but people just coming in to kick tires and look around, that’s difficult for us,” he said.

Medina started the business as a high-end service shop in 1994. But five years in, he came up with the idea for an online bike builder to let customers match their frame and selected parts, ensuring compatibility. The current system is the second iteration of the program, which he launched in 2002.

Medina says that while most custom builds start online, they require some follow-up, either through email or phone.

“You’ve got customers that while they are enthusiasts, don’t know the ins and outs. There are a lot of considerations that generally lead to a correspondence with us in some fashion,” he said.

Much of his business comes from beyond the Bay Area, and the store fields a fair number of international clients.

Other than bare frames hanging from the walls, and a few shop-branded kits, there isn’t much inventory for customers to peruse. Instead, computers are set up for people to access saved builds or start a new build.

Medina keeps $300,000 worth of frames at any given time from such brands as Niner, Pinarello, BMC, Knolly, Intense, Turner, Ibis, Ellsworth, De Rosa, Moots, Yeti and Merida, among others.

The average bike it rolls or ships out of its doors retails for $8,000, but it’s not unusual for builds to go as high as $20,000.

All the retailers noted that competing on price and building awareness for their virtual stores are barriers to growth. Most rely on email marketing to build web traffic as they have a limited, if any, budget to spend on advertising or optimizing search engine placement.

A little less than half the shops visited don’t bother with e-commerce. Retailers including Oakland’s Tip Top Bike Shop, Berkeley’s Missing Link and Fairfield’s Sunshine Bicycles prefer to spend their energies on local walk-in business.

“We’ve sold old parts on eBay and tried doing Shopatron, and it’s just not worth it,” said Tony Merz, manager of Sunshine Bicycles. “Online is less personal and we have so many return customers locally. We’d rather focus on providing a good customer experience.”
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BIKE CO-OPs FIND THEIR GROOVE IN HIGH-COST MARKET

By Lynette Carpenter

It's no walk in the park running a retail store in the Bay Area, where the cost of living means a larger percentage of a shop's total revenue is sucked up by high rent and payroll. Adding the complexity of decision-by-consensus from being worker owned and run sounds like a recipe for disaster. But Berkeley's 40-year-old Missing Link Bicycle Cooperative and San Francisco's 8-year-old Box Dog Bikes are mainstays in their neighborhoods.

Among the biggest benefits of a co-op is less staff turnover than at a traditional shop. Each employee-owner has a say in the decision-making process, which fosters a greater sense of ownership. At Missing Link, James Hill is among the veteran staff, having worked there close to 25 years.

However, it takes a bit of a learning curve for those who haven't worked in a collaborative environment.

"We talk about how we engage with each other a lot and that takes some time to learn, but it creates a shop culture that is fun and makes you feel like you're part of something," said Anderson Reed, who has worked at Box Dog Bikes from the beginning.

Reed, who felt bullied working at other shops where he was ordered around or yelled at by his managers, said the non-hierarchical model where everyone has equal input was a welcome change.

Another benefit is in cross-training and increased job mobility. At both Box Dog and Missing Link, staff often rotates roles and duties.

John Suzuki, a 10-year employee-owner at Missing Link, put his background with apparel brands The North Face and Marmot into play as the store's clothing buyer when he joined. Today he enjoys managing the store's cross team and getting involved in advocacy and community outreach. But, he says laughing, "I will never be a bookkeeper."

Tired of being tied to a desk, one employee at Missing Link is transitioning out of the financial controller role, so another staffer is taking some college courses to learn the job and eventually take it over.

"People gravitate toward what they like to do, so there's more willingness to work," said Bill Sparks, who started at Missing Link in 1990.

The most noted pitfall is delayed decision-making, as major operational changes require some level of negotiation and sometimes could take several meetings.

With 18 employee-owners, decisions are made at a glacial pace, said Missing Link's Scott Hicks, an 11-year veteran of the co-op.

Big capital expenditures call for a two-thirds majority vote, he said, so something like replacing old carpet during Christmas—typically a slow time since college students and faculty are on break—has been delayed until spring break.

On the flip side, Hicks said, the store is very fiscally conservative, staying out of financial trouble and paying its bills on time, something many bike shops struggle to do.

Box Dog's Reed adds, "Sure, sometimes things take longer than you want them to, but that's mostly true in all aspects of life. Choosing to take agency in your environment at least gives people an opportunity to put others in check and make decisions that affect how much money you take home at the end of the day."

Marin

This store got its start as a student-run worker co-op on the University of California, Berkeley campus in 1971. Two years later it became a formal business, and in 1978 it moved to its current location on Shattuck Avenue, just a couple blocks from the campus. In 1994 it split off its service and repair department into a separate store across the street. But students remain a big part of its clientele and business; its bread and butter are $400 to $700 hybrids.

Missing Link is collectively owned and run by 18 employees—soon to be 19. One current employee is working toward becoming a member of the cooperative, something that the members vote on once a worker has put in 360 hours at the shop.

Everyone makes the same hourly wage and has equal say in different matters, from hiring to shop hours, compensation and health care policies. And employees also have the freedom to choose what they want to do and will rotate between sales floor, wrenching, buying product, receiving inventory or other back-office work.

This business model is appealing to Berkeley residents, who remain loyal customers despite growing competition, said Bill Sparks, an employee-owner who started working at Missing Link in 1990.

San Francisco

Box Dog Bikes, San Francisco

Employees: 6 or 7
Sales floor space: 1,700
Years in business: 8
Emphasis: Commuter and touring
Main brands: Jamis, Surly, Breezer, All-City, Pelican
Owners: Dan Thomas, Jan Lautze, Anderson Reed, Gabe Ehler

With transportation, touring and randonneur bikes from Jamis, Breezer and QBP's Surly and All-City, Box Dog Bikes' core customer is summed up thusly: "I think people in San Francisco are looking for something they can do everything on, whether it's commuting in the city or riding weekends in Marin," said Emily Conner, one of five staffers who work alongside four employee-owners of the 8-year-old shop.

Box Dog occupies two ends of the utility bike business: $500 to $600 built bikes and more sophisticated custom builds on the shop's filet-brazed Dedacciai double-butted steel 650B Pelican randonneur frameset, made by Wisconsin's Winter Cycles, or other small-batch frames such as Velo Orange's Rando or Polyvalent "low trail" frame. Customs account for 20 percent of bikes sold.

With limited space, Box Dog doesn't carry apparel, and P&A is carefully selected based on what the shop's owners and employees like and use in their everyday riding. "It's all tested here," Conner said.
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COMMITTING TO FITTING

By Toby Hill

There may be as many definitions of what “bike fit” means as there are retailers providing the service. “We go really deep into fit with our customers,” said Tim Medina, owner of Wrench Science in Berkeley. Medina devised his own fit system based on the LeMond model. His online customers—the overwhelming majority of Wrench Science’s business—are asked for their height, weight and shoe size, and are provided detailed instructions on measuring torso length, inseam, arm length, shoulder width and body flexibility.

“We also get their current bike measurements and ask what they like, and what they don’t like, about their bike,” Medina said.

Going to such lengths is understandable when your average bike sale comes in at $8,500, and the occasional custom $20,000 road rig, outfitted with ultra-high-end Lightweight carbon wheels, rolls out your front door.

At Box Dog Bikes, a commuter and touring shop in San Francisco, every customer is sized to the appropriate frame, but there’s no technical fitting or time aboard an indoor trainer, said staffer Emily Conner. However, if a customer brings back a bike saying they’re too stretched out, a stem swap-out and saddle fore-aft adjustment are no problem.

The shops are two extremes, to be sure. But both also illustrate how the somewhat amorphous concept of “fit” can be shaped for each retailer’s unique customer base.

Mojo Bicycle Café’s Romi Nelson takes a more macro view of fit than most. “It’s not only body fit, but the bike should fit your lifestyle,” said the owner of the combination café and urban, road and commuter shop.

That’s not to say cyclists wanting a detailed fit are out of luck. Mojo’s Roni Hung, a veteran road racer with years of custom bike fit experience working for A Bike Odyssey in Sausalito, is happy to break out the plumb bob, goniometer and other traditional fit tools, Nelson said.

“It’s plain as day there’s a commuter market here, but more of those riders are getting into higher-end road,” Hung noted. Some retailers are fine just ceding the high-end fit business to the surging number of dedicated fit studios cropping up in the Bay Area. Huckleberry Bicycles does a free basic fit on a trainer with every bike purchase, but refers customers out to a studio if they want more detailed attention. “We’re so heavy on lifestyle, versus performance, that we really don’t need to invest in high-end fit,” said co-owner Brian Smith.

With commercial real estate at such a high premium in the Bay Area, fit service often becomes a victim of limited space.

“We’d like to do much more fitting, but it’s hard right now,” said Quoc Phan, co-owner of Tam Bikes in Mill Valley.

All three of the Specialized dealer’s owners—Bryce Kirk and Den Satake are the others—have gone through BG Fit training, and the shop has a Serotta fit cycle for custom builds.

But Tam Bikes’

**Studio Velo, Mill Valley**

**Employees:** 5, plus 3 partners  
**Sales floor space:** 2,450 square feet  
**Years in business:** 10 (originally as Bike-RX)  
**Emphasis:** High-end road and cyclocross, bike fitting, clothing, travel  
**Main brands:** Independent Fabrication, Guru, Time  
**Owners:** Scott Penzarella, Colin Beardsley, Chris Reed

This operation started as a mobile bike repair business just a decade ago. Now it’s an elegant destination store that moved into a new location a few months ago, a former dry cleaner’s store in upscale Mill Valley.

Founder Scott Penzarella has whittled down the store’s product lines, trimming its bike offerings to Independent Fabrication, Guru and Time. He cut some other lines he said demanded preseason orders or that sell through discounters.

The store has a minimalist studio design befitting its name, with just a few carefully chosen shades of gray, red and white throughout. Semi-custom LED ceiling light fixtures and black wooden clothing shelves complete the look.

“We are not purely a studio, but we wanted to have some European panache,” Penzarella said.

**Tam Bikes, Mill Valley**

**Employees:** 10-12  
**Sales floor space:** 2,600 square feet  
**Years in business:** Four and a half  
**Emphasis:** Mountain, family and road  
**Main brands:** Specialized, Santa Cruz, Soulcraft, Retrotec, Cervelo  
**Owners:** Bryce Kirk, Quoc Phan, Den Satake

Situated in the shadow of the cradle of mountain biking, Mt. Tamalpais, it’s no surprise that Tam Bikes’ business leans heavily toward the off-road side—70 percent of bikes sold are mountain rigs.

Medina said even with the solid MTB rep, Tam strives to be “the family shop of the town,” said co-owner Bryce Kirk, who grew up in the shop’s hometown of Mill Valley. That means offering a full range of price points, from the low end to the high, and a sales structure with no commissions to prevent pushiness on the shop floor.

The store is open from 10 a.m. to 7 p.m. Monday through Saturday and 10 a.m. to 5 p.m. Sunday.

**SV Studio Velo**

Founder Scott Penzarella moved Studio Velo to an expanded space last fall.

dedicated fit room, part of the store’s original build-out, has been taken over as much-needed office space. And although Tam promotes its fit service online, the increasing number of performance fit specialists in Marin County appear to be grabbing that business, Phan said.

Sunshine Bicycles in Fairfax is packed cheek to jowl with product, so staffs haul a trainer out to the patio for fittings done with old-school tools like a FitStix—

"things shops have been using for years," said manager Tony Merz.

The Cannondale dealer has considered bringing in a Guru fit bike following last fall’s purchase of the Canadian custom bike brand by Cannondale parent company Dorel Industries. But first, the shop would need to find somewhere to put it.

Studio Velo in Mill Valley displays a number of bikes in its showroom but doesn’t sell any complete road bikes—all bikes are built to order, so fit figures come into every sale.

The cost of a Retül 3D motion-capture fit is put toward the purchase of the bike, said owner Scott Penzarella, and Studio Velo additionally offers fit improvement on customers’ current bikes. For custom frames, Studio Velo also has a Guru fit

a cycle offering infinite adjustment on the fly without the rider having to dismount.

The detailed fit process helps build the customer relationship, Penzarella said, and can drive additional P&A sales for items like shoes, pedals, stems, bars and bar tape.

Penzarella’s fit business has also expanded across the Bay to San Francisco, where in August he opened a studio and retail space selling lifestyle products inside Café The Station.
Timex® Cycle Trainer™ 2.0 Bike Computer. Conquer goals and finely tune your rides with up to five screens of real-time cycling data powered by GPS, an included heart rate sensor and ANT+™ compatibility. After your ride, upload your data to view routes and performance stats on a free account powered by Training Peaks™.

HOW FAR WILL YOU TAKE IT?™
American Cyclery, San Francisco

**Employees:** About 15

**Sales floor space:** Less than 3,000 square feet (total, two locations)

**Years in business:** 72

**Emphasis:** Mountain bikes, vintage bikes

**Main brands:** Bianchi, Raleigh, Specialized, Soma, Gunnar, Waterford

**Owners:** Bradley Woehl, Kimo Toguchi

Like any landmark institution, American Cyclery has its heroes, its stories and ... a ghost.

American Cyclery was founded in 1941 by six-day racer Oscar Juner, famous for, among other feats, being the first to ride a bike across the Golden Gate Bridge. He was also the first to be arrested for doing so.

Years later when the Marin County mountain bike pioneers were grabbing for drivetrain parts, they came to American Cyclery to root around.

These days Oscar’s shop is crammed to the rafters with parts and accessories (mostly parts) both vintage and modern. Current owners Bradley Woehl and Kimo Toguchi operate in two locations, across Sanyan Street from each other.

Woehl likes to show visitors a basement archive full of old magazines, catalogs, brochures and his head badge collection.

But the one-time Schwinn “total-concept” store is not all about history. It stocks high-end modern bikes from Bianchi, Raleigh and Specialized. And the operators are seeking an artist and a grant to repaint a giant mural that once graced the exterior of American Cyclery II, one of the locations. That store also is in line to get a “parklet”—one of the city’s new programs that converts parking spaces into public recreation spots.

As for the ghost, it’s reported to have moved around some of the store’s old trophies, to the bafflement of employees. Perhaps it’s one of the many riders Juner defeated in the early 20th century, looking to finally get an edge on the wily Oscar.

Blazing Saddles, San Francisco

**Employees:** Hyde Street store, 8-12; companywide, 50-120

**Shop floor space:** Hyde street, 13,500 square feet

**Years in business:** 30

**Emphasis:** Bicycle rentals

**Main brands:** Marin, Fuji, Specialized

**Owner:** Jeff Sears

This rental operation was the home base for the pick-up and drop-off of the Fuji and Kestrel road bikes during our three-day sojourn in the Bay. It has seven locations in San Francisco, two in New York City and one in Monterey, California.

High demand for sightseeing on two wheels anchors its success and that of its competitors. Owner Jeff Sears says 17 different rental ops do business within a half-mile radius of his Hyde Street location.

His fleet covers every taste and skill level—from the basic hybrid for a family on vacation looking to ride across the Golden Gate, to full-suspension rigs for the enthusiasts headed to Marin’s world-renowned trails, to carbon road and tri bikes for athletes who brave the Escape from Alcatraz triathlon.

It even has tandems and e-bikes, the latter of which make the city’s steep hills accessible to casual riders. Each of its rental locations has a specific focus and the staff to suit the clientele.

Sears acquired the business after 9/11. He said rentals boomed after the President transitioned from a military base to a national park, opening access to bikes on the waterfront.

“When we first started, riding was confined to Golden Gate Park,” Sears said. He’s banking on further developments along the northern waterfront that will make it more accessible to bikes and pedestrians.

Blazing Saddles also does guided tours and sells a few electric bikes from Stromer and Ultra Motor, mostly to city dwellers working in the financial district.

“We’re trying to open an e-bike-specific retail location this year because we think the public is missing out,” Sears said. “We want to have a separate place to host conversations.”

Tip Top Bike Shop, Oakland

**Employees:** 6

**Sales floor space:** 2,000 square feet

**Years in business:** 6

**Emphasis:** Commuter, road women’s-specific

**Main brands:** Trek, Jamis, Felt, Salsa, Surly

**Owners:** Richard and Charlotte Oelerich

Tip Top may be the quintessential neighborhood shop, drawing a loyal following from Oakland’s Temescal section—which has seen a recent revival with a number of independent businesses and restaurants moving in—as well as commuters riding on nearby cycling routes between downtown Oakland and Berkeley.

Husband and wife Richard and Charlotte Oelerich—she’s a British expat, he’s a Yank with 20 years in and out of bike shops—skew their product mix toward the utilitarian, offering transportation and road bikes from their primary brands and moving the occasional Surly Big Dummy cargo rig, the most expensive bike on the sales floor at $1,900. Women’s-specific bikes get prime placement by the front door to downplay the intimidation factor.

And a broad selection of racks, bags, lights and locks helps keep their commuting clientele out of the driver’s seat—much like the Oeleriches themselves, longtime bike commuters who have not owned a vehicle in three years.
One of those elegant inventions that make you say, Why didn’t I think of that?

— Bicycling Magazine

"...easy to use and very effective. Best of all, I’ve yet to add another streak of grease on the backseat."

— Robbie Stout, Velo News

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**Mojo Bicycle Café, San Francisco**

**Employees:** 5 in bike shop; 12 to 15 in café

**Sales floor space:** 900 square feet for bike retail and service; additional 900 for café

**Years in business:** 6

**Emphasis:** Urban, road and mountain

**Main brands:** Jamis, Breezer, Dahon, Surly, Soma, Surly, Rock Lobster

**Owner:** Remy Nelson

This combination bike shop and café—sales split 50/50 between the two businesses—earned its rep early on with practical commuters and city bikes as much as it did with its appealing menu of sandwiches, coffees, teas and craft beers. Having developed a taste for two-wheeled life, however, six years on those entry-level customers are coming back for more.

So in addition to the sub-$1,000 Jamis transportation bikes that dominate the small retail space at the back of the café, Mojo also does an increasing number of custom builds on frame sets from Rock Lobster, Soma and Surly, as well as Jamis’ higher-end carbon models.

And customers bringing bikes in for service can wile away their time sipping a latte in the relaxing “parklet” in front of the store or admire the cycling-inspired art inside the café while washing down a beer-braised pulled pork sammy with a pint of San Francisco-brewed Big Daddy IPA.

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**Sunshine Bicycles, Fairfax**

**Employees:** 7 full time; 3-4 part time

**Shop floor space:** 1,700 square feet

**Years in business:** 42

**Emphasis:** Mountain bikes, hybrids, family, custom

**Main brands:** Trek, Cannondale, Surly, Moots, Ibis

**Owner:** Martin Hansen

In business since 1971, this shop has seen a lot of history pass through its doors. Gary Fisher worked here just before founding his mountain bike business in 1979.

“I bought it in 1984, but when I first started working here in 1979 as a part-time mechanic, Gary Fisher was still here before he went down the street to open Fisher with Charlie Kelly,” owner Martin Hansen said.

Other mountain bike notables also put in stints at Sunshine including Joe Murray, White Industries’ Doug White and local custom welder and builder Paul Brown.

On Center Boulevard, where most Marin and road and off-road rides pass through, Sunshine is at the center of Fairfax’s cycling hub in a strip mall building where Marin County Bicycle Coalition and Osmo Nutrition are headquartered.

The shop sees a constant stream of cyclists ride by on weekends. It’s within steps of two popular cycling hangouts—Iron Springs Pub & Brewery and Java Hut.

Three to four guys wrench on bikes daily. Manager Tony Merz says quick turnaround on service—one to two days—keeps a constant flow of business. The store also sponsors several high school mountain bike teams.

“Schools here are overflowing with kids and high school teams are huge,” Merz said.

The store sells quite a few mountain bikes to youth and families—off-road bikes make up 70 percent of sales—but Sunshine takes pride in being an all-around shop serving the youngest kids all the way to the most veteran racers.

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**A Bicycle Odyssey, Sausalito**

**Employees:** 4-5 full time

**Shop floor space:** 2,900 square feet

**Years in business:** 38

**Emphasis:** High-end road

**Main brands:** Bianchi, Giant, Look, Time, Colnago, Marin Bikes, Scott; a handful of smaller niche brands

**Owner:** Tony Tom

This store is part museum, part retail store. It’s crammed to the rafters with goods from the past 35 years that founder and owner Tony Tom has collected since he opened in 1975, alongside the newest bikes, apparel and parts.

Tom sells all kinds of bikes, but his heart—and bread and butter—is in high-end road racing rigs, the more esoteric the better. Road makes up 90 percent of sales. He says his customer base is pretty diverse, with about half coming from San Francisco. Unlike the trend toward carbon, he fouts the attributes of steel, titanium and lightweight aluminum.

“The carbon fiber market is so commodified,” he said.

Throughout the Bay Area his shop is known by cognoscenti for its top-rate builds and exceptional repairs, which have earned him high ratings on Yelp. The store gets the job done, even if speed of service isn’t the priority. Tom has plans to expand his business, opening a second store just a couple of blocks from his main location to offer demos and rentals of high-end road bikes.
Honey Stinger’s new POP

ASI director of marketing Kallieh Philipp bemoans handlebar tape mustache guy at Huckleberry Bicycles.

“Fast Freddie” Rodriguez escorts our crew through Berkeley.

ASI’s Frank Zimmer demonstrates how to carry two cases of beer in a Chrome bag.

Train tracks, streetcars and buses keep riders alert on city streets.

BRAIN publisher Marc Sani (left) and Breezer brand manager JT Burke turn onto the street from a bike path in Berkeley.

A quick pit stop for a photo op before riding across the Golden Gate Bridge.

San Francisco Bicycle Coalition’s Kristin Smith points out a green lane on Market Street.

ASI’s Pat Connane is cheered on as he works up a steep hill.

Bikes Belongs Bruno Maier ready to get off the ferry from Marin County.
One of Mike’s Bikes’ shop dogs gets some lovin’.  

Missing Link’s component vending machine doesn’t accept credit cards.  

Bell’s Shannan Valette high fives elementary kids as we ride through a school.  

Joe Breeze points out the history detailed in the Repack mosaic in Fairfax by artist Quintilla Nylin.  

The ceramic tile art installation is on Bolinas Road at the entrance to the parking lot at Mono Lane.  

Riding up a trail toward Mt. Tamalpais  

San Francisco Bicycle Coalition executive director Leah Shahum gives us a rundown of the city’s growing bike infrastructure and the nonprofit’s advocacy work.  

The view on the ferry ride back to San Francisco from Marin  

Riding through the Cal Park Hill tunnel from downtown San Rafael to the Larkspur Ferry Terminal.  

The WTB crew hails us with cowbells as we ride past their headquarters.
JOE BREEZE SHOWS DEALER TOUR CREW THE WAY IN MARIN COUNTY

This was my third BRAIN Dealer Tour, after Dallas and Portland. On both those earlier tours I was surprised by the degree of bike infrastructure improvements. Everyone is aware of Platinum Portland, but what I saw of the Dallas area also impressed me.

I once thought my home county, Marin, offered the safest bicycling in the nation. Not anymore. Traveling around the county over the past decade I’ve witnessed extraordinary improvements that allow people to better traverse cities by bike. Many cities have equaled or exceeded what we have in Marin. Still, we do have a good thing going here and I was delighted to show off Marin on the recent tour.

I met the group for lunch in my hometown of Fairfax. Outside the window of Iron Springs Brew Pub, moms whizzed by on e-bikes with one or two kids per rear deck. To even the casual observer, Fairfax is a bike town. There are bikes everywhere. The whole Ross Valley supports 10 bike shops with 50,000 residents across five miles.

Cycling has been strong in Marin since the early 1970s when lots of mountain bikes, being the early epicenter of mountain biking, being the foot of Mt. Tamalpais and the Repack downhill. Our new Repack Shop downtown is a tribute to the cruel that continues to attract mountain bikers to Fairfax from around the world.

Repack’s legacy continues to spawn many things cycling. We formed the Marin County Bicycle Coalition (MCBC) in 1998. Many local industry players such as Patrick Seiler of WTB stepped up and made a difference. On BRAIN’s Marin tour day, as the riders passed through Mill Valley the WB crew came out with cowbells clanging.

My son’s elementary school in Fairfax hosted one of three U.S. pilot projects for Safe Routes to School. The program started in 2000 when he was in first grade, so he and his peers grew up with encouragement to ride. When Fairfax kids reach high school age and discover the NorCal High School Cycling League, they sign up in droves. Drake High has been California state champions the past four years.

After lunch in Fairfax we rolled on to San Rafael and Mike’s Bikes. By chance, Drake senior Lucas Newcomb, one of NorCal’s brightest stars, rode up alongside us. Lucas was UCSC 15-16 Junior National Champion, and last year was the 17-18 runner-up. He went to the Schools in Salzburg, but unfortunately broke his collarbone the day before his event. Fit now, he hopes to lead to a fifth straight state title this season.

At Mike’s Bikes we saw employee Brian Poppleswell, whom I see riding on bikes at many local events and races. Mike’s is one of Marin’s biggest supporters of bicycling and the MCBC.

Heading back south we rode through the Cal Park Hill Tunnel, a key component of Marin’s bike transportation network. At the end of the tunnel the Larkspur Ferry awaited, ready to take the riders back to San Francisco. The MCBC hopes to reopen another abandoned railroad tunnel farther south, and make Marin’s core system almost as flat as Holland—but with better weather.

As Marin’s bike dealers support their local bike coalition, promoting safe ways to get healthy while getting places in our busy lives, they are reaping the rewards of a better community and increased business.

JOE BREEZE WORKS AS A FRAME DESIGNED FOR BREEZE BICYCLES. A MOUNTAIN BIKE PIONEER WHO DEVOTED HIS BRAND TO TRANSPORTATION BIKES IN 2002, BREEZE HAS BEEN SHAPING THE WORLD'S MISSION TO CYCLING FOR MORE THAN 40 YEARS. HE SEES EVERYDAY USE OF BICYCLES AS A WAY TO EXPAND CYCLING IN AMERICA.

BIKING IS A LIFESTYLE FOR BAY AREA RESIDENTS; SHOPS REAP THE BENEFITS

Cities like Portland, Seattle and Minneapolis are often the poster child for cycling in the U.S., but San Francisco is making drastic inroads in becoming a model cycling city. After spending three days riding around San Francisco, the East Bay and Marin County, it became clear that cycling was a way of life for an increasing number of people and a thriving group of independent dealers were there to support every demographic. Riding down the Embarcadero you would see everything from the businesswoman in a suit riding a hybrid to the college student with an old steel frame road bike loaded down with groceries for the week.

A vast majority of the shops we visited catered specifically to cyclists who made a lifestyle choice, those who wanted to not only commute to work by bike but make as many trips as possible by bike instead of using their car. In shops like Tip Top Bike Shop in Oakland, you will not find a $6,000 road bike, but you will find a large selection of bikes, accessories and clothing designed specifically for city riding and commuting. Local shops understand their customer base and design their stores to fit their cliente.

On the tour we heard story after story about how retailers were making their money from the repeat business of the everyday rider, not from the one-off sale of a bike. They would see customers at regular intervals for new clothing and tune-ups. The same customers would be seen with even greater frequency for consumables like nutritional products and maintenance products like lubricants and degreasers. The strongest shops were those with a focused selection of parts and accessories, as well as a quality service center.

Though other cities overshadow San Francisco and the Bay Area when it comes to cycling, this will not be the case for much longer. The city provides a vibrant backdrop for an ever-growing and increasingly passionate cycling community. Every year more and more shops pop up to fill the demand, and those that know their customer and focus on repeat business not only succeed, they thrive.

—Derek Cozzi, social media manager, White Lightning

BAY AREA OFFERS RICH CONTRAST OF SHOPS AND NEIGHBORHOODS

We Bell folks enjoyed a great time riding in the East Bay and Marin. The two days we spent there were refreshing and worthwhile. We met with a wide cross section of very independent retail pros and appreciated the local route knowledge provided by our ride guides.

Our industry team was an engaging and fun group and our West Coast “winter” weather wasn’t bad either. Riding back to our hotel from the Chrome retail store along the Embarcadero on a clear night was a rare February treat. I cannot wait to return and share some of the same routes with my family and friends in the near future.

The first thing we noted in Oakland was the surprising strength of the folding bike market, the creative merchandising of helmets, and the ease with which we were able to cross town on bikes in a big group. Lunch in a cycling-themed restaurant was a pleasure, as was riding through quiet Oakland neighborhoods with Freddy Rodriguez guiding. I was struck by the impact small changes in infrastructure and route communication can make to widen the gateway to cycling for many.

The variety of specialty bike retail locations we visited during our day in Marin County was amazing—from classic road- and mountain bike-focused shops to core cultural icons and even a unique boutique with a high fashion bent. Rolling through Fairfax down to San Rafael with Joe Breeze was a treat, as was riding around an open grade school where the bike path was routed past the playground—kids love bikes!

—David Hayes, senior channel development manager, Bell
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