

Bike shops get skewered by Engadget blogger (and of course, I respond)

You can read the full content here, but I'll post an excerpt to give you an idea of what Joshua Fruhlinger, an influential blogger at Engadget (a website for people who like high-tech toys), thinks of his local bike shops-

This year, I was in the market for a new mountain bike. My first move, of course, was to look online where I found a multitude of great deals, free shipping and, of course, no tax. I then checked online communities like mtbr.com where I was guilted into checking my local bike shop. For not much more money, it was argued, I'd establish a relationship with a local dealer who would also service my bike and hook me up with equipment and accessories over the life of the bike.

This sounded nice. I like relationships. So I set out to visit two of the most reputable bike shops in the area, money at the ready, in the dead of Black Friday.

The first shop was set up for the big day with a clearance tent out front full of last year's shoes and pedals. I sauntered past into the showroom and over to the mountain bikes. I stood, staring, waiting for help from one of the three unoccupied salespeople. After 10 minutes, not one approached me. Finally, I walked up to the counter to ask a young, Bieber-esque dude if I could get some help.

Without leaving the comfort of the counter, he asked, "What are you looking at?"

"Well, I'm not sure, but I wanted to check out the Specialized and Yetis you have."

"What's your budget?"

"I'm still figuring that out."

He was still behind the counter. I told him I'd come back when he wasn't so busy.

Ouch. There's another tale of woe involving a different bike shop, and in the end, the blogger concludes that the local bike shop just isn't up to snuff. It's a scary read from someone who's invested everything they've got, time, money, emotion, everything, into a business for 34 years and you wonder, as you're reading it, is this my shop? And on a bad day, it could be! Of course, I had to respond, which you can read below (the response makes more sense if you read the entire blog piece)-

Interesting piece. My brother and I own two brick & mortar bike shops, and have been at it for 34 years. Some of the things in this article make me cringe, not because I don't believe them, but because, on a bad day, it could be my shop he's talking about. I hope not; we try not to sell product in exchange for cash, but rather solutions. That means we need to pay attention to how the customer is actually going to use the product, we have to be aware (and help the customer become aware) of the local opportunities for cycling (something not easily done if you're not from the area), and essentially engage the customer. That's really the key, that's what was missing from Joshua's attempted transactions. Nobody engaged him.

Some of it comes from asking a customer if they need "help" and the customer says "No, just looking" and the salesperson thinks he or she's doing him or her a service by leaving them alone. After a while they (the employees) see that as a normal routine, not connecting with the fact that somebody drove miles to get to their store; they didn't drop in by accident. And miss out on something interesting- the customer's bicycle dream. Instead, after the customer says "No, just looking", the employee can think darn, nobody wants to buy anything, so why shouldn't I spend my time on the 'net reading Cyclingnews?

One thing that Joshua doesn't quite have right though- the idea that 3 hours of google shouldn't put you at an advantage over the salesperson. My goodness, if you want to become the world expert on anything, spending three hours on-line ought to do it, or at least ought to convince you, when you talk to someone else, that you know more about the product than they do. How could you not? I sell primarily a single line of bicycles. Simple, right? Except that within that line I have kids bikes, hybrids, comfort bikes, mountain bikes with 26 or 29 inch wheels (both front & rear suspension), three different road bike platforms... and each of those styles comes in 4 to 10 different models! And they change frequently. I own the store, I've been at it since 1972, I used to race, I still get in 7200 miles a year, I attend all manner of seminars AND I STILL CAN'T TELL YOU THE INTRICATE DETAILS OF EACH OF THOSE BIKES ON THE FLY.

What I realized, early on, is that it's not so bad if the customer knows more about something than you do. You have to get comfortable with that, or else it becomes a battle as you get defensive and the customer wants to prove they're smarter than you are while you're looking for some area they goofed up on so you can tell them they just wasted all that time and know nothing really.

In the end, I love this business because I love putting people on bikes. I love hearing stories about how cycling has changed their life. I love the many ways in which a bicycle can both improve the world and the person. And the best of us (bicycle retailers)... we might screw up once in a while, but we'll go out of our way to make things right, given a chance.

Sorry for the long ramble... it was a more "eventful" day at the shop than it should have been, due to losing our phones and internet (and ability to process credit cards) for four hours. Thank you, Comcast. Grrrrr.

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