

# Interbike retail award recipients share their winning ideas

Need some fresh ideas to re-energize your shop or jump-start sales? We are featuring some innovative retail practices from the winners of this year's Interbike Retailer Innovation Awards.

Staff from the National Bicycle Dealers Association, The Mann Group and Interbike selected 10 retailers from a pool of self-nominated businesses. Stores were asked to apply and share strategies and ideas that they have implemented and which have yielded positive results over the past 12 months. Here's what they had to say about their ideas.

## Outback Bikes

Atlanta, Georgia

Owners: Peter Wicker and Kate Rockett

Years in business: 32

When Peter Wicker suffered a heart attack and stroke in June 2017, his health became the priority. That's when his wife, Kate Rockett, and daughter, Josie Hickok, stepped up to the plate to not only take over operations but grow sales in a tough market. Rockett said that initially her husband's absence was felt, with sales plummeting and some of the worst months in the business' 32-year history. "We started doing clinics and classes and more group family rides not just enthusiast rides. And it took three to four months for us to become flat again. But this year we're beating numbers from two years ago," Rockett said. She and her daughter began hiring more women, and they brought on another brand, Giant, which adds to the store's mix that includes Specialized, Bianchi and a few other niche brands. Hickok also built a new website and linked it to some brands for instant online purchases. Wicker's family forced him into retirement, but Rockett said she's hopeful the business will continue to be family owned and run, with their son Liam showing interest in going to mechanic school and working at the shop, and Hickok running the shop as store manager. "We are truly fortunate for where we are currently," she said. "We as a family and staff have increased sales over last year gradually each month in a flat economy overall."



## Aaron's Bicycle Repair

White Center, Washington

Owner: Aaron Goss

Years in business: 21

When Aaron Goss moved his shop to its current location in early 2017, he devoted more than 50 percent of the new space to service and repair. While Aaron's Bicycle Repair has always been service focused, the 1,800-square-foot shop features an open-air repair area located front and center in the shop. A 25-foot-long glass and wood display, which Goss built, is filled with "hundreds of parts and gewgaws from bicycling's past." Some products in the case are also for sale. The shop's tools and workbench have always been focal points of the store, and in his new location Goss has them neatly organized on a light wood background. "The tools look really nice and people are impressed," said Goss, who opened the store in Seattle in 1997. "Service is the majority of our business, with 34 percent of our income from labor and most parts and accessories sales are for or come out of repair jobs. Bikes — new and used — only make up about 10 percent of our sales." Charging enough for service has contributed to the shop's success. "We charge maybe a little more than some shops, but you wouldn't take your car to the cheapest mechanic. We charge a fair price. Our shop is one of the cleanest and organized you will likely see, and that sets us apart," Goss said.



## Frisco Bike Shop

Willard, Missouri

Owner: Cari Harrison

Years in Business: Less than 1.



Cari Harrison thought that the town of Willard needed a small bike shop directly on its popular 35-mile rail trail. The challenge was that the landowner didn't want a permanent structure on the property. The solution: convert two shipping containers into a store. In its first season, Harrison said the store has been a raging success. "It's been fantastic; it's more than we ever imagined," she said. The shop offers rentals, service, bike sales and food and drinks for bike path users. One surprising success has been the store's weekly mountain bike rides at a local park. The shop brings a fleet of rental bikes and leads rides for various skill levels. They attract about 40 people, most of whom rent bikes. "We have rentals booked out a couple weeks in advance" for those rides, Harrison said. The shop has been such a success that it's outgrowing its space. The solution: Harrison will insert a third shipping container between the first two. "All we have to do is pull down some decorative and pop one into the middle," she said. She plans to make the addition this winter.

## Babcock Bicycle

Endicott, New York

Owner: Kevin Babcock

Years in Business: 39

Kevin Babcock found innovation, and retail survival, by simplifying his inventory and creating a modern showroom. Babcock has been in his current space about 15 years. But things weren't looking good. "I look across the street and see an empty store. ... Our numbers were starting to dip and I knew we couldn't keep doing business like we were doing or we would be next," he said. So Babcock cut back sharply on the store's SKUs — but went deeper on key items. "We still fill the rack. We just have a smaller selection. We looked at carrying what our customers really needed, not what Trek wanted to make," he said. Instead of a wall of helmets, he offers just two models now: one road, one mountain. He also removed barriers. "We were old-fashioned: We had glass cases and we'd help people find what they needed. Now we've taken out three of the cases and put in more slatwall and put things where people can get them." With less inventory, he's selling more. "I think we had so much inventory people got brain freeze. Now it's simpler for them, and for me," he said.





## Bloomington Cycle & Fitness

Bloomington, Illinois

**Owners:** Scott and Caryn Davis

**Years in business:** 21 (10 under current ownership)

A UBI-certified mechanic with more than 20 years of industry experience, Christopher Tuma has made it his mission to personalize the service writing process at Bloomington Cycle & Fitness. "Bonding with the customer, understanding the customer and the potential sentimental value of the bicycle is so important. But oftentimes it translates into a bike sale because they got the bike secondhand and don't have that sentimental attachment, and they need someone to show them the bike is worn out and they can benefit from a bike that is the correct size or is not going to be a money pit to replace the driveline and the cables. They can afford to get a new bike with an excellent service plan," he said. As the shop's service writer, Tuma has set up his space with a workstand and good lighting so he can demonstrate a bike's wear and tear to the customer — from chain stretch to worn shift cables and brake pads and rotted tires. "Catching the issues and potential issues on a repair and the relation of the owner with the bike before the mechanic works on it has increased new bike sales and bike repairs that are perfect every time," Tuma noted.

## Absolute Bikes

Salida, Colorado

**Owner:** Shawn Gillis

**Years in business:** 19

Absolute Bikes has expanded its demo program in recent years and is finding the program pays dividends in unsuspected ways. The store is in a hotbed of mountain biking and stocks an array of pricey bikes. In the demo program, customers pay \$200, which is applied to any new bike purchase and allows them to ride as many demo bikes as possible for up to three days. It helps customers choose the right bike, demonstrates the staff's knowledge, and builds a deeper relationship with customers. "There is less talk about price and more talk about which bike is best for them," said store owner Shawn Gillis. The cost comes in stocking more high-end bikes, storing and maintaining them, and training staff so they can dive deep with the customer. But a bike buyer who spends days trying bikes and interacting with employees about features, sizing and tuning — and the best local trails — might become a customer for life. "Many of them never knew how much work goes into bike setup, into our trails, into our inventory, and for our staff to competently explain the difference in linkages so the customer feels excited about their purchase," Gillis said.



## Wheelhouse Detroit

Detroit, Michigan

**Owner:** Kelli Kavanaugh

**Years in business:** 10

In addition to sales and service, Wheelhouse Detroit has offered experiential, guided bike tours and rentals since it opened on Detroit's riverfront in 2008. Owner Kelli Kavanaugh said that these tours, which cover a variety of topics that allow guests to become better acquainted with the city, have always set her shop apart. "But there's a lot of new competition here with five new shops that have opened in the past four years and one more opening this fall, so now it means staying alive," said Kavanaugh, who opened a second store in Hamtramck, an enclave city surrounded by Detroit on all sides, in 2016. "No one else is really doing it [tours]." Wheelhouse Detroit's tours are run mostly out of its flagship location, which sits on the riverfront path, a popular destination for tourists and locals alike. The shop has a fleet of about 70 bikes, renting mostly cruisers and conducting tours on lighter-weight geared hybrids. Wheelhouse Detroit's tours cover a variety of topics including architecture, urban agriculture, sports, auto and music heritage, public art and historic cemeteries. In addition to public tours, Wheelhouse offers private tours and increasingly, corporate tours on weekdays, which Kavanaugh said helps fill out the week.

## Topanga Creek Outpost

Topanga, California

**Owner:** Chris Kelly

**Years in business:** 19

At Topanga Creek Outpost, owner Chris Kelly saw a lot of riders were interested in going on his "UnPredict Your Wednesday" overnight bikepacking excursions, but that interest wasn't translating into the frequency of participation he'd like. "We noticed people weren't participating as often as they wanted. So we sat down with a bunch of people, served them breakfast and asked them why they weren't going," he recalled. Riders said not having suitable gear, or looking foolish by not being properly prepared, was keeping them on the sidelines. So Kelly purchased six bikepacking bikes — a handful of Surlys, a Jeff Jones bike and an Advocate Cycles Hayduke mountain bike repurposed for bikepacking — and outfitted them with shop-branded frame and seat bags from Bedrock Bags in Durango, Colorado. Customers rent the bikes for a minimum of two days, and can add on a camping package that includes a tent, sleeping bag and sleep pad. "We wanted to make it as easy as possible so people could go," Kelly said. The rentals include a free additional day to visit the shop and get set up on the bike, which helps spread the bikepacking stoke among customers who wander into the store. "Other people see them getting set up and want to go too," Kelly said.

## Level 9 Sports

4 stores along Wasatch Front in Utah

**Owner:** Dave Hall, majority owner

**Years in business:** 12

Level 9 Sports started selling skis online back in 2006, then added brick-and-mortar stores and bikes and related accessories to round



out sales. Though it has four stores in Utah, they account for only 30 percent of sales. The majority of its business is done online through its own website, Amazon, eBay and other third-party sites. "Our goal is to not get in the way of a customer to buy what they want where they want to buy it," said Christopher Kautz, chief operating officer. Because the company has invested to build its own website, it's able to incorporate functions like mounting skis for online purchases. The company is working to build out the same capability to do customization for bikes bought online, so they can be built and shipped to customers. "We do that with closeout frames that are not website restrictive, but now we're in the first phases of being able to sell demo bikes from some of our vendors," Kautz said. Aside from its online savvy, Level 9 has grown sales through product bundling, which has not only increased the average order value but also the units per order.

## 718 Cyclery

Brooklyn, New York

**Owner:** Joe Nocella

**Years in business:** 10

Last December, more than 40 bike shops in 23 states — plus a retailer in Russia — participated in the inaugural Bike Shop Day, an event 718 Cyclery owner Joe Nocella started as a celebration of the IBD and the sense of community local bike shops build. Nocella got the idea from a manager who joined his Brooklyn shop from the music industry, which has celebrated Record Store Day for music retailers since 2008. Participating bike shops held sales, group rides, community events and fundraisers. "These crazy guys in Russia this mountain bike shop, they contacted us. They were in the middle of nowhere, and they took a bunch of pictures of them barbecuing inside their store," Nocella said. At 718 Cyclery, Nocella and his staff served up a pancake breakfast, held raffles, hosted group rides and gave away swag bags with products donated by the shop's suppliers. "People lined up to get swag bag but it was more about getting people into the shop. The industry needs an event like this," said Nocella, who reported an increase of 345 percent in customer traffic and a 245 percent jump in sales compared with the same weekend day in 2016. With Bike Shop Day now established, Nocella is emphasizing a spirit of diversity and inclusion in the cycling industry for the event's second edition, set for Dec. 1. Shops and vendors interested in participating can fill out a form at BikeShopDay.com.