



During spring and summer of 2020, when COVID-19 lockdowns were still stringent and government was cautious about opening indoor recreational activities, outdoor recreation received a large boost in interest. In Vancouver and other cities across Canada, recreational bicycling became more popular as a way to safely get exercise, gather distantly with friends and enjoy the warm weather. This 'bicycle boom' has persisted into the early fall and businesses such as Sidesaddle Bikes in Vancouver, which have stayed open during the pandemic, are enthusiastic about new riders joining the community¹. Sidesaddle Bikes is a locally-owned, independent bike shop that provides high quality and specialized bikes for city and road riders. They provide a catered shopping experience to every unique rider, so their customers get the best bike for their needs. Sidesaddle Bikes also has mechanics on hand to fix complex bike problems, but the emphasis of the shop is too 'do it right the first time' by selling the rider their best fitting bike. Owner Andrea Smith moved Sidesaddle Bikes in the spring of 2020 and converted the original site, opened in 2015 to a quick repair shop called Flat Fix. Flat Fix is a neighbourhood bike shop which provides affordable, accessible bike sales, bike parts, and offers low cost repairs. In addition to repairing bikes, Sidesaddle Bikes also offers 'inflation by donation' tire fills to support different charities every month.

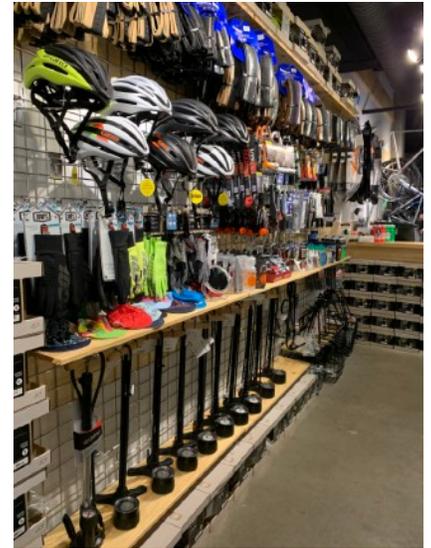
Sidesaddle Bikes operates in a 1,000 square-foot facility located on Commercial Street. They are open seven days per week with a staff of three to four people at the shop. Before the store opens, staff come in early to discuss bike fixes, work on repairs, and do customer bike fittings. Andrea explained, "about two hours [in the morning] is the time for the staff to really focus in an uninterrupted way on any difficult work orders or admin work." When the store opens at noon there is typically a line-up of people outside waiting to pick up and drop off bikes for the day. In the time the shop is open each staff member is assigned a role to either help customers coming in, managing communication for services, or work on the bikes being dropped off. By the time the after-work rush finishes and the shop can close it's usually around 7pm.

¹ Price, G. (2020, September 22). The Bike Boom and Winter: Will Vancouver Become a 'Conventional' City? Price Tags. <https://pricetags.ca/2020/09/22/the-bike-boom-and-winter-will-vancouver-become-a-conventional-city/>

Challenges for Running a Sustainable Bike Shop

There are a number of sustainability challenges to running a bike shop. The biggest challenge Andrea has encountered is the amount of unnecessary packaging used in the shipping process of bike parts. Andrea remarked that it is ironic for a bike shop to struggle on this front "...because we're supposed to be very environmentally friendly; [but] sustainability, environmental sustainability, has been a challenge for us." In addition, Sidesaddle Bikes presently doesn't have a cardboard recycling dumpster through the strata, which means long drives to the recycling depot to drop off all the cardboard recycling.

The shop also prioritizes social sustainability by investing in the working environment and people. "[O]ur priority has always been in terms of sustainability of the business and the lives of the people who are working in the business," commented Andrea. The shop chooses to focus more on social sustainability and trust building with staff as a way to ensure quality relationships that will last. This reciprocity between the owner and staff has led to some great suggestions by staff on how to reuse incompatible bike parts. For example, by donating them to Kickstand; a non-profit community bike shop run by volunteers.



Due to limited space storage space they don't always have room to store parts for later donation. Sometimes, parts that could be reused end up going to the trash. Andrea noted that the biggest limitation for small stores to implement comprehensive recycling is physical space. "So... for us to have a recycling program that I feel good about we would need a space at least as big as our bathroom... and we would need to be storing rubber, soft plastic, cardboard, scrap metal, bike parts, used chemicals, [and] paper, " remarked Andrea. Another challenge is that there isn't one comprehensive service that will collect all the different types of recycled materials that the bike shop produces. They would have to spend more time dropping off different materials at different locations. With the small amount of staff and the time taken to drop off materials, "it's frustrating having to take different substances to different places." There have been some small victories for the shop's sustainability goals. For instance, they found a way to recycle Evo batteries for electric bikes. If more information about products recyclability was readily available, it would have helped to expedite implementing more sustainable practices.

Adaptations for COVID-19

Sidesaddle Bikes made several changes to adapt to changing guidelines surrounding COVID-19. One benefit of being a small shop was they were able to experiment with different safety protocols to see what worked and what didn't. Overall, they've tried to keep changes to a minimum so customers and staff can more easily understand and follow the rules. Over time, the shop has adapted to what works instead of "... flying by the seat of our pants", as they did in the beginning. Now they are able to double down using the most effective protocols and stay consistent.

The main changes maintained have been based on a philosophy of mitigating risk rather than trying for 100% control of all activities. This includes managing the flow of people in the store, disinfecting common surfaces regularly, and allocating dedicated teams to the two shops to minimize cross exposure. Another adjustment has been to introduce appointments for riders to test ride bikes or to get their bike checked. Previously appointment weren't mandated, and it has been challenging for riders to adjust when they are used to "[dropping] by their neighbourhood bike shop and get some help." Now customers can use an online platform not only to make online appointments, but to research higher end bikes, correspond with staff, and then set up a final selection and fitting appointment to purchase a new bike. Another change was to temporarily stop the "inflation by donation" service to minimize equipment touching and potential COVID-19 transfer. In the future they hope to start the service again.



Challenges from COVID-19

Bike Demand

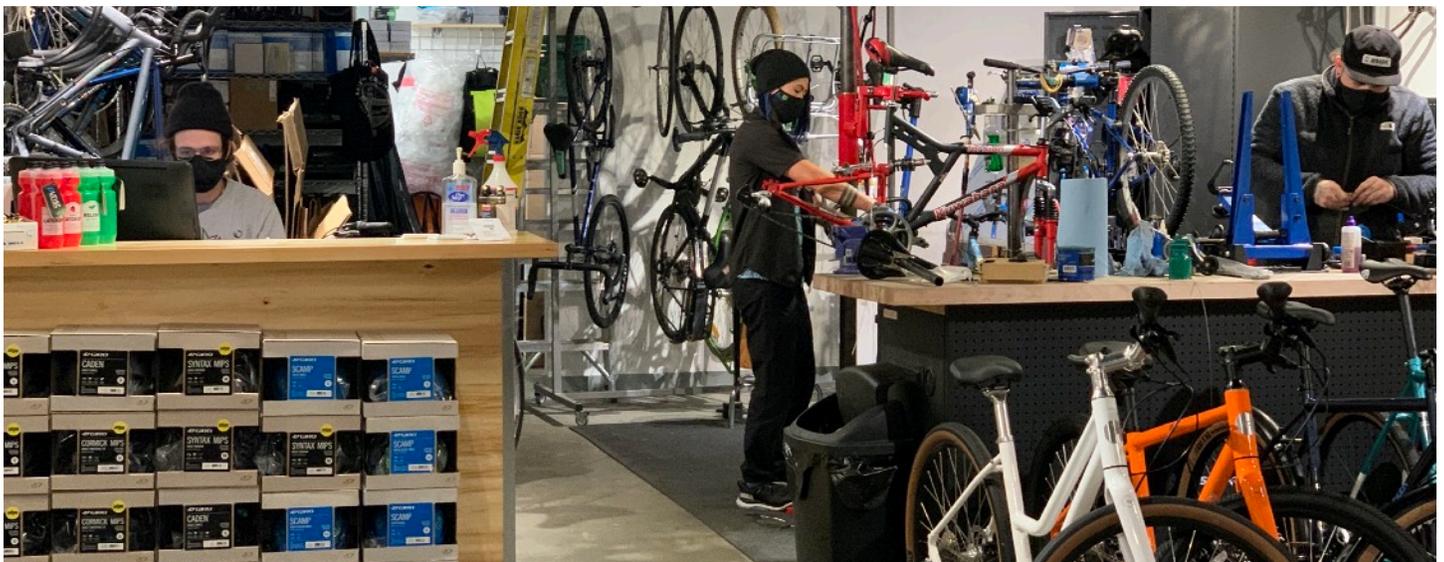
The limits on indoor activities during the spring and summer gave people more incentive to take advantage of nice weather by exploring outdoor activities like bicycling, which fit social distancing parameters. Bike shops found their services more in demand compared to prior seasons. Typically, the community of Sidesaddle Bikes was dominated by enthusiasts connecting with other riders. With the increased interest in bicycling in the spring and summer, there were more new people entering the shop who may not have as much experience with the ins and outs of rider culture. While it was positive to get more people interested in riding, it also presented some challenges for communicating between staff and customers who were and were not familiar with bike shop culture and etiquette. The majority of the time customers were very respectful and “most people who are shopping in the store value their bikes and value us and it’s a very respectful, humane, mutually supportive relationship.” But with an uptake of new riders, Andrea noticed that there has been increased strain between staff and new customers who may display “a lot of disrespectful customer behaviour.”

Diverse Staff and Customer Base

A challenge in any business is to accommodate the needs of a diverse staff and clientele. In the bike shop it is no different. One challenge was to build consensus on COVID-19 protocols that had the buy-in from all staff. One example making masks mandatory for staff and customers before there was a provincial mandate to do so. They also had to consider how to balance good customer experience with increased safety protocols. In some instances, the shop has encountered customers who had service expectations that were not in line with safety protocols and/or capabilities of the shop. In this case they found it was more helpful to suggest the customer take their business to a different location without being charged, instead of finishing their repairs. In most cases, they found that stress can be a factor in strained interactions and can be dissipated once there is recognition that the staff are trying their best to help the customer. Andrea explained that once given the option to leave, “I’d say three-quarters of them stay and are nicer to the team. Because they’re not bad people, they’re just stressed.”

Supply Chain

A final challenge has been a mismatch between the bike boom in demand and ability of suppliers to provision parts. COVID-19 disruptions to factory production and shipping resulted in less available bike parts being supplied to meet the recent increase in demand. This dynamic revealed shortages in the globalized market that the local bike industry relies on, especially for shops that rely on individual sellers for special orders. At Sidesaddle Bikes they order from 30 to 40 suppliers to get parts. While they do try to buy Canadian, some specialized pieces are only made in certain factories overseas and may not be available in Canada. “[W]e do a lot of business with Canadian [companies]... what’s left of the Canadian bicycle industry, but even then” it can be hard to find local supply.



Benefits from COVID-19

Bike Boom

One unexpected benefit of COVID-19 was having the second store timed to open as demand for bikes increased in the spring and summer. It took extra effort but was also good luck. Originally the space was going to replace the first store, but after the landlord decided not to increase the rent, they decided to keep the current site and name it Flat Fix. Andrea reflected, “we were like, wait a minute we’re leaving a really well established bike shop location that’s built out and we kind of have nothing to lose from keeping it.”

With the new shop open the business was able to capitalize on the boom in bike sales and doubled business between the two locations. With Sidesaddle Bikes and Flat Fix open, both shops were still busy and “still running at pretty much full capacity.” It was much easier to expand the business across two sites given bike shops were deemed essential and “being on that list has enabled...we didn’t have to lay anyone off. Which was awesome.” The bike boom was also beneficial to new riders as the recreation and exercise is a benefit to mental and physical health. If in the future bike shops are no longer on the essential services list, it would be a challenge for the shop.

“If the public health officials change their mind and took us off the essential list, I would be sad and financially that would be hard, but I would respect that decision.”

More Structure and Efficiency

Another benefit to the COVID-19 rules and regulations was having a slower pace in the bike shop. The safety protocol adjustments gave more time in the day to focus on repairs as well as improving their recycling systems. For example, they began to recycle soft plastics. They also utilized space across shops to store extra bike parts for donation and recycling that needed to be dropped off at the depot. Andrea hopes they can keep this momentum by improving recycling practices further to align with their sustainability goals.

Sidesaddle Bikes has a different sales process than other bike shops. They have specialty bike orders rather than just direct buy “as is” bikes. “Like I would say two-thirds of the bikes we sell are special order which is totally weird in this industry,” commented Andrea. To help with the process of buying a bike, they’ve developed a system where riders can do most of the shopping work from home. To start the process, they have a customer survey which includes questions about the intended uses of the bike, the rider’s body measurements, and other pertinent information. Shop staff then make recommendations about what bikes would best suit the rider, who can then make an appointment to come get fitted and test bikes. This makes the purchasing decision more efficient because the rider already has a couple bikes to choose from prior to visiting the shop. Having the consultation process with a subsequent appointment is something the shop will be keeping in the future.

Advice for Programs and Policies

Through the pandemic the shop has had challenges and opportunities for learning that can apply to other small and medium businesses working through the pandemic. Sidesaddle Bikes was part of the Support Local BC campaign which facilitates gift card purchases to local businesses to help balance lost revenue from in-person shopping when stores were shut down. Andrea was cautious about government subsidies and assumed they would automatically apply to businesses across the board. Among the small business community, the perceived efficiency of grant and loan dispersal from the government is low and this has led to a lot of frustration. Other challenges include increased prices of lease space in Vancouver because empty lots and spaces are not taxed. She observed that the climate for small Vancouver businesses is so difficult that most businesses are focused on survival, and that more effective management of the commercial real estate market would reduce the pressure and free up resources to adapt to unexpected circumstances, such as COVID-19, and sustainability initiatives. In conclusion, Andrea remarked that the government could set up more efficient and accessible programs for distributing emergency subsidies, and also focus on addressing underlying issues of commercial leasing which challenge small businesses.

Written by Jamie Varney, edited by Tamara Shulman and Belinda Li. Thank you to Andrea Smith for sharing insights and experiences from Sidesaddle Bikes. Revised: 2020 December 4.