

DIRK ZEDLER

SUSTAINABILITY: A HALO ABOUT TO LOSE ITS SHEEN

Recent years have seen a boom in bicycle and e-bike sales. It's high time for bike dealers and manufacturers to start caring about the bicycle as a product in all its facets. The industry needs to ramp up its lobbying effort to ensure cycling is a truly sustainable mobility solution.

Riding bikes is not just fun but also sustainable and the best available solution when it comes to covering short and medium distances. It has a number of positive attributes, being a healthy, emission-free activity requiring very little material and space. The bicycle is therefore rightly considered part of the solution to many of today's problems: overcrowded and congested cities, noise pollution, a dearth of parking spaces and the need to overcome our reliance on fossil fuels. However, it is entirely unwarranted to rest on these laurels, as many players in the bike industry seem wont to do.

Hardly any manufacturer is truly in the know about the ecological and societal footprint of globalised production. Acquiring this knowledge is an ambitious task that requires a lot of commitment and is fraught with pitfalls. But I believe it would be wrong if manufacturers were to abstain from tackling the subject of sustainability because of the difficulties involved.

Starting with the MTB boom at the tail end of the 1980s and the start of the 1990s, bikes have been built by cycling athletes for other cycling athletes. This has meant that passing trends and functions were turned into selling points that the majority of cyclists are not even able to experience or which have been of little or no use to them. Such sales strategies have resulted in ever shorter lifespans of the standards for tyres, hubs, bottom brackets and fork dimensions, to name only a few. What was en vogue in one season became outdated only one or two years later. This would not be so bad, were it not for the fact that many a bike has ended up far too early on the scrapheap of obsolescence due to insufficient availability of spare parts and the resulting lack of repairability.

Current bike tech is only partly sustainable

The industry has been rejoicing in the electric bike boom for the past decade, ignoring the fact that the 'e' in 'e-bike' changes virtually everything about a bicycle. Brake pads and rotors that have historically been optimized for weight give out after a few minor descents, super-narrow chains with delicate sprocket clusters that fail after less than a thousand kilometres, equipment that is not designed for the higher loads created by more cargo, longer distances and transporting children, as well as the churn of model changes combined with the poor supply of spare parts: all this can easily ruin the potentially stellar ecological bottom line of riding e-bikes.

Unfortunately, while sales continue to surge, they do not even remotely reflect new surveys on the actual use of all the bikes, e-bikes and cargo bikes as replacement for cars. According to current publications, the use of motor vehicles is more widespread than



photo@zedler.de

ever. There are manifold reasons for the failure of e-bikes to replace cars. Too many potential bike users are still afraid to move in road traffic, topped off by the constant fear of bike theft. The argument that a bicycle is less convenient in day-to-day use should also be taken seriously.

We as an industry need to firmly advocate and support the use of bicycles beyond their mere manufacture and sale. Only when sufficient and convenient bike paths, safe public parking spaces as well as showers and lockers at workplaces have become available will the many bikes sold be put to intensive use. Only then will buyers continue to enjoy cycling and be willing to buy their next great bike before long.

Lobbying to secure future sales

We need to be honest with ourselves as an industry: a boom like the current one could be followed by years of slumping sales. This we can only prevent if we pave the way for future success.

Other sectors have demonstrated for many years how that could be done – lobbying being the magic word here. It does not behoof any industry player to balk at the L-word. Let's take a more pragmatic approach instead.

The easiest way to engage in lobbying is to become a member of an association that is concerned not just with technology or the current sales and procurement strategies but has people close to the government working on concrete tasks. In Germany, the place to be is Berlin.

While the pharmaceutical and automotive industries, to name just two amongst many, each have more than estimated 500 lobbyists working in the German capital, all the bicycle associations combined don't even have 10 full-time lobbyists on the payroll.



But to make a difference, bike dealers and manufacturers do not necessarily only have to be where the really big policy decisions are made. Local advocacy, e.g. in local councils or at chambers of trade and commerce, can set a lot of things in motion. The bike industry has multiplied its sales volumes in euros over the past few years and is now a major economic actor – which will not go unnoticed by policymakers and administrations, provided they are made aware of it. Make no mistake, they will not come across this knowledge on their own. It is the bike industry's responsibility to point them to it and set out our demands for more traffic space and safe parking options. Strive for best practices when it comes to mobility management within your company, and communicate this role model unambiguously within your community or city.

The last few years have seen a rapid transformation of the market and the industry which has kept the cash registers of dealers and manufacturers ringing. However, when it comes to long-term high-level sales, another COVID-like opportunity is not likely to come along any time soon. We must work together as an industry to make traffic routes and cycling opportunities so attractive that the bicycle becomes the preferred alternative for the daily commute or the trip to the supermarket.

It is high time cycling was transformed from a sport and hobby into an actual sustainable mobility solution. If we fail to do so, the poor sustainability of production and the short product lifecycles will fast become a real issue and our halo will start to lose its sheen.

Dipl.-Ing Dirk Zedler, publicly appointed and sworn-in expert and Managing Director, Zedler-Institut, www.zedler.de



Dirk Zedler (photo©Bernd Lammel)

DIRK ZEDLER

Since 1993, Dirk Zedler has been an analyst and expert witness on bicycle accidents and product failures for courts, bike and insurance companies, and private individuals. He got his start in the industry by working for a large bike shop from 1986 on, and now holds the respected advanced engineering degree known as "Diplom-Ingenieur."

Courts have recognized Zedler as an officially appointed and sworn expert on bicycles since 1994, and on electric bicycles since 2014.

The Zedler – Institute for Bicycle Technology and Safety has used this wealth of knowledge, derived from his and his teams work in thousands of court proceedings and expert's reports not only in Germany but from the US to all over Europe, to enhance research and development in the bicycle industry.

The Institute sets the standards for the bicycle industry. It develops and builds testing equipment that is used by manufacturers to improve the riding performance and safety of their bikes, and by leading European bicycle magazines to test them. The Institute's work provides a basis for European and American manufacturers to communicate with their Asian suppliers. Manufacturers can buy test equipment from the Institute or use its state-of-the-art testing labs.

The Zedler Institute also prepares risk analyses, conformity papers, workshops, recall papers and user manuals for bicycles and pedelecs. These manuals, now available in more than 40 languages, help consumers use their bikes properly — and in many cases have protected manufacturers from liability. **For more information, visit www.zedler.de.**