

Communications Audit: Durham Bicycle Cooperative

Background:

The Durham Bike Cooperative was founded in 2007 by a group of cyclists and bicycle mechanics that are dedicated to the Durham community and environmentally friendly transportation. The founders established a location where community members can learn about the many facets of biking and its advantages. Since 2007, the organization has been promoting sustainable transportation through workshops such as repair skill-sharing, clinics, and "earn-a-bike" programs.

What makes the Durham Bike Cooperative different from other bike shops is the relationship between the bike mechanic and customer. The organization holds weekly shop nights, where customers get hands on experience working with the bike mechanics to fix their bikes. The shop's mission is to empower program participants to fix their own bicycles.

Each year on average, the organization provides repair assistance to nearly 500 customers. Close to 120 people earn or purchase a refurbished bicycle. In addition, the Co-op recycles up to four tons of scrap metal yearly to ensure that valuable materials are kept out of the landfills.

The Co-op is run by volunteers who share a passion for sound environmental practices, a commitment to sustainable economics and social equality, involvement and outreach with the local community and the promotion of cycling as a healthy fitness and wellness activity.

Overall the organization does a lot for the Durham community. Their commitment to the Durham community's well being is reflected the organization's desire to help customers learn the important skills needed to maintain an environmentally sustainable lifestyle.

Strengths:

To better understand how to help the communication efforts of the co-op we analyzed their current public relations efforts and identified several strengths and weaknesses as a starting point. First, the co-op has a well-organized website. The headings

are clear, and the FAQ section is very thorough. The website could easily help someone understand what the co-op's goals are and how they plan to achieve them. Additionally, the contact information is clear for members of the co-op and a map of the location is on the homepage. These elements add to the accessibility and online presence of the co-op.

Aside from the website, the co-op has social media accounts on both Facebook and Twitter. In a digital age it is important for businesses to take advantage of these platforms because they offer free advertising and engage participants. The co-op has almost 2,000 "likes" on its Facebook page. Another strength of the co-op is the uniform logo. The logo is used on all flyers and brochures, on the website and as an avatar for both social media accounts. This helps with recognition of the organization and shows consistency across platforms.

Weaknesses:

In addition to identifying the strengths of the communication efforts, we also found several places for improvement. Although there are almost 2,000 followers on the Facebook page, there are only 88 on the co-op's Twitter. This could be due to a lack of knowledge on how to engage users of different platforms. While the co-op is good at writing long-form posts on the Facebook page, they do not have a strong presence of shorter posts for Twitter. Other challenges with the social media efforts include the fact that Durham Bike Co-op does not have an Instagram account. These separate platforms reach different age groups, and we believe the co-op is ignoring a large audience of young people by not utilizing Instagram.

Further areas for improvement are the overall lack of visuals, both on the co-op's website and across the social media accounts. Having worked with Durham bike co-op for the semester we understand what they do, but for an average person the goals may not be as easily understood. Photographs are much more effective at engaging readers and without them the co-op's online efforts lack the edge needed to draw people in. A final weakness we aimed to address through our work with the co-op is the lack of consistent

updates online. There are new Facebook and Twitter posts sporadically and new blog posts every few months.

Opportunities:

The biggest opportunity for the co-op lies with their online presence, starting with their website. With an updated, interactive and accessible website, more people will be drawn into learn about the co-op and the services it provides. An updated website could include links to social media sites (that are updated regularly) that interested parties could share with their family and friends. This establishes the co-op as a prominent community organization that maintains beneficial relationships between its members and the community as a whole.

Second, advertising events online and through social media sites could increase turnout at all co-op events and at open-shop nights at the workshop. This is especially important as the co-op is under construction and trying to raise money for the construction project.

Most opportunities for the co-op cycle back to the appropriate use of their social media sites. With the appropriate use of social media, the co-op can widen its influence to the Durham community as a whole instead of just the cycling community.

Another opportunity for the co-op is to set up partnerships with other nonprofits in the area that have the same special interest. Some of these groups include BikewalkNC, or the ReCYCLery in Carrboro. This would create a network for the co-op's board of directors as well as for its members. This could help with event planning, fundraising, and awareness for their cause.

Threats:

One of the more glaring threats to the cooperative is that they do not have a wide range of advertising for themselves compared to other repair facilities. As a result, people are not sure of who they are and what they do. For example, upon googling "Bike repair

shops Durham NC” the cooperative does not pop up on the search results along with the 9 other bicycle repair facilities in the Triangle area.

However, the biggest threat faced by cooperative is another nonprofit organization of the same nature in Carrboro. The ReCYCLERY has not only been around for longer than the co-op has (15 years compared to 8), but their use of social media has been more effective. They frequently post to their Facebook and Twitter compared to the sporadic posts on the co-op’s sites. Their website is also more catching and prompts visitors to sign-up or to give to their organization. When the ReCYCLERY asks for donations they specify what your donation could provide compared to the co-op’s website shows you all the ways you can donate and only emphasizes the fact that donations are “tax-deductible.”

Recommendations:

Since Durham Bike Co-op has such a strong emphasis on the relationships with their customers, their entire organization should represent that, even outside of the shop. This starts with having a unified message delivered to all members and interested people.

The co-op cannot have a unified message if they do not have the same idea of what that message is. First, the board of directors needs to have a meeting to discuss the most important messages for the co-op. There has been a heavy emphasis on construction, but this can’t be the only area of focus. What social events are coming up? If there aren’t any, brainstorm potential ones. What has been happening at open shop? Maybe highlight some outstanding volunteers, do a “member of the week/month” or have a “quote of the day” that relate back to the co-op’s mission on some way.

Once there’s a set message, the co-op should turn to social media. Regular usage of social media sites to display the co-op’s message keeps the attention of current members and has the potential to attract new ones. The co-op needs to utilize their social media coordinator more fully. Bring the message to him, and allow him to regularly update Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, etc. The key word is regularly. For sites like twitter, this means at least once a day, and for the others this means at least once or twice a week.

If there is a concern that the social media coordinator might be too busy to post one day, the co-op should use Hootsuite. This allows an account to have a queue of messages that can be sent on a delay. This provides the co-op with a tool that can archive posts so there are posts to choose from, and to send automatically.

This increased use of social media should incorporate the blog as well. A regular blog posts weekly or bi-weekly, which may sound daunting. In a meeting with the board and the social media coordinator, they should create a queue of ideas of what blog writers can write about. Some of these should include upcoming events and ways to get involved, but it is also important to have posts about a biking lifestyle or that can relate to biking. This could include things like “best snacks to eat after a ride,” “best places to bike in Durham,” etc. This engages members on a higher level than just informing them about upcoming events.

This increase in social media and blog use should all be brought together by an updated website. There are free sites like Wordpress, Wix, or Weebly that the co-op could use to create a sleek, simple and well done website. With a website that draws people in, the co-op can get their message across and link to all of their social media sites.