



Photo credit: Stu McKellar-Basset

IN A SPIN

Spurred on by the ever more rapidly spinning dollars and cents gauge at the petrol pump, more and more commuters are spinning to and from work. After hours, hungry, lycra-clad athletes spin furiously in bunched groups and families pedal the many public cycle-ways.



Opposite Round and spinning – the magic of cycling.

Left The lively surrounds entice customers to want to be a part of the cycling world at Hedgehog Bikes on the North Shore.

Right The North Shore's Hedgehog Bikes store.

Cycle retail is on a roll. No one need look far for evidence. Import statistics provide concrete proof of the cycling boom: annual total bike imports in 2003 jumped 45,000 to 208,084. In 2005, bikes imported were 218,405 – slightly down from the 2004 peak of 255,146.

Bicycle Industry Association of New Zealand (BIANZ) chairman and cycle accessories importer/wholesaler Peter McGregor is all too aware of the current cycle surge. He has 40-foot containers arriving every day, chock-a-block with his Bike-Bits branded accessories. Such is the global demand for all things cycling he's now having to order five months in advance.

"The problem for (New Zealand's) importers and wholesalers is ordering enough in advance because we're just a little drop in the world market. I just hope that people have got sufficient stock for summer."

He sees huge opportunities for further growth.

"For much of the last twenty years the industry was in decline but I can now see huge potential, especially with fuel costs ... you only have to look at what's happened to the demand for motor bikes and scooters; the same thing will happen, and is happening, with us."

IN THE SADDLE

Aside from those who are seeking fuel-free forms of transport, 'lapsed' and new cyclists are being enticed into pedal power.

Phil Judd of Hedgehog Bikes, a six-shop group in Auckland and the upper North Island, attributes last summer's phenomenal trade largely to mums, dads and the kids getting out on bikes.

"It was a confluence of a number of factors: great weather and a lot of parents wanting to get the kids away from the couch. Often that ended up with the kids and parents getting out on bikes."

He says advancement in bike design has also helped encourage the more mature back into the saddle, with 'comfort bikes' – those with suspension forks, suspension seat posts and adjustable handlebar stems – making bike-riding easier and more comfortable for adults.

Yet another reason for more 'oldies' turning to pedal power is the low impact nature of cycling – with many former pavement-pounders swapping their Nikes for knobbly tyres.

Notably, more women are pulling on the lycras, says Gail Gilbert of Southend Cycles, Levin.

In the bike retail business since 1985, Gail and husband Brian have traded

through the various trends. They started with 10-speeds, then mountain bikes and, more recently, road bikes. The current desire to be fit is bringing in more baby boomers – especially women. She attributes the femme fatale influx to sports events, such as the Special K Women's Triathlon series.

"They want all the gear and they'll spend their money on all the right accessories." She mentions a 30-something woman who recently walked out of the shop with \$1,700-worth of bike and assorted gear.

ALL SEASONS

For many, cycling has become a year-round passion. Christchurch retailer Ewen Robertson can attest to that, with business at Hub Cycles buzzing during the traditionally quiet month of June. Commuter bikes pretty much sold out – as did basic road bikes; then there were the hard-core cyclists calling in to buy an extra winter layer before heading out to clock up a few kilometres.

"Generally, people were looking for good basic bikes ... but we were still regularly selling high-end bikes."

Undoubtedly, the current demand presents opportunities for further expansion of the market, says Alastair Woodfield, managing director of Cycletech – the New Zealand

distributor for Giant bikes and various mid-to-high-price, branded accessories.

He says the development of new types of bike, such as free-ride bikes and skateboard bikes, is creating niche opportunities.

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"That presents the opportunity for expansion of the market as a whole – but more challenges for a (specialist) retailer. They can't be specialised in every area so have to decide what their focus is."

But whatever their chosen niche, specialists must strive to rise to the expectations of their customers, says Russell Sinclair, BIANZ executive director and the New Zealand Retailers Association Auckland regional manager.

"People look to you as the knowledgeable professional. They're brand- and status-conscious and want the right gear." Fulfilling expectations also means having the right look and brand, something sadly lacking in some bike specialist shops.