



Ashland's Brandt offers mobile services to bicyclists

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ASHLAND — When leisurely bike enthusiasts fancy for a ride, life can jam their time.

It's no secret that parents are bound to work and family obligations. They endure seemingly endless days and lightning fast weeks. So, for bike lovers, any chance to beat the stress on a cycle is a cherished godsend. Moreover, taking the time to do so has important health benefits.

For example, according to the British United Provident Association, a medical insurer, a 15-minute bike ride five times a week burns off the equivalent of 11 pounds of fat in a year.

Unfortunately, for many moms and dads biking can be infrequent and the necessary maintenance is even more so.

So, if biking offers health benefits yet the hours are fleeting, how can enthusiasts solve this quandary so they can enjoy the cycling season on a safe, reliable bicycle?

Well, Steven Brandt has the answer to that riddle. In December, the Ashland resident started Steve the Bike Guy, a mobile bicycle maintenance and consulting service.

The business is a mix of repair shop, school, sales consultation and AAA. Whether consumers need a tuneup, brake repair, product adviser or good route, Brandt delivers.

The beauty behind Brandt's venture is he encapsulates his services into just a few hours because he comes to you. If you go to a local retailer, the time element to get the fix can swallow valuable good-weather days, Brandt notes.

Furthermore, the experience can be a nuisance and cumbersome, too, he adds.

"Going to a retail outlet is a hassle and can take three to four days for a repair," says Brandt. "Sometimes it takes a week. Then, to reload it into the car is a chore. It can take away from the fun of biking."

Brandt, 38, is a bicycle maven. During his youth, borrowing a page from Bill Gates and Paul Allen, he set up a personal workshop in his family's garage. This became his private school and laboratory for training himself on all things cycling including cadence, cantilevers and cogs.

"At the age of 13, when there was no Internet, I could dismantle and reassemble a bike with a hammer, screwdriver, pliers and crescent wrench," says Brandt. And this passion and drive to know it all were fueled by his initial feelings of independence and his exposure to the world around him.

"Bikes were always part of my life," he says. "My love for them deepened when I realized I could go to other towns, see friends and girlfriends and really do whatever I wanted. It was pure freedom."

But freedom on a bike as a spirited youth is one thing while freedom on a budget with adult responsibilities is quite another.

From 1995 to 2010, Brandt had a very different career. As an environmental geologist, he evaluated and coordinated chemical and petroleum cleanups at gas stations and industrial sites.

Then in 2008, when the markets fishtailed and the workload fizzled, Brandt was employed no more. Thus, sticking to what he knew, he started his own home-based environmental consulting business.

But advisory gigs lagged. So, in March of last year, he and his wife Kristin worked on a developing a new business while eating at Lola's Natick Deli & Groceria.

By the time the tab arrived, Brandt's company frame was set and the nuts and bolts tightened. Then, out of nowhere, the name, Steve the Bike Guy, popped into Kristin's head.

"As long as I've known Steve, he's been a 'bike guy,'" she says. "His enthusiasm for the sport is infectious. When we met 15 years ago, I didn't even own a bike. Today, I own several and regularly ride my bike to work."

So, with his wife's support, Brandt's entrepreneurial spirit was triggered once more. In December 2010, Brandt started "pedaling" Steve the Bike Guy to the local biking community. And while still dealing with his environmental consulting and organizing his biking businesses, Brandt was also overseeing a third: family business.

Since Brandt works from home, he has the pleasure of being a stay-at-home dad to children Anders, 8, and Sophie, 6.

"When developing Steve the Bike Guy, having a home-based business was important so I could be with my kids," says Brandt. "The bike business works well for me because I can be with clients when the kids are at school."

In his new business, Brandt promotes the importance of tuneups. On a bicycle, a tuneup is a tightening of its bolts and screws, general cleaning, thorough checking of all systems and fixing any defects. In Brandt's expert opinion, the tuneup is the most vital service for all kinds of bicycles.

"I find the more bikes I see, the more they need tuneups," he says. "Bikers really need this to keep them going. It's like a tuneup for a car."

The family tuneup package, which includes four bicycles (two adult and two kids), costs \$148; additional bikes are \$22 for a single gear and \$48 for a multigear.

However, in order to have a tuneup, one must first buy a bike. Part of Brandt's service is accompanying his clients to a local retailer and sharing important purchasing considerations not necessarily known by the store's staff.

Ashland's Nathan Lester, 43, and a bike enthusiast for 15 years, hired Brandt to help find the best cycle for his seven-year-old daughter, Maggie.

"He went to the store with us and... because of his knowledge, I felt confident I bought the right bike for my daughter," Lester says. "Steve knew exactly what we wanted."

Sometimes a shop's turnkey solutions aren't the answer. That being the case, Brandt applies his assembling skills to help customers build a bicycle to spec. The cost for bike assemblies ranges from \$24 to \$96. He is a firm believer that the right fit is essential for anyone's long-term enjoyment of biking.

"Working together, the customer and I will select the parts and I'll put them together," says Brandt. "Some of the best components are not available in stores. Plus, should you buy a ready-made product, you're stuck with what comes with the bike."

Once the bicycle is assembled and ready to roll, now it's a matter of finding the routes. With tarred roads, off-road trails and rigorous technical pathways to choose from, the options can be dizzying. Brandt knows the different terrains across Massachusetts so, if your bike has a GPS system, he can program your favorite routes right into your device.

"I study topographical and aerial maps to plan the best urban and rural routes and loops based upon the customer's interest and skill level," he says. This programming service cost 30 cents per mile.

Yet even while following the advice of a trusty GPS, any bike can be disabled by a blown-out tire or jammed gear. Therefore, thinking about his own on-the-road horror stories, Brandt created an emergency roadside service.

"If you're on the road and break down, you can call me for emergency roadside services," says Brandt. "For \$48 per hour (price is prorated based upon 10-minute increments), I'll come to your location and fix your bike. If need be, I will load up your gear onto my vehicle's bike rack and take you home should your location be accessible."

When Steve the Bike Guy isn't helping bikers with repairs, purchases and rescues, he works closely with amateur and professional triathletes with pre-race checkups and on-the-course fixes.

"I am going to a host of triathlons in MetroWest over the course of the summer and fall," he says. "I'll have a tent helping triathletes with their bikes. And during the race, I'll be on the course looking to help people in the event of a breakdown."

For more details, visit www.stevethebikeguy.com.

Elaine Vescio, the owner of Vmps Triathlon Center in Millbury, sees Brandt as a paramount service during the events.

"Steve is a real lifesaver for our athletes," she says. "He's so quick, calm and nice. We're looking forward to having him at the races this season."

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