



OUTSIDE  
THE Vines

INSPIRATION FROM BEYOND THE POTTING BENCH

# Shifting Gears

A California cycling shop demonstrates the importance of product familiarity for any business.

By Lynn Tangorra

Had Nordwall's passion for cycling and fellow riders led him to open his own store, Above Category, in the San Francisco Bay Area. A key factor for wanting to open his own business was the experiences he had in other shops.

"I went into a shop in the area and I remember looking at bikes and thinking I might want to get one, but nobody paid attention to me," Nordwall says.

Not wanting to emulate how some other stores conducted business, he worked to set up a place where customers could have an experience from start to finish.

At Above Ground, it's all about purchasing a bike, but Nordwall's emphasis on customer guidance and tried-and-true products should be key at any retail store.

## Road Tested

When it comes to what the shop carries, said products are of utmost importance to Nordwall and his team.

"I'm sure you're used to when you go look at a bike, you go to the shop and the bike or whatever you want is sitting right there," he says. "The bikes we have here, they don't even exist. [You pick] a frame and then you pick out a fork, a headset, a stem, the cables and this and that. We

are dealing with all individual parts."

All of those individual parts have been extensively tested by Nordwall and his employees.

Just because something is new or trendy at the time, if it doesn't work well for them, the store won't carry it.

"It's not like a normal bike shop. Normal bike shops you walk in and they have 10 different kinds of drink mix, they have five different kinds of tubes you can buy, they have 10 different handlebar tapes; we carry one and we carry what we think is the best at the time," Nordwall says.

"And that's not [what's] most expensive; it's just what we think is best. We use all this stuff on a daily basis, and if we try something and don't like it, we don't carry it. We don't care if it's popular."

When the shop first opened, Nordwall tested products by hitting the market to see what was out there and purchasing them all himself. An avid rider who bikes five to six times a week, he believes this is how business should be done.

"That is how I know the parts," Nordwall says. "Now that I have been in this [business] for so long, I know all the builders, I know their quality."

## The Cycling Specialists

A product journal is available on the shop's website where Nordwall shares with customers his experiences with cycling products, what works

and what doesn't, along with some cool tidbits.

"I was out riding and a different experience came up: It rained, and I was riding some wheels that technically you don't ride in the rain, and I was actually blown away by how good they were," he says. "I wanted to come back and let somebody know, 'Hey I just got off the bike [and] this is what I felt about this product.'"

Nordwall feels strongly about spending time and energy with products.

"It's based more on experience and actually using them [versus], 'Here's a new product out, let's just use the photo that the manufacturer sends us and tell everyone how cool it is even though we have never seen it in person.'"

Now that his business is known in the area, Nordwall doesn't have to go out and purchase everything on his own anymore. Manufacturers will ship products like frames and wheels for him to test and send back.

"That gives us time to really test them out," he says. "And then [if they work] I can say, 'OK, that's what we want in the shop.'"

Have you tested the latest products in your garden center? Do you use personal experience to guide your customers' purchases? **LGR**

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