



Photo by Christina Pearson

ATTITUDE ADJUSTMENT

Jan/Feb 2016 // Business Building // Exploring the Industry

In the primarily male-dominated world of cycling, Grease Rag is creating spaces where cyclists from underrepresented groups have a chance to thrive.

On a Tuesday morning in mid-September, thousands of bike industry folks took a quick second to catch up on social media before heading to OutDoor Demo for the day. What greeted them was the latest media fiasco to face our industry: a pair of socks. These weren't just any socks, though. They featured a pair of bikini-clad derrières and were part of the Interbike gift bags that every attendee received upon check-in. That's a lot of socks and a lot of sexism. While this example received much more media attention than others, instances of sexism occur in our industry all too often. From using women as props in advertising to disrespectful comments on rides and at events, the bike industry has a long history of not being an inviting atmosphere for women. Groups like the Twin Cities' Grease Rag are doing their part to change that.

Meet Grease Rag

Grease Rag Ride & Wrench is a volunteer-run group in the Twin Cities area whose main objective is to encourage and support WTF (that's women, transgender, and femme) cyclists. They achieve this through a variety of avenues: group rides, educational seminars, social events, you name it. The group's events create a safe haven for WTFs to grow as cyclists in a much more inclusive environment.

"We've organized bike camping trips for beginners, monthly nighttime rides, regular destination group rides, winter biking skill shares, and various social gatherings with the goal of making cycling in the Twin Cities more inclusive," says Grease Rag organizer Laura Kling. "Additionally, our Facebook group is active with conversations about the challenges and triumphs that WTF cyclists face on a daily basis, including topics on gender identity, attire, equipment, and attitudes."

While Grease Rag Ride & Wrench has organized and hosted many successful events, the Wrench in its name is where the group shines—open shop nights.

What Exactly is an "Open Shop Night"?

Since the group hosted its first open shop night in the summer of 2009, Grease Rag has helped hundreds of WTFs in the Twin Cities area develop the confidence and knowledge to work on their own bikes. These safe and inviting shop spaces result in more people from underrepresented groups wrenching on and riding bikes, thereby moving the needle of equality in the right direction. The group even has a monthly open shop night specifically for WTFs of color. But what exactly is an "open shop night"?

"An open shop night is a free event where all WTF cyclists, regardless of knowledge or experience, are invited to bring in their bikes and learn how to do their own mechanical work," says Kling. "We have one or two professional mechanics on site, but most of the learning is achieved through helping one another out."

Participants at open shop nights come from all backgrounds and walks of life. Regular attendee Kristin Greeley first heard about Grease Rag at another local event and decided to check it out, hoping to fix up her old bike and learn some mechanical skills. After only a few nights, though, she got even more than that.

"Once I started to understand how my bike worked—mostly by getting greasy, taking it apart, and learning how it all went back together—I quickly developed a newfound appreciation and love for my bike," she recalls. "The more I learned, the more I was able to upgrade components, and turn what everyone would deem 'a junk bike' into my personal beauty."

Grease Rag currently partners with six shops around the Twin Cities to host open shop nights. Shops provide the space, time, tools, and consumable items like lubes and degreasers. The shops are chosen to accommodate different neighborhoods, but Grease Rag members are welcome and encouraged to check out different locations to find an open shop that best suits them. At each shop, there is at least one facilitator, or a point of contact, to ensure that the night runs smoothly and to set the overall vibe of the evening.

"Our facilitators have a positive attitude and relaxed demeanor to ensure the space feels welcoming for everyone who shows up," says Grease Rag organizer Julia Winkels. "We strive to make the space accessible by working with participants on whatever bike they may be riding. When we lose the emphasis on having high-tech gear or the latest bike, and instead meet people where they're at, they are empowered to take bike care into their own hands, rather than relying on assistance from people that may condescend to them or make them uncomfortable."

"For me, it's about confidence, ability, and knowledge," Greeley adds. "I've built skills to support myself on rides, assist others, and to know there are always areas for improvement. **I like being independent and self-sufficient and this organization has helped me achieve that with regard to cycling.**"

A Win-Win Situation

Open shop nights not only create safe and inclusive environments for budding mechanics, they also provide benefit for the shops that participate in them. By hosting these types of events, shops are guaranteed to have a regular night with low overhead where customers are showing up and buying things. More than just bringing in sales, though, open shop nights help shops build a positive reputation in the community.

"Having worked previously in a shop that hosts Grease Rag open shop nights, I vividly recall WTFs and people from other underrepresented groups coming in in tears because of how they were made to feel at other shops," Winkels says. "Word of experiences travels quickly, so having a positive reputation in your local community as an inclusive shop goes a long way."

The worker-owned Hub Bicycle Co-Op in Minneapolis has been hosting open shop nights with Grease Rag for years. Worker-owner Morgan Pease says the shop's reputation as a WTF-friendly shop speaks for itself.

"Our participation in Grease Rag has helped us secure some lifelong customers," Pease explains. "Our reputation has also allowed us to hire and maintain a more diverse and knowledgeable staff."

Pease recommends that every shop looking to connect more with its community host an open shop night. While having a group like Grease Rag in your city makes it much easier, the basics of it are something that any shop can put together. Hosting events on a consistent night helps participants plan out their weeks so they can attend. Events can be hosted on a weekly, biweekly, or monthly basis depending on your available resources. The most important thing to keep in mind is ensuring your staff is trained to be respectful facilitators. Constantly remind your staff what the purpose of the event is, and make sure no one is saying or doing something disrespectful. That includes inappropriate or crude jokes, sexual advances, and negative comments about someone's bike or gear. The overall goal is to empower and educate a contingency of cyclists that don't always feel comfortable in the traditional bike shop atmosphere, so anything that works against that goal isn't doing anyone any good.

EXPLORE CALL UP

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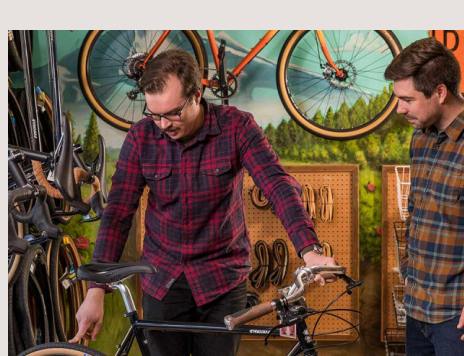
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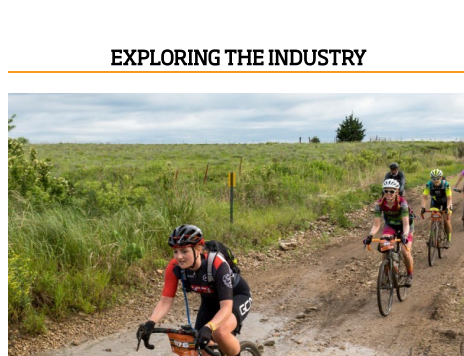


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