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Is bicycling the new golf?

Corporate outings take to the road; provide chance to bond, build trust

By **TOM HELD**
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It's more evolution than revolution, but Milwaukee business leaders have started moving their corporate outings from the fairway to the roadway.

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The tagline to describe the phenomena, "bicycling is the new golf," first caught on in Silicon Valley, Calif., which always seems to be a few miles ahead in cutting-edge business trends. Milwaukee, though, seems to be catching on to the peloton.

Anyone who doubts carbon-fiber bikes can match graphite drivers as toys of the trade should take a look at the peloton, or pack of cyclists, heading east from Madison this morning: more than 180 of them participating in the corporate bike outing and networking opportunity organized by Epstein Uhen Architects.

Rich Tennesen, the firm's vice president for client development, organized the first Beyond Design Tour last year, figuring a dozen colleagues and customers would take to the road to celebrate the opening of Uhen's first Madison office.

More than 60 showed up then, and his expectation of doubling the number this year proved low as well.

The New Golf?



Photo/Mark Hoffman

A group of people go on a training ride in preparation for the Beyond Design Bike Tour. The fundraising ride will go from Milwaukee to Madison and will raise money for the Atwood Community Center and Notre Dame Middle School in Milwaukee.



Photo/Mark Hoffman

Pam Kassner talks with

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"We had overwhelming feedback last year that it's a great way for people to connect," Tennesen said. "It's fun, but it has a business flavor to it."

"It's similar to what a golf outing might do."

The parallels between corporate golf and corporate cycling may actually be closer than side-by-side fairways.

Replace hole sponsorships with rest stop sponsors, give away water bottles instead of golf balls, and pick up the pace and you've got a corporate event that builds business, teamwork and quadriceps.

In the case of the Eppstein ride, architects, engineers, bankers and builders will share the road and their business strategies over the 86 miles from Madison's Atwood Community Center to the Milwaukee Athletic Club.

Cycling's arrival as an alternative to a day on the links has even been validated by Tim Sheehy, president of the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce.

Over his 23 years with the association, Sheehy has networked on golf courses, basketball courts, football fields and softball diamonds. The former University of Wisconsin baseball player started taking to the road a few years ago and will be joining the Eppstein Uhen group on the Madison ride.

In cycling, Sheehy, 49, finds a physical challenge that doesn't inflict a debilitating pounding on his baby boomer joints. And a long, group ride becomes much easier with the kind of teamwork he's always enjoyed.

"Anytime you share an experience, especially one as taxing as a ride, there's an element of bonding that you can't find anywhere else," he said. "It's an inventive, creative, healthy way to pull together a group of people for a cause, and to network and raise some money."

Like many of the larger corporate golf outings, the Eppstein Uhen tour takes in sponsor and participant donations and directs them to local charities. This year, Tennesen expects to clear \$25,000, to be split between the Atwood Community Center and Notre Dame Middle School in Milwaukee.

Tennesen, 39, was so impressed by the success of last year's outing that he started doing some of his client development work on his Specialized Roubaix bike.

A scheduled golf outing with commercial banker John Rodell, who heads up the Milwaukee office of commercial builder J.H. Findorff & Sons Inc. became a two-hour bike ride, with the two of them covering business strategy and a lot of pavement.

John Rodell, who heads up the Milwaukee office of commercial builder J.H. Findorff & Sons Inc., finds a bike ride inspires a more open conversation than a board room.

Rodell, 49, has found that clients pedaling at a relaxed pace will better articulate what they want and what they see as roadblocks. They'll share more of themselves.

another rider before going on the training ride. Biking as a corporate outing first caught on in Silicon Valley.

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"When you get to see the client outside the suit-and-tie mode, you can see what drives them," he said. "You get to start to make that personal connection with people, learn about their kids and their family life."

That more business executives have become self-propelled on their business outings is no surprise to Tim Blumenthal, executive director of the Bikes Belong Coalition. The baby boomers now leading companies likely rode their bikes to grade school or around the college campus, and are more likely to return to biking as they age. Sales of high-end road bikes, \$1,000 or more, have set records in the past three years.

While the Eppstein Uhen ride will be dominated by execs and professionals from the construction fields, the local business that has been out front in making cycling part of its corporate culture relates more closely to Silicon Valley.

ISCorp, a computer data services firm headed by president and CEO Mike Weber, has a cycling center in its corporate office in Mequon and sponsors one of the largest racing teams on the local citizens' circuit.

Weber leads his employees on lunch-hour rides on the rural roads in Ozaukee County and brings customers and vendors together on excursions in Walworth County a dozen times a season.

"Just like golfing, we get them in a place where we can capture their attention for a good amount of time," Weber said. "It's been extremely effective in building trust with our larger clients, and that's how I judge my bottom line."

Tennessee could only dream that the Eppstein Uhen bottom line would match the growth of his Beyond Design Tour. He figures to double the field again next year, when the firm adds a century ride to celebrate 100 years in business.

Luckily, there's more room in the peloton than in the board room.

For more details on the Eppstein Uhen Beyond Design Ride, go to:
www.eppsteinuhen.com/beyonddesigntour/

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