

FRANCHISEE OF THE MONTH

Reggie Drew/Wheel Fun Rentals

Life's a beach bike

Come the weekend, Reggie Drew has to force himself not to get out of bed and go into work. Sound atypical? Maybe if he had the traditional 8-5 desk job, but Drew rents bikes for a living in Santa Barbara, Calif.-about half a block from the beach. Sort of a Jimmy Buffet lifestyle without the margaritas.

Renting bikes to Santa Barbara's tourists was Drew's first job and it's likely to be his last. He took over the rental business from his father a couple of years after he graduated from high school. Since converting his beach rentals to a Wheel Fun Rentals franchise a couple of years ago, he's seen his sales rise 25 to 35 percent. Not a bad endorsement for franchising.

At one time, Drew had nine rental locations. Ironically, he found that his sales doubled when he reduced the number of out-of-town locations and concentrated on one location with a couple of satellite sites in heavy tourist locations (the tourist traffic is heavy, not the tourists themselves.)

Renting a bike tends to be a "let the good times roll" activity, Drew said. Ninety-five percent of the people who rent inline skates or surreys or bikes are in good moods. "This is not like Disneyland where you stand in long lines; this is clean fun. You're exercising; you're going at your own pace."

In addition to running the Wheel Fun franchise, Drew also owns the local trolley company and wine tour business. The trolley business is a nightmare compared to bike rentals. "It's the paperwork," he explained.

FT: How many bikes do you own?

RD: About 150

FT: What do people like to rent?

RD: They like what they don't have at home. Some of the most popular rentals are "recumbent-style" bikes. (Examples are the Chopper-similar to the childhood Big Wheel, but made out of steel, not plastic-and the Deuce Coupe, a bicycle built for two with an awning. Another example of the unusual bikes they rent is the "bullet," where the steering mechanism is in the handlebars.)

FT: What's your earliest memory of an out-of-the-ordinary bike?

RD: The Jim Dandy, a surrey for kids. It was marketed by Art Linkletter on his television show. I remember him in a Santa suit talking about it. (Drew's surrey is full-size so that two adults can pedal and the kids don't have to contribute any pedal power.)

FT: Who are your customers?

RD: 25% are locals, 10% are from out of state and the rest are Californians on vacation.

FT: Where do you go on vacation?

RD: Jamaica, The Cayman Islands (no cold weather places, in other words)

FT: What's the best part of being connected with a franchise?

RD: Longer-lasting bicycles. (Most bikes are manufactured for the general public, not rentals. So a bike that gets casual use can last for years, but one that is rented out several hours a day has wear and tear that isn't always addressed by the manufacturer's warranty. As a franchise, they have more clout with manufactures and the ability to refurbish bikes.)

FT: The worst part of your job?

RD: There are no drawbacks. I've never gotten bored.

FT: Any thoughts about retirement?

RD: I hope not, I'm only 37 years old now. This has always been my dream, it's been a good business and I'm always looking for ways to improve it.

www.wheelfunrentals.com