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Framebuilder Entrepreneurship

Joshua Shuart

The handmade bicycle industry has grown exponentially over the past decade. Although existing for decades in much smaller numbers, the popularity and credibility of framebuilder entrepreneurship—custom, handmade bike frames—has increased significantly in the past 10 years. The companies that specialize in custom-producing bicycle frames vary in size, scope, reputation, profitability, and even building materials.

Keywords: framebuilder, bicycles, marketing, velocipede

A Framebuilders' Primer

Two major initiatives have aided the ascension of framebuilding entrepreneurs into the media spotlight—the establishment and perpetuation of The Framebuilders' Collective (TFC) and the first annual North American Handmade Bicycle Show (NAHBS) in 2005.

The Framebuilders' Collective

TFC is a group of some of the most influential, powerful, and successful framebuilding individuals and companies in the industry. Currently, TFC includes 14 members, 7 of which were founding members (see Figure 1). Among the collective's chief purposes are to gather like-minded veterans to establish unspoken quality standards, to disseminate information and insights to others, to act as mentors to younger builders, and to support the highest professional standards.

There are several qualifications that members must satisfy, which is why the membership is small, and is limited to some of the biggest names in the framebuilder community. Above all, there is a commitment by all members to “pay it forward” in the spirit of growing the reputation of the industry, and in helping younger builders to establish themselves. For example, one of the icons of bicycle framebuilding, Carl Strong of Strong Frames, has continuously given back to industry colleagues by sharing specifics about his methods, techniques, and practices. Many of these TFC members have apprentices learning directly in their shops. For the uninitiated wanting to break into framebuilding, “you either apprentice *or* you go somewhere like Frame Building Classes (e.g., United Bicycle Institute) (Ferris, 2011).

To begin, it is important to look at the types of builders in the industry and the types of materials they use to construct their frames.

Types of Builders and Types of Materials. *Custom brands* are the large, well-known, high-end bike brands commonly referred to as custom even though the majority of their production has a very limited (or no) actual custom element in the frame. In these instances, the term “custom” refers most often to the parts, which may be custom selected depending on the



Figure 1: The Framebuilders Collective

Source: The Framebuilders Collective website.

dealer. Examples of custom brands include DeRosa, Colnago, and Litespeed.

Custom manufacturers are smaller companies that sell through bike shops. They offer custom frames but the customer has little to no direct contact with the company and no one person builds the frame. Examples of custom manufacturers include Independent Fabrication, Serotta, and Seven.

Small custom builders can best be described as a one- or two-person shop. The frame is built for the specific customer and the customer deals directly with the person who is fabricating it. Examples of small custom builders are Strong Frames, Kirk Frameworks, and Richard Sachs Cycles. (Strong, 2011).

In addition to types of builders, the chosen *type of frame materials* is of primary importance. Some builders are chiefly



Figure 2: New England framebuilder materials

Source: NE Family Tree website.

known for either their choice of frame material and/or some specific framebuilding techniques. Figure 2, for example, shows the material of choice for all 50 of the known framebuilders in New England as of 2012.

North American Handmade Bicycle Show

Another beneficial initiative for framebuilders was the establishment in 2005 of a major annual get-together, the North American Handmade Bicycle Show (NAHBS). Simply stated, the NAHBS is the Super Bowl for framebuilding entrepreneurs. In addition to being a trade show and exhibition, it also yields a yearly awards ceremony for the best products and handcrafted bicycles. Additionally, NAHBS acts as a showcase for academic and practical seminars and presentations, many given by influential builders on their craft. Don Walker founded NAHBS and also acts as the organization’s president. NAHBS’s greatest contributions to the industry are positive public relations, marketing, dissemination of information, and organization of the annual show. The annual event is the preeminent and largest handmade bike show in the world. “Since its first year in 2005, NAHBS has grown from a show with 23 exhibitors and 700 attendees, to a highwater mark of 172 exhibitors and 7,300 attendees in 2011. The overall trend from 2005–11 has been one of steady growth at a rate of 8 to 10 percent a year” (NAHBS, 2015).

Business of Bike Building

The “craft” of framebuilding aside, the “business” end of this industry is the critical piece in determining success and profitability for each builder. Many of the most well-known builders are also adept businesspeople, with either a business degree or, at minimum, significant marketing and accounting skills.

Each frame is custom made to buyer specifications and, as such, the price for a handmade bicycle is considerably more expensive than one purchased from a big-box retailer. Handmade bicycle frames run from \$1,000 to \$3,000 on the very low end to \$8,000 to \$15,000 on the high end. The more established the brand name and builder, the higher the demand and price. Accordingly, many of the top builders have a waiting list of two to three years for custom-built bicycles. These prices normally do not include many of the things one would expect when buying a bicycle, such as a seat, handlebars, chain, and tires. Framebuilders specialize in the bicycle frame, and elite framebuilding is both an acquired and learned skill and an art (Figure 3).

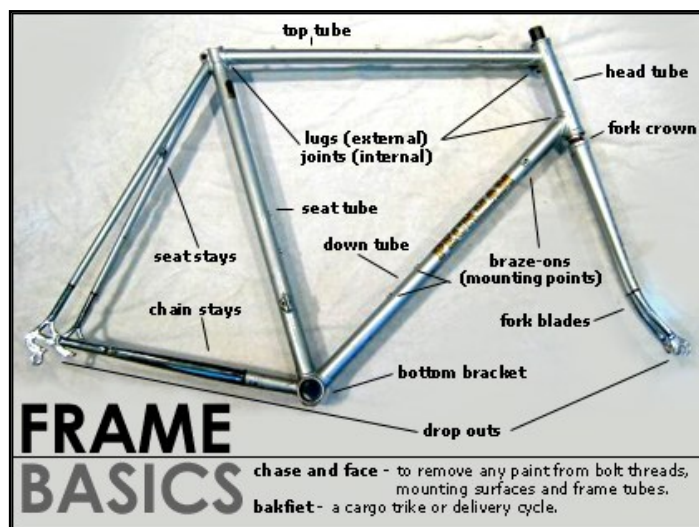


Figure 3: Basic image of a bicycle frame

Source: *Bloodline*, Angles and Poise

In “The Business of Professional Framebuilding,” Strong describes the three types of high-end framebuilding business models.

- Type I. Single Person Custom: 1–150 bikes/year
- Type II. Custom and Small Scale Production: 50–300 bikes/year
- Type III. High-end Manufacturer: 250–3,000 bikes/year

Most entry-level builders start small, as a Type I business. And, much like any successful company, focus is on the customer. The builder is selling his or her brand, not the bike, and the custom frame can represent any of the following to the buyer: Solution, Dream, Comfort, Performance, or Status. (Strong, 2011)

Bikenomics

The above short discussion of handmade, custom framebuilding entrepreneurs is but one small component in the now bustling bicycle industry, which also includes mass-produced, easily obtainable, and more affordable bikes. Significant further study should explore the following: (1) financial analysis of the handmade industry, (2) continued growth and establishment of

greater quality standards, (3) surveys and interviews with builders of all three types of business models, and (4) marketing considerations based on previously collected data.

Bikes and the Economy

Blue's (2013) book, *Bikenomics: How Cycling Can Save the Economy*, states, "...bicycling is the only form of transportation that doesn't just break even, but brings wealth into the community. Bike infrastructure was once seen as a boondoggle; now it's absolutely necessary" (Harris, 2014). Blue also discusses bike *equity* and *access*, and how bicycling presents society with a unique opportunity for change, especially in the areas of racial stereotypes and discrimination (Blue, 2013).

Growth of the Velodrome

Dozens of attempts have been made in various parts of the United States to conceive, fund, and build the next great velodrome—a track for cycle racing. Up until about 100 years ago, indoor velodromes were commonplace, yet most now in existence are outdoors. Efforts continue to build indoor ones on par with some of the world's most famous velodromes in Australia and England. Funding and public support are the biggest stumbling blocks to the greenlighting of new construction for single-use indoor velodromes, while multipurpose facilities that include racing tracks can already be found in many states.

Banked cycling racetracks made of wood or poured concrete were once at the center of the American sporting life. Through the 1920s, track cyclists were among the highest paid athletes in the country, and Madison Square Garden (which was originally built to host cycling) drew crowds that exceeded or rivaled any other sporting event... The sport of track racing is, as one Kenosha, Wisconsin, velodrome regular lamented to an NPR reporter in 2012, "the fringe sport of a fringe sport." (Balf, 2013)

Rails to Trails Movement

A third societal shift that has taken flight, due partially to positive economic ramifications, is the Rails to Trails movement. Rails to Trails makes sense as pro-bike investors purchase defunct railroad systems cheaply and then develop them into trails and paths for bikers and runners. This is increasingly popular as it fulfills several objectives, including beautification of the natural world; opportunities for healthy, outdoor activities; creation of tourist destinations for smaller, more remote locations—oftentimes in long-forgotten, old industrial towns that were once a stop on the railway circuit; and creation of ancillary entrepreneurial ventures for enterprising individuals.

Websites

The Framebuilders' Collective
<http://www.framebuilderscollective.org/>

NAHBS—North American Handmade Bicycle Show
<http://www.2015.handmadebicycleshow.com/>

New England's Frame Builder Family Tree
<http://www.thebicyclestory.com/2012/08/new-englands-frame-builder-family-tree/>

New England Bicycle Bloodline.
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