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Can Bikes Replace Trucks to Deliver Goods in Cities? European Entrepreneurs Believe So

By Kate Hinds | 05/04/2012 - 12:07 pm

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Proponents of cargo bikes were out in force this week, trying to sell transportation ministers from from dozens of countries on the idea that cargo bikes are not only capable of moving goods around cities, in many cases they're preferable to trucks.



Randy Rzewnicki is working with the European Cyclist Federation on their CycleLogistics project. Funded by the European Union, the nine-country, multi-year project is promoting moving goods by cycle. "There's a whole lot of things that can be moved by bikes," he said. "Our estimates, from the research that we've done, is that 50% of all light goods in cities could be moved by bicycle."

CycleLogistics researches and tests cargo bikes, connects with transport companies, runs a "shop by bike" program, gives cities cargo bikes to critique and test themselves, and aims to be a "best practices" warehouse for people and companies looking to make the switch from four wheels to two (or, in some cases, three).

"CycleLogistics has been a niche market," Rzewnicki said, "but it's starting to mature now. And some of the signs that we're seeing are companies like TNT, UPS, DHL, FedEx, which have active cycle delivery projects." He said TNT is working to create a mobile depot in Brussels that is serviced by cargo cycles.

Outspoken, a UK company, is also using the mobile hub idea — only theirs is a giant cargo delivery bike. "They're using some of their big bikes, (ones) that can carry 250 kilos, as a kind of a mobile depot," said Rzewnicki. "Because that bike isn't going to go door-to-door." But the smaller bikes can.

And they go to places that motorized vehicles can't. Outspoken Delivery is based in Cambridge — a place where, according to Gary Armstrong, the company's business development manager, "lorries and vans aren't allowed in the city center between 10am and 5pm. Few motorized delivery services can wrap up business before 10am.

"So we do the last mile for them," he said. Outspoken recently delivered 17,000 magazines to 430 locations in two days by bike. Last year, he says, Outspoken couriers cycled 54,000 miles around Cambridge.

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Scottish bike designer Nick Lobnitz got the idea for his **Paper Bicycle** company when he took a long look at the trailers the Royal Mail was using. "I thought 'that's rubbish! I can do better than that!'" He started by making what he says is a low-maintenance bike with a lower center of gravity. Then he added a trailer. "It's a car boot for a bike," he said, adding that he had taken his with him on the plane from the UK to Leipzig then biked from the Leipzig airport to the conference center.

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The bike trailer that Nick Lobnitz checked as luggage (photo by Kate Hinds)

The bike looks somewhat imposing — but a test drive dispelled any worries about maneuverability. How does it feel so light? "It's clever heavy," he said. "It feels exactly the same as riding a normal bicycle except you'll be slower uphill and faster downhill." His bikes and trailers are in use in public bike share systems, food delivery services. He said even the gardens and groundskeepers in London's Hampstead Heath park use his bikes to transport supplies around.



(photo by Kate Hinds)

Lobnitz says he's not getting rich quickly; last year, for example, he turned about a thousand dollar profit. "The easy way to make a small fortune in the bike industry is to start with a large fortune," he said. "But I'm happy. It's nice to make things people appreciate."



Nick Lobnitz, Randy Rzewnicki, and Gary Armstrong want you to know you can deliver almost anything by bicycle. (Photo by Kate Hinds)

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