

These aren't the droids you're looking for (e-bikes)



E-bikes are here, and the Trek versions are fun, reliable and practical. But they're not going to sell like hybrids when priced like higher-end road or mountain bikes.

E-bikes, motor-assisted bicycles capable of speeds from 15-28mph with relative ease, are huge in Europe. I mean it's not just the "next" big thing... it IS the big thing. Many shops in Germany & Holland & elsewhere are seeing greater sales in e-bikes than in regular bikes. The price range? \$3-\$5,000 (and up!).

Here in the US, e-bikes are a much tougher sale. We have fantastic bikes from Trek featuring either Shimano's "Steps" electrical assist, or Bosch. You can't ride one of them and not have a huge smile on your face. They make you feel like Superman or Wonder Woman. When you hit a hill, they don't bog down, they don't complain, they just go, magically adding power that would normally take an unhealthy dose of performance-enhancing-drugs to come even close to.

Sales are increasing with improving awareness, but not as fast as the industry would like. Sometimes we're being told by those heading the lobbying efforts for e-bikes in the US that the LBS (Local Bike Shop) is the problem, and if we don't get our butts in gear, the e-bike revolution is going to happen elsewhere, outside our stores, and we'll be left behind. I'm not convinced it's that simple.

First, this is not Germany or Holland. This is the United States of America gosh dangit and guess what, the e-bike isn't providing a solution for something that people thought was a problem! It's an opportunity, not a necessity. We don't have a strong culture of commuting by bike. Most of our cities weren't designed before cars came along, like Europe. And those cities that are that old, have been rebuilt, because this is America gosh dangit and we love our cars and want places to park them, so that's what we got... wide expanses of asphalt (roads) and thousands of square miles of parking lots that displace other uses. Remember the lyrics, "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot."? It's real. We did it. Europe didn't.

Of course, we're recognizing the problems created by urban sprawl and cities that favor cars over people. Change is coming, even to Redwood City California, where I sit on the city council's "Complete Streets" committee. It's going to be a very different attitude towards bikes and cars 10 years down the road. I promise. Everyone sees that happening. Too many people and not enough room for all of their cars, so other solutions became inevitable.

Don't be too proud of this technological marvel you've constructed. Your ability to sell an e-bike is insignificant next to the power of a real brand name. That brand name is Tesla. That would put e-bikes on the map in the US. (My response to an e-bike industry expert's attempt to lay blame on the local bike shop for the e-bikes lack of success so far)

But that's not today. Today that awesome e-bike isn't seen as real need but rather a cool want. A cool want that is priced beyond the means of many, and is arriving before it's really practical to go without a car. Some in the industry maintain that sales haven't skyrocketed because we, your local bicycle shop, aren't getting behind them like we should. Despite bringing in quite a few different models, getting trained on how to work with them, and committing expensive floor space to their display. In plain & simple terms, the e-bike is a growing niche market. It is not mainstream, and until it becomes mainstream, it's tough to sell in huge numbers at local bike shops across America. Sounds like a conundrum. They won't sell in bike shops until bike shops can sell lots of them.

In a nutshell, the e-bike is just a bit ahead of its time in the US. Then again, that's what people thought about electric cars, for years. They were always "the next big thing" from year to year to year. Until this guy named Musk came along and created the Tesla. Unfortunately, Musk is a one-in-a-million person, someone with business sense, marketing acumen and willing to bet the farm that his ideas can change the world. Tesla was not his first try but rather a huge play he could make due to past successes. He's got one thing in common with the industry e-bike folk though... he's a dreamer. Big vision. But things differ greatly in his financial power to make the play. Might not hurt that he has degrees in Economics and Physics either.

Going on and on about how successful they (e-bikes) are elsewhere indicates a lack of understanding the differences between "here" and "there." Visions and dreams are not enough to accomplish success at the rate they believe possible. Not with a \$3-4k bike anyway. The utility cycling market in the US would buy large numbers of \$1500 e-bikes. That's where the high-volume market will be. Just saying you can't produce a decent bike in that price range doesn't justify a belief that you can sell large numbers at a price range where you can.

Don't get me wrong; the present high-quality e-bikes we sell, from Trek, with Shimano and Bosch mid-drive motors, are awesome! They are amazingly versatile, have great range (about the same as my wife's Chevy Volt) and great reliability. Fantastic improvement over what we had just 4 years ago, and that 4 years ago product worked out great for my wife. It's just not the breakthrough, everyone-must-have product due to price. We've got the equivalent of a Tesla S (\$80k car) and we need to do exactly what Elon Musk did... create a Model 3 (\$35k car) that delivers 80%+ of what the Tesla S offers. That will put e-bikes into the mainstream here in the US. Of course, Elon Musk is still a year away from putting Tesla's first \$35k car into a customer's hands.

I have faith it will happen. We will see roadworthy \$1500 e-bikes in a few years. Perhaps slowing their development are the cheap & unreliable look-the-part products found on Amazon, do-it-yourself kits that convince people that you can't get there (reliable & fun) without spending much money. But when I look at the technology and manufacturing that goes into a disk drive (where pricing has come down over a thousand-fold, with high-tech high-capacity drives now available for less than \$100), I have to believe there's a lot of room for volume production and standards to bring down the price of e-bike components.