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Bells for Bikes: Reducing Multi-User Conflict on Boise Trails

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Abstract

This Capstone Project is an effort to improve social perceptions toward mountain bikers and reduce multi user conflict through a social bridge building initiative which will donate bells to the local mountain bikers in Boise Idaho. It began with outreach to stakeholders to identify shared values and create a shared vision for how to approach these problems using donated bells. A fundraiser was started which could be advertised through social media by the stakeholders. In the spring of 2022 bells will be distributed directly to mountain bikers encountered on the trails by the Ridge to Rivers Rangers. The method of distribution will include an educational discussion about responsible bell usage, trail etiquette, and will act as a catalyst for Ridge to Rivers to engage the public and provide opportunities for different types of advocacy and collaborative participation.

Keywords: mountain bike, multi user trail conflict, Ridge to Rivers, silent approach, social bridge-building, general trail etiquette

Introduction to your Capstone Project

My research has shown that the anxiety and surprise that mountain bikes cause other trail users is one of the three main factors contributing to perceived conflict on multi-use trails . Mountain bikers are regularly viewed by non-motorized trail users as a threat to their safety because of the ability of a bicycle to quietly and quickly approach (Hoger & Chavez, 1998; & Walker & Shafer, 2011). Trail network managers across the country are applying three common approaches to address multi-user conflict, but only two of them have been used in our area: direct, indirect. My ‘Bells For Bikes’ capstone project applies the less common third method, social bridge-building, in an attempt to reduce user conflict by improving the relationships and social perceptions between mountain bikes and other trail users. It consists of three major elements: outreach to stakeholders, fundraising, and distribution of bells to the mountain bikers on our local trail systems.

Section 1: Innovative Approach

The first half of my project focused on identifying shared values and creating a shared vision with potential stakeholders and donors (Kouzes & Posner, 2017). I spent a lot of time having open discussions with organizations and members of the cycling and trail community. Going into the discussions, I had already done a lot of research and had a good idea of what I thought might be best. But I had also made a critical decision to approach the stakeholders in an attempt to search for new ideas that could only be found through perspectives outside my own; I let them do most of the talking. I spoke with local trail users of all disciplines, local outdoor business owners, bell manufacturers, coaches for the National Interscholastic Cycling Association, and the trail management organization - Ridge to Rivers.

My goal was to create an innovative social bridge-building approach to reducing trail conflict using donated bells. At the beginning, I had planned on finding donors in the form of manufacturers or distributors to supply the bells, and to distribute them through local outdoor industry businesses, clubs, or even race organizers. Ultimately, I ended up confronting challenges and gaining insights from my stakeholders which shaped the program into something much greater than I could have anticipated.

The approaches to reduce multi-user trail conflict that have been used in our area have traditionally fallen into two categories: direct and indirect methods, such as patrolling Rangers giving out citations or limiting access on specific trails to certain user types. I decided to try a different approach that addressed the social perception element that my research showed is the largest and most deeply rooted cause. Rather than penalizing or segregating mountain biking, I decided to introduce bells in order to overcome the *silent approach* which causes most of the negative perceptions of mountain bikers by other trail users (Hoger & Chavez, 1998). It became clear from my research that the problem is a social issue driven by fear and perceived differences or lack of respect. When a mountain biker uses a bell respectfully, not only does it prevent them from startling others, but it also acts as a sign of respect and concern for others.

Section 2: Emotional Intelligence

The Bells for Bikes project required me to apply a lot of self awareness during the planning stages. Prior to speaking with stakeholders, I had done a lot of personal research, and I had a good idea of what I wanted to accomplish and the methods I assumed would be best. Because the perspectives and ideas of others were incredibly important to my plan, I had to be cautious and self aware as I began conversations. I recognized that I was approaching

stakeholders without giving them ample opportunity to gather their thoughts or do any research of their own - so I wanted to approach them without introducing too many of my own opinions or ideas first. The goal was to gather their perspectives without accidentally influencing them.

The successfulness of the project ultimately hinges on the emotional intelligence of the trail users, and the ability of mountain bikers to use the bells responsibly. Many stakeholders voiced perspectives that contained some negative associations with bells on bicycles. A common fear is that mountain bikers would feel entitled for others to always move out of their way - disregarding many of the existing general trail etiquette guidelines just because they rang their bell. Another is that bells would be used inappropriately; either in an annoying manner, or not within an appropriate range of the people they approach.

For these reasons, the plan was modified - using input from all stakeholders - to include an educational element during distribution which would be focused on responsible bell usage and other trail etiquette standards. This will help to ensure that people who use the bells are mindful of the fact that it can still cause negative perceptions if used improperly, and that they understand and agree to use it responsibly.

Section 3: Creative Thinking

The collaborative approach to planning allowed me to create a completely new method of distribution; enabling more benefits to trail users and other stakeholders. I ended up keeping my own ideas of the social bridge building method using bells, and modified it by including a distribution method suggestion that came directly from Ridge to Rivers: Using their Rangers to distribute the bells directly to cyclists on the trails.

The additional benefits of this new distribution method seemed overwhelming. It allows

a unique opportunity to achieve both my project's goals, and to help Ridge to Rivers with public outreach. It ensures the people who will make the biggest impact using bells on their bikes are being reached and educated, and it also gives Ridge to Rivers a direct way to connect with more people - other than just volunteers or handing out citations. This not only ensures that the bells will go to those who need them, but it also serves as a catalyst to increase participation and advocacy for important agenda items at Ridge to Rivers.

Section 4: Your Innovative Solution

At this point in time, the project is not fully completed - but a lot has been accomplished. A plan is in place and unfolding leading up until the spring of 2022. An online non-profit fundraiser is being established that will be spread and marketed using stakeholder social media accounts. It includes a promotional video discussing the Bells for Bikes initiative and all of the key ideas outlined in this paper. The initial fundraising goal is \$2000, which will allow us to acquire at least one hundred bells of various styles to fit different bicycles. The fundraiser will run until March 1, 2022, at which point we will purchase as many bells as the proceeds allow. Shortly thereafter, bells will be allocated to Ridge to Rivers Rangers who will begin handing them out on the trails.

There are many ways this project could have been approached differently. My initial ideas included distributing the bells to local bicycle retailers to hand out with new mountain bike sales, or having them be giveaways at local mountain bike races or club meetings. Additionally, how the bells were acquired could have been different. I could have relied upon manufacturers or distributors to donate the bells, or attempted to find a way to have local or national cycling organizations obtain them using part of their budget. I also considered finding a way to have an

educational trail etiquette pamphlet with stakeholder links to be given out with the bells.

But the key innovation and benefits lie in the different route I chose to take. Using the Rangers to distribute the bells allows us to educate the public and provide information about advocacy opportunities without the need and costs associated with printing any type of pamphlets or cards. Direct encounters with Rangers acts as the most effective form of education and outreach, and allows for all of the proceeds of fundraising to purchase the greatest number of bells possible. Even the fundraising, which I initially wanted to avoid, has many benefits that I didn't assume at first. It serves as another form of community engagement and outreach. Using social media will open discussions about social bridge building methods to reduce multi user trail conflict that reach far beyond just the cycling community.

Section 5: Results

I am realistic and realize that multi user conflict is going to be an ongoing issue - one that bells alone can never hope to eliminate. And while there are more obvious benefits to Bells for Bikes, there is undoubtedly potential for a few known and unknown negative impacts to certain stakeholders. However, I believe that the results will be largely positive. The most obvious benefits will affect the majority of trail users including mountain bikers, runners, hikers, equestrians, bird or animal watchers, new trail users, ecological surveyors, and other recreation groups.

I have already described the ways this project will increase public outreach by Ridge to Rivers and could encourage greater public participation in the organization's advocacy and planning processes. If there is a notable increase in harmony on the trails, Ridge to Rivers may see increases in funding, collaboration, and consensus regarding the maintenance and

improvements which are made on the local trail system. There is the potential for this to lead to new projects aimed at benefiting all user groups rather than modifying the behavior of a select few.

The potential negative impacts I have identified include the possibility that bells will disrupt and displace native wildlife. However, I would assume that any change will not be distinguishable or add to the current disruption created by mountain bikes, dogs, and the noise and scent from trail users. Another negative is that some trail users find bells annoying or perceive them as disrupting the serenity of their outdoor experience. There is also no way to ensure that mountain bikers will use the bells respectfully. Most of the trail users opposed to bells that I spoke with either find them annoying, feel they are disruptive, or they have encountered mountain bikers who do not use the bells responsibly.

The results at this point are speculative but quite optimistic. Ridge to Rivers is excited about the opportunity to be able to reach out to more people on trails. The fundraiser is in its beginning stages, but is expected to be a success. There are only a few logistics left to iron out once we have an idea of how many bells we will be able to purchase. The positive effects ought to continue to grow as there are increased discussions resulting from the fundraiser advertising, on trail conversations with the public on trails, and the slow change and improvement of perceptions as more people are respectfully approached by mountain bikes with bells. At some point during the spring riding season of 2022, Bells for Bikes should begin to ease tensions between different user groups and allow them to unite and focus on larger plans that will benefit every type of trail user equally.

Section 6: Different Approaches

There are a lot of different approaches I could have taken for both funding and distribution. However, I feel confident that the plan and solution we have in place is ideal for the resources available and is a great way to try out the innovative new social bridge building approach. All other distribution methods introduced more challenges and would not have been targeted as directly at the source of the problem. The plan I settled on is the simplest of those considered, but crucially it also generates the most benefits for stakeholders.

Reflecting on how things have gone up to this point, I have one main regret. Initial plans to find manufacturers, distributors, or organizations willing to donate bells fell short and consumed a lot of valuable time. I can only speculate why many of these potential donor groups began with such encouraging conversations, only later to go silent. As a result, I expected to be much farther along at this point, and potentially had even acquired the bells and transferred them to the distribution channel.

Ideally, I would have decided to establish a fundraiser right from the beginning, either as the sole source of funding or in addition to pursuing main donors. I likely would have completed fundraising, acquired bells, and handed them off to Ridge to Rivers by this date - and had more to show for the writing of this paper. However, paradoxically, I am not really discouraged; I now realize the best time to actually distribute the bells is in the spring as the trails become more active. So in the end, it makes little difference for the ultimate goal.

Section 7: Conclusion

While not totally completed, this project is well on its way to making a difference in improving social perceptions toward mountain bikers and reducing multi user trail conflict. It has already begun to spread a new conversation about reducing conflict that is focused on social bridge building and improving relationships. For me personally, the experience has solidly reinforced and impressed upon me that there is importance, value, and chances for innovation which can only be found in others' perspectives. I learned to be flexible and to constantly reflect on whether or not it's time to pivot to a new idea or direction. Ridge to Rivers, local trail users, and all local outdoor industry retailers and organizations will only continue to benefit more and more as time goes on. Ultimately this is all about bringing people together so that we can share the outdoors peacefully together.

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