

# Peddling bikes

Former copywriter Lynette Chiang travels the world for Bike Friday as its customer evangelist.

Lynette Chiang must have one of the best job titles in the world: "customer evangelist & world traveller". That's right, Chiang gets paid to travel around the world on a fold-up bike, as the face of US bike manufacturer Bike Friday.

Seven years ago, Chiang was working as a copywriter and creative director at Saatchi & Saatchi Melbourne, when she spotted a map of England with a dotted line stretching across the country and thought, "I'm going to do that".

True to her word, Chiang peddled her bike across England in 1996. She then bought a custom-made bike from Bike Friday and documented her travels on her web site, which caught the attention of Bike Friday founders Hanz and Alan Scholz, who offered Chiang a job.

Her brief: to travel the world by bike, recruiting customers and setting up Bike Friday clubs for other passionate cyclists.

Chiang's role is based on the premise that a business built on a community of satisfied customers can grow from the enthusiasm of its own customers. This is particularly important for a company like Bike Friday with a tiny marketing budget, but equally relevant to all companies wanting to get closer to their customers.

Bike Friday promotes its bicycles in three simple ways: through customer referral cards and \$50 incentives paid back to referees, and by setting up bike riding clubs to draw attention to the brand and bring customers together. Chiang also conducts slide presentations at bike shops and hiking clubs, where she tells like-minded people about her travels around the world.

By recruiting a sales force from its own client base, Bike Friday now claims more than 10,000 customers and 1,000 bike sales per year, and earns annual revenues worth more than \$3m.

## Why did you leave your copywriting job at Saatchi & Saatchi in Melbourne?

I got tired of the slog of advertising, after so many years in the job I needed to hear and see something different. I agonised

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over whether to take a job at Saatchi & Saatchi in Dublin — part of me said, "This is a cop-out". Then I took a job where I stood at Windsor Castle in an orange dress with stuffed boobs and a parasol, handing out leaflets and batting my eyelids. But everywhere I went people were fascinated with my bike, and after writing about my travels on my web site, Bike Friday offered me a job as the company's roaming face.

## What is the premise behind "customer evangelism"?

It's about giving your customers a real sense of community — even if that community is just based around bikes, it's an ongoing sense of belonging, and

people like to belong.

It is also important to take a personal approach. Bike Friday is a family — people get fanatical about their bikes.

We take this passion, and let our customers take it where they want to take it. We use our customers in our advertisements, we use the web to disseminate information, we use other bike shops to sell our product, and we employ our customers as our sales staff.

## Evangelism works for smaller companies with tiny marketing budgets, but can it be applied elsewhere?

The trick is to create evangelists among your customers, who become disciples of the product. The size of Bike Friday's marketing budget is limited, so we're forced to take this approach.

But would customer evangelism work for a bank? Bank managers visit your house when you apply for a mortgage — that's putting a face behind the brochure. Virgin Airlines hand out sleeping masks with an optional sticker that says "Wake me for a meal" — that's thinking like a customer.

A lot of people have too much fear, which leads to conservatism in the way they approach things. Evangelism is labour intensive, but it pays off. It's about making customers the star, it's not about making the product the hero — a happy customer will tell 50 others.

Barbara Messer