

YAN LYANSKY'S FOLDING BIKE

Yes, it's about the bike. But it's also about the changing face of capitalism.

by John Schubert

Bikes are sold through careful marketing plans. Dealer relationships, strategies to keep the perceived value high, and careful attention to profit margins are essential. Enter the Downtube. And it breaks all the rules. Say what? DOWNTUBE? Could you ever find a more self-effacing name for a bike company? Who was the image consultant who picked that name? What does a Downtube cost? How much do you want to spend? They're auctioned off daily on eBay, and you might get lucky and buy one for a

song. You'll be buying it from the same company, with the same warranty as the guy who went to downtube.com and paid \$269 (which is still a fabulous value, by the way).

Where's tech support? It's the founder's cell phone number. Who handles warehousing and shipping? It's outsourced and it's cheap. A warehouse in the Philadelphia suburbs charges \$250 per month to warehouse a container of bikes and \$1.50 per bike to put one on the loading dock and slap on the new owner's address label. UPS, located next door to the warehouse, delivers the bike.

What's the advertising budget? Minimal. They place a few small ads in *Bicycling* and *Road Bike Review*.

Dealer support? They gave up on dealers, finding that they sold more bikes, quicker and easier, by going through the Internet. And their marketing and communications consists largely of watching happy customers speak their minds on www.bikeforums.net.

If all of this makes you a bit uneasy, that's okay. Change can be disorienting.

The Downtube is brought to you by Yan Lyansky, a Russian émigré, a math professor, a two-time transcontinental



bicycle tourist, and a software expert. Lyansky came to the United States with his family when he was three.

"You were lucky to get out of the Soviet Union," I said.

"We're Jewish," he replied. "They didn't want us." And he shrugged. The man is not introspective.

Lyansky started a side business selling bike parts while he was getting his Ph.D. at Philadelphia's Temple University in the 1990s. He invested heavily in

overstock of SunTour components when the original Japan-based SunTour went toes-up. He became the go-to guy for SunTour lovers and stocked other components as well. But it wasn't a rip-roaring success. He was earning about \$20,000 per year packing stuff in boxes.

So he quit the bike business. His Ph.D. had arrived, and it was time to go teach math at a prominent university.

Teaching wasn't an instant success either. "I thought, 'this really sucks. The bike stuff sucks, but this sucks even more.'" One day, he walked into the department chair's office and quit in disgust. He'd been asked to "adjust" a slacker student's grade one time too many. With no job and a mortgage, he revived his bike business.



His teaching career recovered. Lyansky has been a visiting professor of mathematics at a number of well-known colleges and universities (this year, it's Coker College in Hartsville, South Carolina).

The bike business, now Internet-based, was far more successful the second time around. He assembled a handful of people to do the day-to-day work while he taught, and he handles tech-support calls on his cell phone when he's not in the classroom. Gross sales reached around a million dollars per year, and a good chunk of that was selling DaHons bikes on eBay.

"There was a huge demand for folding bikes, and DaHon was out of stock half the year. I sold 350 DaHons my first year, and could have easily done double that, if they'd been in stock."

Deciding he had a few ideas of his own about folding bikes, Lyansky found a supplier in China and collaborated on the Downtube's design. A new bike was born.

The line consists of two models: a \$299 model with swing-arm rear suspension, and the one I tested, the \$269 hard-tail model, which has fenders, a light-duty rear rack, and a big fat saddle that I would

replace if I owned the bike. Both models have suspension front forks. More models, including one with hub gearing and another with no suspension and skinny tires, are planned.

The Downtube is a good folding bike. No, it doesn't compare with a Bike Friday or a Brompton, but it's about one fifth the price, and it is a good value in its own league. The oversize aluminum frame is reassuringly rigid, the suspension fork worked quite well on the potholes of my unpaved road, and the eight-speed drivetrain gives a nice range of gears for general-purpose use in hilly areas. Lyansky says it weighs twenty-eight pounds with rack, kickstand, and fenders. To my delight, the included carrying bag is of good quality.

I would use this bike with great enthusiasm for errands and city riding, but not for my weekend three-hour rides. The cockpit dimensions are just a little different from those of a conventional bike, and they are optimized for commuting, not for long-distance touring. Specifically, the seventy-degree seat-tube angle puts your feet about an inch and a half farther forward than they would be with a more conventional seventy-three-

degree seat-tube angle. (See why I remember my trigonometry? So I can figure out stuff like this!) If the bike had a top tube, it would be a long one — 22.5 inches — but the handlebar stem has no forward reach. So the bars are maybe two to three inches closer than they would be on your average mountain bike.

This puts the rider in a very upright riding position. It's quite comfortable, excellent for city traffic, but this position causes the body to catch as much headwind as possible.

We usually don't review sub-\$300 bikes, typically sticking to the fancier stuff for sophisticated and discerning Adventure Cycling members. But to me, this story is as much about Lyansky's approach to commerce as it is about this entry level (but well-made) bike.

I asked Lyansky why he auctions bikes on eBay instead of controlling the price by selling them all at his retail price. "It lets the market set the price," he replied. "I think that's good." Only once has he been hosed badly; the bidding was light one day and a bike sold for a bit over \$100. But most days, the winning bid is in Lyansky's profit margin area.

I also asked Lyansky about compet-



PHOTOS BY KREG ULERY

Specifications: Downtube VIII



Price: \$269. Price may vary.
Seat to crank spindle: adjusts from 23 3/4" to 30"
Seat angle: 70°
Chainstays: 16"
Bottom bracket height: 10 7/8"
Front center: 25 3/4"
Wheelbase: 41 7/8"
Standover height: 24 "
When folded: 32" long, 18" wide, 25 1/2" tall
Frame: Welded oversize aluminum. Hinged & telescoping steering mechanism, main frame hinge, telescoping seat post. Dual rear rack/fender eyelets; replaceable derailleur hanger, slotted cable stops, bosses for one water bottle. Standard headset. Vertical rear dropouts
Fork: Zoom 327 Escape suspension.
Rims: Dino DN-18 20 x 1.5"
Spokes: 28, 14-gauge, cross-three
Hubs: aluminum one-piece, quick release front and rear.

Tires: Kenda 47-406, 20 x 1.75, 40-65 psi
Crank: swaged aluminum.
Rear derailleur: SunRace M50
Shifter: SunRace twist grip indexed.
Chain: KMC narrow
Saddle: huge, vinyl, with coil springs and pads
Seatpost: Kalin; one-bolt saddle clamp; 510 mm long, 27.2 mm diameter
Brakes: Aluminum V-brakes with Allen wrench centering adjustment.
Pedals: Plastic folding pedals.
Bars: Upright bars, 50 cm wide, mini bar-ends.
Cog cassette: 11-12-14-16-18-21-24-28
Gearing in inches:
 28 24 21 18 16 14 12 11
 46 33 38 44 51 58 66 77 84
Contact:
 Downtube www.downtube.com, (215) 245-4032.

ing with the image and prestige of other well-known folding bikes. There, too, he gave a new-age answer: "If nobody has a brand name, then everybody has a brand name." In the world of Internet sales and global word-of-mouth recommendations, you don't need the usual resources to build your brand name. Longevity counts for less. DaHon's twenty-five-year head start matters little to someone seeking a recommendation for a bike to buy now. The rules have changed.

I don't think of importing products and fulfilling orders as a job one does part time, let alone a thousand miles away from the loading dock, but it works for Lyansky. Everything I thought would be a problem he has found a solution for. For example, like all mail-order merchants, he gets an occasional bike returned. What to do with those? He sells them at discount to Coker professors. Warranty issues? The biggest one he had was broken reflectors and bent derailleur hangers, and so he changed the way those are packed in the box. The quality control from his fac-



tory is so good that he simply doesn't have many warranty issues.

Lyansky had a disappointing experience trying to sell his bikes through bike shops. Most shops don't sell folders, and if they do, they probably want to sell DaHon, the most well known brand. He couldn't reach an agreement with even one shop to sell his folding bikes.

Folding-bike customers are an original bunch of people. Lyansky's customers have, at various time, added a gasoline motor, an

electric motor, and a Nexus hub. One metal-working expert rearranged the folding handlebar mechanism to make the bike fold more compactly.

I grew up in a world where folding bikes were designed by famous geniuses like Alex Moulton and David Hon, where perceived high price was a marketing must, and where retailers are absolutely necessary to guide you through buying the bike. Now, we're in a world where a part-time Russian-American businessman collabo-

rates with some unnamed people in China to design a bike; the price varies every day and the seller doesn't care; and the retailers were indifferent so they got pushed to the curb.

The change is killing me. But the bike is quite nice, and that makes the change easier to get used to. 📧

Technical Editor John Schubert hangs out at schubley@aol.com.

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