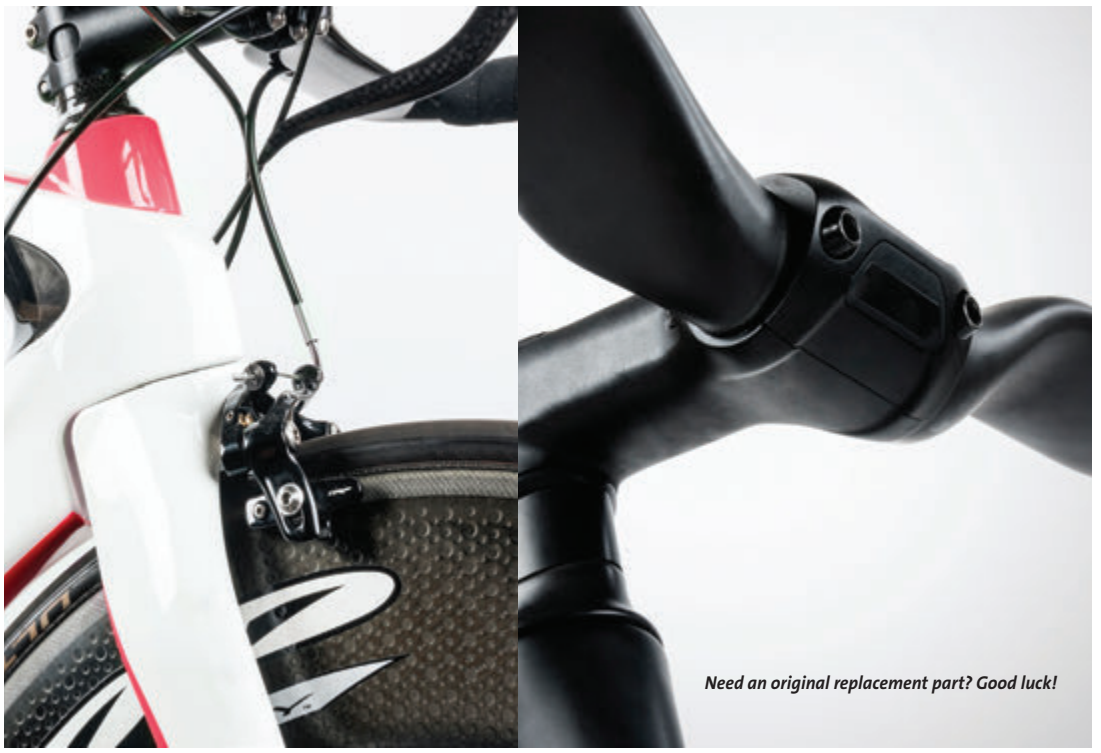
Dirk Zedler

Innovation comes first, but why should spare parts come last?

Eurobike is the industry's biggest party of the year, where we celebrate all of the latest innovations that make our industry dynamic. But like a lot of epic parties, this one will leave a lot of people with hangovers — especially retailers and consumers.



Need an original replacement part? Good luck!

While bike brands make a lot of noise over their newest and coolest products, they neglect the issue of spare parts and service. These are unexciting topics, but they are vitally important.

Imagine you own a Porsche 911 sports car or a Rolex Daytona watch, and five years after you buy it a part breaks or sustains minor damage.

You wouldn't be happy, of course. But what if you took your car or watch to the dealer for repairs, and the dealer just shrugged his shoulders and said there was nothing to be done. Be honest: You'd be more than just annoyed!

Yet this happens every day in the bike industry.

Just try to find an original carbon fork for that expensive carbon frame you bought only two or three years ago.

Or maybe you need a spare part for a first-generation Shimano Dura-Ace Di2 system; a carbon crank; a rim for a carbon wheelset; or an OE stem for your specific bike model in a different length.

These are not hypothetical questions. At the Zedler Institute, we know how real these are because we are aware of urgent requests all the time from consumers or dealers who are trying to find replacement parts for bikes that are not all that old.

And we also know, from making repeated requests to nearly all manufacturers, that the chance of successfully obtaining the right replacement part happens only in absolutely exceptional cases.

Paying the price. When there is a satisfactory solution, it is usually because a retailer stepped up to take care of the customer. Yet so many times, the retailer receives no benefit and may well take a financial hit.

Say a retailer replaces a stem, painted to match the color of the customer's frame, with one that better fits that particular customer to the particular bike.

It's unfair to bill the customer for the new stem, because it's the retailer's responsibility to make sure the bike fits the customer properly in the first place. Yet the retailer may have paid for the new stem, and is now stuck with the original stem that will probably never be sold.

Yes, the industry is doing well right now, as more consumers buy bikes for transportation and invest in high-value products like pedelecs. Because bike makers and retailers are boosting sales and earning higher profits, they can invest some of that revenue into creating innovative new products.

Such innovations often include unique, proprietary components, as brands look to set themselves apart on the market. But as more of these unique components come on the market, the harder it becomes for consumers to repair them or find replacements when something goes wrong.

No stock answers. It's time for bike brands to rethink their approach to new bike and pedelec models. Brands don't just have to satisfy consumers, but — especially with e-bikes — also have to satisfy market surveillance authorities.

Brands shouldn't just think about how to integrate a battery on a frame, or how to make a bike more comfortable to ride.

They also need to tackle less favorite issues such as instructing consumers how to use the bike properly; maintaining a database of complaints; conducting safety tests; creating systems to handle quality assurance as well as recalls; and creating an adequate supply of spare parts.

The boom in pedelecs means that "spare parts" don't just refer to the usual bike hardware, like frame, fork, components and wheels, but to software as well.

This raises one important question: How long should a manufacturer keep spare parts in stock?

We are not aware of any case law on this question involving bicycles, although court rulings involving products in other industries may provide some guidelines.

The Product Liability Act refers to "the intended or reasonably expected use" of a product, although admittedly that language was not written in the context of spare parts or service requirements.

The law also requires that a manufacturer ensure the operational safety of a product for 10 years after sale.

If we use the language of the Product Liability Act as a springboard, it is reasonable to think that a court could conclude that the "reasonably expected use" of a city or trekking bike is at least 10 years. It is also reasonable to assume that the expected lifetime of a downhill mountain bike, in contrast, is much shorter.

Another issue that bike manufacturers shy away from is whether a new bicycle should carry an "expiration date." Some countries require that motor vehicles be inspected on specific schedules, which can lead them to being withdrawn from service in due course.

I would argue that the industry should set an expiration date on bicycles, or at least on those types of bikes that can reasonably be expected to have useful lifetimes of less than 10 years.

Spare a thought for spares. Meanwhile, the bike industry is not even talking about setting standards for maintaining a stockpile of original spare parts. I believe this is unacceptable.

The bike industry, which is strongly in the ascendant right now, must decide whether we want to promote modern bicycles as throw-away products. Or should retailers treat aftersale customer orientation as seriously as some hype the newest test winners in a popular bike magazine?

Luxury brands like Porsche and Rolex know one thing that our industry would do well to remember: It takes a fraction of the time and expense to keep an existing customer happy and "on board" than it does to gain a new customer.

Just do it! ■ **DIRK ZEDLER**

Dirk Zedler

Since 1993, Dirk Zedler has been an analyst and expert witness on bicycle accidents and product failures for courts, bike and insurance companies, and private individuals. He got his start in the industry by working for a large bike shop in 1986, and now holds the respected advanced engineering degree known as a "Diplom-Ingenieur."

Courts have recognized Zedler as an officially appointed and sworn expert on bicycles since 1994, and on electric bicycles since 2014. His staff prepares some 800 expert's reports every year.

Zedler – Institut für Fahrradtechnik und -Sicherheit GmbH (the Zedler Institute for Bicycle Technology and Safety) has used this wealth of knowledge, derived from its work in thousands of court proceedings and expert's reports, to enhance research and development in the bicycle industry.

The Institute sets the standards for the bicycle industry. It develops and builds testing equipment that is used by manufacturers to improve the riding quality and safety of their bikes, and by leading European bicycle magazines to test them. The Institute's work provides a basis for European and American manufacturers to communicate with their Asian suppliers. Manufacturers can buy test equipment from the Institute or use its state-of-the-art testing lab.

The Zedler Institute also prepares user manuals for bicycles and pedelecs. These manuals, now available in more than 35 languages, help consumers use their bikes properly — and in many cases have protected manufacturers from liability.

For more information, visit www.zedler.de.