GUIDE TO RUNNING A BIKE SHARE

HOW TO PLAN AND OPERATE A SUCCESSFUL BIKE SHARE PROGRAM
The bicycle is the most loved form of transportation.

No other machine allows for such efficient transportation and the freedom to adventure, on demand.
For many communities, the challenges, time and cost of running bike share can be a big ‘gotcha’. Many bike share vendors provide bikes, racks and technology—smoothing sales by promising easy, low cost operations.

However, once bikes are on the ground, communities that have not budgeted for the costs and responsibilities of running the program find their bike shares suffering from cost overruns, damaged equipment and frustrated riders.

Bikes and stations are only the first step in building a successful bike share program. The majority of time and expense related to a successful bike share is spent on operations, support and maintenance.

This guide is designed to help you understand and plan for the necessary elements in order to run a successful bike sharing system.

The Impact of Operations

Bike shares operate on a supply and demand basis. A successful bike share operations program balances both sides of the equation to deliver a reliable, cost-effective system.

Program growth and ridership is enabled by supply—the bikes. If you don’t have enough bikes available, riders will lower their expectations for the program and choose another way to get around. Over time, this results in program stagnation and abandonment.

When there are sufficient numbers of functioning bikes on the ground in trafficked areas, riders will trust the bike share as a reliable means of transportation. Trust, and in turn ridership, comes from successful operations, support, maintenance and education.

About Zagster

Zagster’s mission is to help communities establish successful bike share programs that get people riding and we love to work with communities that are committed to running successful bike sharing programs.

Zagster’s planning, launch and operations teams are experienced in managing on-demand bike share for more than 130 bike share networks around the country.

If you have questions, GET IN TOUCH.
WWW.ZAGSTER.COM/CONTACT
THE FIVE FUNDAMENTALS

There are five fundamentals to consider when running a successful bike share. It’s not just the Zagster team, all of the successful bike sharing programs we know of have fully implement each of these five strategic areas as part of their bike share program.

PLANNING

Where does operational responsibility and liability fall?

Good bike share planning anticipates issues and controls costs to maximize ridership and ensure long run success.

OPERATIONS

Operations includes the monitoring, rebalancing and storage duties that make sure bikes are available in the right place at the right time and keep your bike sharing program running smoothly.
MAINTENANCE

Bike sharing bikes are ridden up to 15 times more than personal bikes. Heavy use combined with constant exposure makes regular skilled maintenance a necessity.

EDUCATION

Education is one of the most overlooked components of bike share.

Many people know how to ride a bike, but not necessarily in an urban environment. Good rider education keeps riders safe and prevents theft and damage across your fleet.

SUPPORT

For new riders, bike share technology doesn’t always work as expected. Whether it’s a flat tire or a bike that won’t unlock, good rider support keeps customers happy and your system humming.
A well planned bike share is essential to meet your goals of providing an efficient and convenient mode of transit for your community.
The two biggest measures of bike share success are controlled costs and increasing ridership. While many communities choose to focus on technology - for riders, a bike is a bike.

Availability and convenience are the defining factors that most impact ridership—a bike loaded with technology may look good, but can miss the point when it comes to providing a good rider experience.

Good bike share planning defines responsibilities in the community for running the bike share, anticipates issues and controls costs to maximize ridership and ensure long run success.

RESPONSIBILITIES

One often overlooked aspect of planning a bike share program is responsibility. Who is ultimately responsible for keeping the system running on a daily basis? Do you have someone that will arrange for maintenance and take change when something goes wrong? Who decides when to add more bikes or move stations? When a bike needs to be fixed, who gets the call?

Programs that put bikes on the ground with no clear chain of responsibility run into trouble when decisions need to made. When no one is in charge, everyone is in charge and this leads to slow response and lack of cost control.

LIABILITIES

If a bike is damaged or stolen, who is liable? What happens if a rider hits a car or falls?

Having coverage for damage or injury is critical to keeping your bike share fleet rolling. Lack of planning for liability can shut your program down or even keep it from launching in the first place. The best bike share providers protect communities by providing rider waivers and insurance coverage.
Costs

It's crucial to consider the total cost of ownership for your bike share program. Our analysis shows that the costs of running a bike share including operations, maintenance and support usually make up around 60% of the total cost of bike share.

If you are planning to operate your own bike share or pay an operator to manage equipment you’ve purchased, for every $1 you spend on bikes and stations, you should budget $1.5 dollars for keeping the system running.

Some programs that are sponsorship based have been scuttled by not planning for operational costs. After negotiating with a third party to secure a sponsorship for their bike share, they find out at the last minute that the sponsorship only covers the cost of the equipment, not the ongoing operations.

Programs that fail to anticipate the costs of operations put their investment at risk when they are unable to find the budget to keep the bikes on the ground.

Action Steps

Don’t wait to figure out responsibilities for your bike share program. Decide on a person or entity who is in charge of not just the implementation, but the long run operation of the program.

Have a plan for liability. Make sure you or your bike share provider have strong rider waivers and liability coverage for when things go wrong.

Budget adequately. It’s better to buy a simple, robust solution with a good management plan than spend money on overly complex technology without a plan to pay for the upkeep of the system.
OPERATIONS

Operations can refer to every aspect of running a bike share. Specifically, operations are the monitoring, rebalancing and storage duties that keep bike shares running smoothly. Good operations means that bikes are in the right place at the right time to so that riders trust the system as a viable transportation option.

REBALANCING

The nature of distributed bike share programs is that the bikes are ridden from station to station. This natural flow of bikes throughout a system is not always self-balancing. The result is that stations in some areas have no bikes available, while other stations are so full there is no parking for riders ending their trips.

In order for riders to trust the system, it’s important to have bikes available where people pick them up and plenty of station spaces where people drop bikes off.

The rebalancing needs of your system will depend on:
- The number of bikes
- The number of stations
- The number of riders

Having more station spaces than bikes is a proven way to lower the amount of rebalancing necessary. Ideally, a bike share will have two times more station spaces than bikes. The additional station spaces do add some fixed costs, but this investment pays large dividends as it allows rebalancing to be performed at significantly longer intervals.

As your ridership grows, there are several ways to rebalance the system. Having someone walk the bikes (up to two at a time) between stations is a cost-effective and easy way to start. If you need to transfer bikes farther distances, use bike trailers or racks or with larger systems, cargo vans that can accommodate several dozen bikes at a time.

STORAGE / WINTERIZATION

Due to weather or other factors, there may be times when you must take all of the bikes off the ground for secure storage. If you anticipate this being necessary in your community, it is important to have a plan and a location to ensure fast and safe temporary storage of your fleet.
ANALYTICS & REVIEW

Good operations goes beyond the day-to-day. Programs with a robust operating plan establish goals for ridership and membership. They also review the analytics collected from rides and riders to ensure that the system is properly configured.

Regular review of your systems use helps you plan for expansion and will show you if and where to stations should be moved to maximize ridership.

A good bike share solution will give you ridership data including heat-maps to help you optimize station placement. The best provide account managers and administrative support to help meet your ridership goals, suggesting solutions based on analysis of your systems use data so you can maximize your return on investment.

ACTION STEPS

Have more stations than bikes in your system. We recommend a 2:1 ratio of station spots to bikes to maximize ridership and lower rebalancing needs.

Proactively monitor the system and rebalance as necessary to ensure that bikes are available to rent where people tend to pick them up and that station spots are available for riders to end their trips.

Have a plan and a secure space to store the bikes during the winter, off-season or inclimate weather.

Monitor and respond to what your data is telling you. Use the analytics from your bike share provider to optimize your system configuration and ensure that you maximize ridership.
MAINTENANCE

Keeping your bikes in tip-top condition is critical to the success of your bike share program. Bike share bikes are ridden much more than personal bikes and need increased maintenance. The average personal bike may be ridden 5-10 times a week by a diligent commuter, while the average bike share bike may be ridden 5-10 times a day (or more). That’s up to 15x the amount of use that a personal bike gets.

If the bikes are not ready to ride, this can lead to complaints like ‘all the bikes are broken’, lack of trust and a drop in ridership.

FREQUENCY OF SERVICE

Because of the level of riding, bike share bikes must be serviced regularly. Many programs have mechanics to look at the bikes at least once every month, if not every few weeks or days.

WHO FIXES THE BIKES?

Knowledge and skill in bike repair is important. The more knowledgeable and efficient the mechanic repairing your fleet is, the less time they need to spend on each bike. An experienced mechanic will also be able to spot parts that are wearing out before they break. This proactive maintenance saves the system time and money and significantly improves the rider experience.
EMERGENCY REPAIRS

Having a mechanic that can be on call to make emergency repairs is just as important as regular, scheduled visits. It’s also important that the bike sharing system you select has a method to notify your staff that maintenance is needed on a bike.

VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers can be the heart and soul of a community project. However, when you have potentially hundreds of thousands of dollars invested in your bike sharing program, relying on volunteers to provide support, operate and maintain the system can carry significant risk.

Volunteers care, but they are not guaranteed. They potentially have other priorities and may not always be available or have the knowledge necessary to run the system on a daily basis.

When it comes to the day-in and day-out operations and maintenance of your bike share system, guarantee uptime and good rider experiences by having dedicated providers that have a duty to keeping your bike share rolling.

SPARE PARTS & REPLACEMENTS

It’s important to consider the cost and availability of spare parts for your bike fleet. Do you need to purchase all parts through the original system provider? How much will this cost on an ongoing basis? Are spare parts covered through an agreement with your bike share provider? What is the warranty for the bike? What about the sharing technology?

With regular use, even heavy-duty bikes can be damaged by riders. If parts on the bike break, it’s important to have the cost of a replacement budgeted.

ACTION STEPS

Make sure your bike share vendor provides maintenance as part of their operations package.

If you are going it alone—contract with an experienced local mechanic to perform regular maintenance of your fleet and be available for emergency repairs.

Don’t rely on volunteers to provide maintenance services - they may not be available when you need them and may lack the knowledge and skills necessary to keep the system running.

You’ve invested a lot of time and money in your bike share program—don’t risk one of the most crucial aspects of its success by relying on people that are helping out in their spare time.

Have a plan and a budget for spare parts and bike replacements. Know where you can get parts from and what the warranties for your bikes, stations and sharing technology cover.
RIDER SUPPORT

Bike share systems exist to serve riders. Good rider support keeps the wheels turning whether someone is trying to find where to pick up a bike, figure out how to unlock or return the bike or if they have any trouble during a trip.

SOLVE COMMON ISSUES

Common issues like finding a bike, unlocking and ending a trip are quickly solved by an on-demand rider support resource. While technology, signage and rider education can help mitigate many rider issues, having a real person ready to assist riders and a system in place to solve their problems keeps your system rolling and provides a good customer experience, which leads to increase ridership. And sometimes, riders just want someone to thank.

CONTROLLING BAD BEHAVIOR

Your skilled mechanics are not necessarily the right people to handle customer service issues. Tracking down missing bikes and removing riders that abuse the system are critical tasks to minimize loss.

Having a rider support resource will make sure you have the right tools and time to help out riders with issues and stop the riders that create them.

ACTION STEPS

Establish a rider support resource. Some bike share providers like Zagster have dedicated rider support organizations that are experienced in supporting bike share systems.

If you are operating your own bike share or your vendor doesn’t offer rider support, you should have someone whose duties include providing support to riders.

Your rider support resource should be your eyes and ears on the ground. They are the person who alerts mechanics that a repair or rebalance is needed. They also can monitor the system to lock out abusers and coordinate with police or other officials to recover lost or stolen bikes.
RIDER EDUCATION

Rider education is one of the most effective ways to make sure that the two key goals of bike share, controlling costs and increasing ridership, are met.

By educating riders you make sure that people know how to use your bike share, which increases the chances of them using it. You also make sure that riders know how to use the bike share properly which exponentially reduces the amount of maintenance and support you need per rider. Rider education also helps to build a strong rider community that is respectful and respected by those they interact with during their rides.

RIDERSHIP

Many people know how to ride a bike, but the reality of using a bike share system and handling a bike in an urban or campus environment is new for many riders. Potential riders may be intimidated by the bike share system or simply confused about how it works.

Rider education assets and programs like clear signage, videos and demo days help people to understand how the bike share works and how to use the bikes. In turn, this makes people comfortable with the program and leads to increased ridership.
SAFETY

Educating riders on the rules of the road in your community increases safety and helps make sure the bike share is safe. Good riders increase confidence in the bike share system and helps to avoid injury and equipment damage.

PROPER USE

Knowing how to unlock the bike or where to find bikes and where to return them improve the rider experience and dramatically reduce missing or broken bikes, which keeps your costs and operational time to a minimum.

ACTION STEPS

Establish a rider education program that promotes your bike share and informs potential riders about the benefits, costs and use of the bikes.

Work with your bike share vendor to design clear signage and a marketing plan that helps riders understand the system and how to use it properly.
A well-built plan for running your bike share program not only maximizes ridership, it helps to predict and control costs.

By planning and budgeting for the total costs, responsibilities and activities necessary to run a bike share program, you will guarantee that your program will successfully grow and provide a valid means of transportation.

The best bike share programs grow organically. By providing a consistent service to the community - people learn to trust the bike share as a reliable means of transportation.

As more and more people use the bike share and the community becomes accustomed to seeing and using bikes to get around, the community becomes more bike friendly.

At Zagster, we think that's a beautiful thing.
Zagster’s expert bike share planning and operations team is experienced in managing on-demand bike sharing programs with over 100 programs and tens of thousands of bikes.

**Get in touch** with us to learn more about how we can help you in planning and running a bike share program for your community.

www.zagster.com/contact