

Bellingham businesses use rentals to capitalize on summertime, an hour at a time



Kirk Turner preps a Specialized full-suspension mountain bike for renting at Fairhaven Bike & Ski. The bike is one of five rental options available at the bike and snow sports shop. Mark Stayton | BBJ

by [Mark Stayton](#)

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So the sun is finally out, the weekend is open and that home improvement project you've been putting off is practically begging to get finished. But, after half an hour spent rummaging through your crowded garage, it hits you — your level is missing. The fastidious craftsman in you won't allow the finished product to sit anything less than parallel to the earth, but the budget is tight and you can't quite bring yourself to spend \$25 on a new one.

So what do you do? Rent one. For \$5 you can rent a level from [Hardware Sales](#) for 24 hours. The job gets done per your specifications before another rainstorm moves in,

there's an extra \$20 in your pocket, and best of all, no additional storage space is required.

Stories like this from customers are the reason Hardware Sales rents nearly their entire selection of tools, from sanders to excavators to hedge trimmers.

They are just one of many Bellingham businesses using rentals to offer customers an alternative to purchasing specialty equipment. And summer, a time when weather-dependent projects and gear-specific adventures abound, is prime time for their rental fleets.

The tool for the job

Michelle Kovacs, head of Hardware Sales' rental department, said that addressing customer needs for specialty equipment without saddling them with the upfront costs and responsibility of maintenance and storage is the reason the store keeps such a diverse inventory of rental equipment.

Lawn equipment needed for once-a-year projects like aerating and thatching, which help with lawn drainage, are popular, as well as tools needed for home improvement jobs, Kovacs said.

"These tools are expensive," Kovacs said. "A lot of homeowners, especially, own small properties in Bellingham, so there's no reason to own some of this equipment."

Renting also allows customers to try equipment before they buy it, determining what size and type of tool fits their needs. Chainsaws and pressure washers are especially big in this category. If a renter does decide to buy, the rental price is deducted from the purchase, which has turned many renters into buyers, Kovacs said.

Hardware Sales' inventory of more than 466 tools is available on the company's rental division website, which Kovacs said has generated a lot of traffic in the store and on the phone.

Although the company does not have insurance on most items — customers renting engine-run machinery can opt for insurance covering engine failure — Kovacs said that most of her rental inventory is sold within a year, so upkeep is generally a minor concern. The problems Hardware Sales encounter most often are customers bringing equipment back dirty or low on fuel, which they charge for accordingly.

For locals and tourists alike

It's no secret that Bellingham is big on bikes. From winning a "bicycle friendly community" award from the League of American Bicyclists to having nearby Galbraith Mountain featured as one of the top 10 places to ride in the nation by Mountain Bike Magazine, the masses have caught on to the city's fascination with two-wheeled transportation.

Bellingham's reputation has been a boon for [Fairhaven Bike & Ski](#), a shop that has been renting bikes since the early '90s. The shop specializes in renting equipment for all levels of riders, offering front- and full-suspension mountain bikes, competition-level road bikes, tandems and trail-a-bikes for kids.

"It's huge for people coming in from out of town," said Michael Storm, a manager for the store's rentals department.

"It's cheaper than bringing a bike on a plane. Plus, there's a spontaneous element to renting a bike. There's no planning required."

Storm said the most popular item is the front-suspension mountain bike, which is the shop's most affordable rental option at \$25 for four hours.

"Most people who come in are just looking for something to tool around on," Storm said.

Andy McKowan, a mountain biker from Pennsylvania, was looking for something a little more technical. McKowan was visiting his family in Lynden after reading about Bellingham's famous trails and brewpubs in a biking magazine. He was walking around Fairhaven with some friends when they stumbled upon the shop. The trio decided to go all-out, renting full-suspension mountain bikes for their first whack at Galbraith's dirty descents.

Upper-level equipment is also rented out by local riders trying to determine if a dedicated road bike or full-suspension mountain bike suits their needs. Again, the rental rate is deducted from the price tag if a customer decides to buy.

The shop's website, which features rates and online booking of its rentals, has been instrumental in increasing awareness of the rental program, Storm said. Events like Ski to Sea, which features both road and mountain bike portions, and Tour de Whatcom usually require early reservations.

Storm said that the rental department accounts for about 15 percent of the shop's labor, which focuses heavily on repairing and prepping the bikes. Occasionally hardware gets broken, leaving the shop to cover the costs.

Getting people out on the water

Operating out of an aquamarine boathouse on the Harris Avenue dock, with racks bristling with kayaks and long boards, the [Community Boating Center](#) (CBC) is poised to offer nautical excitement on Bellingham Bay. Here renting is more than just an additional service, it is central to the nonprofit center's business model and core values.

Dallas Betz, education coordinator for the CBC, said the center's two-pronged mission is to offer customers easy access to the water while teaching them the importance of cold-water safety. They accomplish this by offering instruction, rentals and storage to accommodate everyone from first-time mariners to experts who have purchased a boat of their own.

“Once people go to our classes, they’ll continue to go to the water by renting our equipment,” Betz said.

A variety of vessels are available for rent after a skills assessment or lesson, allowing newbies to come back and hone their skills on their own. Betz said kayaks are the most popular rental item, although sailboats, rowing shells, and stand-up paddleboards are also available for one hour, four hours, or for the day. Annual passes are also available for specific craft or the entire fleet. The proceeds from renting equipment help the CBC offer educational programs and seminars to the community.

The CBC’s rental fleet is composed of sturdy, well-made vessels that are tough to tip over and easy to get right-side-up, which keeps accidents and costs down, said Betz. The rentals are priced based on initial investment versus average lifespan, although trial and error were used to determine what people would pay.

The marketing scheme for the CBC is a mix of old and new. The boating center’s location, although off the radar of most Bellingham residents, is perfectly situated to draw customers coming in from the sea: tourists getting off the ferry and sailors anchored nearby often rent kayaks and explore the bay, Betz said.

Community outreach at local festivals helps as well, though cyberspace is not neglected. The center’s website lists rates and availability of their crafts, and a social media presence is being established, said Betz. The center’s online information has also helped it connect with Ski to Sea teams looking for a kayak, which are often reserved a year in advance of the race.

As one might expect, the boat rental business is highly seasonal. Currently, the CBC offers rentals from May 1 to October 31, using storage fees to keep the center afloat during the offseason. However, Betz said plans were in the works to offer a rough-weather kayaking class in the winter.

But, while the weather is decent, or at least close enough for Bellingham, rentals will continue to be a viable option for businesses looking to cater to customer needs for the right tool or toy at the right price.