



## CONNECTING BUSINESSES WITH MOUNTAIN BIKERS (130)

This report gives a summary of the project which ran between:-

1 July 2010 to March 31 2011.

## Background

Following the foot and mouth epidemic in 2000 the public agencies led by the Forestry Commission Scotland developed a set of proposals to create a world leading set of mountain bike trails throughout Southern Scotland. With funding from ERDF, Scottish Enterprise, Scottish Natural Heritage and the two Councils the 7stanes was born. Of these five are located within Dumfries and Galloway. At the same time Buccleuch Estates developed its own set of trails in the grounds of the magnificent Drumlanrig House.

The trails soon began to attract in bikers particularly the Glentress site with its ready access to Edinburgh, however there was concern that the local business community was not able to respond to the new and emerging market. During 2006 and early part of 2007 Forestry Commission Scotland and Scottish Enterprise organised a series of meetings with businesses who had expressed an interest in selling into this market. It soon became clear that while there was support for the concept of joint working there was no mechanism to make this happen. As a consequence Dumfries and Galloway Chamber of Commerce agreed to set up a business group to try and take this forward.

The group meet during 2007 and became the Mountain Bike Business Network with its own committee. The group was very informal initially and met to explore how the opportunities offered by the public sector investment in 7stanes might be capitalised by a very diverse range of small local businesses. The group eventually became established as a Committee within Dumfries and Galloway Chamber of Commerce and chaired by a Board member of Chamber. Membership is open to any business and it has never been limited to Chamber members. Initially free its membership grew quickly to 140.

One of the early actions was to find a way for all businesses offering services to mountain bikers to be able to connect with them. The Forestry Commission web site [www.7stanes.gov.uk](http://www.7stanes.gov.uk) had proved to be very popular with over 300,000 visitors regularly logging on. This is however a government web site and is not allowed to take advertising or links to businesses other than those occupying FCS sites within the forests. The group had no resources and could not set up its own web site so instead the Chamber entered into an agreement on their behalf with Tourism Doctor to enable the group to badge up [www.7stanes.com](http://www.7stanes.com) web site. This arrangement allowed FCS to treat this as a community web site and allowed it to be linked comprehensively to their web site. Traffic to the .com web site increased rapidly following this agreement.

Encouraged by this early success and with the assistance of Scottish Enterprise a marketing study was commissioned from Bright Lights Marketing. Published at the end of 2008 this plan provided a blue print for the group to help grow the mountain biking market from its base of

£9m (half of which comes to Dumfries and Galloway) and to allow small local businesses to offer services in a cost effective way.

The plan was presented to the membership in the early part of 2009 and unanimously approved. The members agreed to set a membership fee of £100 per annum and to seek grant aid to implement the marketing, membership and business development programme outlined by the consultants.

Support for the project was quickly obtained from Scottish Enterprise and Forestry Commission Scotland. Discussions with Dumfries and Galloway Council indicated strong support but by the time a formal approach was made the budget for this had been fully committed. An application for Leader funding was subsequently approved.

Initially conceived as a single project it became clear at an early stage that the project was not going to be able to achieve all of its targets. The reasons for this are discussed later in the report. Following discussions with staff at Leader it was decided to re profile the initial project over a shorter time scale. That project has been completed and a final report submitted to Leader. A second application was then submitted and approved to achieve some of the outstanding objectives and this ran from 30<sup>th</sup> June 2010 to 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011. This is the report for that second project.

## **The Project Experience**

### **Timescales**

The project started 1<sup>st</sup> July 2010 and ended in 31<sup>st</sup> March 2011.

### **What Happened**

This project built on the first one and continued to recruit members such that by its completion it had reached 80 paid up members. Engaging with small business in the tourism sector has been difficult for a number of reasons. Many of the accommodation providers are owner managed leaving little time to spend on joint events and there are several organisations seeking contributions for marketing that many businesses now simply refuse any such requests. The Project manager found throughout the project that the only way to recruit new business into the Network was by face-to-face contact. Once the concept of the Network and the joint marketing and sharing good practice was explained then the majority of business joined.

A management committee that ensured that the outputs were relevant and effective from the practitioners' perspective drove the project. This resulted in a change in emphasis as the project progressed.

### **How was the project delivered?**

The project delivered a number of key tasks as set out below

**Monthly Newsletter:** the monthly e-newsletter was delivered to member businesses to update them on Network activity and alert them to opportunities such as the networking event at Jacquie's Beauty Salon (July 2010), IMBA UK 2010 Annual Conference (August 2010) and the Women on Wheels events (November 2010). This newsletter continues to be circulated and now reaches over 200 businesses comprising 80 member businesses and 120 potential members.

**Membership recruitment:** By the end of Phase II membership stood at 80 with five members declining to renew their membership and 12 new members joining, including one charity. Much of this new membership was attracted to join the network after visiting the new members' only MBBN website.

**MBBN Website:** The new members' only website was launched in September 2010. At launch the site was fully populated and all the members' pages included at least one picture.

At the end of Phase II the site included 85 members' pages as members owning multiple businesses are given a page for each of their outlets.

The site was developed to allow members direct access to their own pages and is not moderated as in many web sites. This meant that members were able to ensure the content of their page was correct, up to date and relevant to their customers. A great deal of time was spent making sure that the content was established from day one and then making sure that members were confident in using the content management system. This was achieved through direct contact with members and through three drop in events.

The drop-in training events were held in Newton Stewart, Castle Douglas and Dumfries. They attracted 16 members from small businesses, the majority of whom were not highly computer literate. They were all very pleased at how simple the site was to manage and were impressed by its links to Facebook and Twitter

Search engine optimisation (SEO) continued throughout the second phase and the site continued to rise through the Google rankings. SEO was concentrated on making sure that the right key words are present on each page to match the content – which in turns increased the pages' relevance to Google and affected the site's rankings. The words used to search for the site were monitored, as were the sources of searches. Improved links to and from the site were created and particular attention was paid to social networking (see below).

This work resulted in people staying on the site for an average of 5 minutes and a significantly lower bounce rate.

<http://eat-sleep-ride.com> benefited from being linked to the official 7stanes site from where around 40% of traffic to the site is generated.

**Website Marketing:** The success of <http://eat-sleep-ride.com> depended on the site attracting large numbers of visitors thereby bringing new business to the members. In order to raise the profile of the site a number of initiatives were undertaken as follows:

**Web site Flyers:** A one third A4 flyer was designed and produced to introduce the web site. The flyer included the web address and a call to register for the MBBN newsletter in order to be entered into a draw for an I-Pod. With 6000 copies distributed to members businesses and at all the major events. It has also been supplied to businesses attending exhibitions and shows.

**Bike Stickers:** 1000 bike stickers which read Eat-Sleep-Ride.com were produced in order to raise awareness of <http://eat-sleep-ride.com>. These were distributed to members businesses and used at a number of promotional events.

**In Commerce:** The MBBN committed to three articles for the Dumfries and Galloway Chamber of Commerce Magazine – In Commerce. The first was published in autumn of 2010 and it opened with an introduction to the new site so local businesses would be aware of its existence. These also included the Leader logos and 2,500 copies are circulated within the region.

**FCS Silverburn Event:** The MBBN supported a Forestry Commission Scotland event held at the Silverburn Shopping Centre in Glasgow on Saturday 26 March. This was seen as an ideal opportunity to get information about the site out to the public. MBBN volunteers attended the event and took with them bike stickers reading [eat-sleep-ride.com](http://eat-sleep-ride.com) and 1/3 A4 flyers advertising a competition to win an I-Pod for those who visit the site. 5000 copies of the flyer and 1000 bike stickers were produced for use at events.

**Manchester Confidential:** The MBBN supported a Forestry Commission Scotland promotion run through popular Manchester based competition website [www.manchesterconfidential.com](http://www.manchesterconfidential.com). The campaign consisted of a feature on the 7stanes and a competition to win a mountain biking holiday in Dumfries and Galloway with prizes donated by MBBN members.

The site is a Greater Manchester-based consumer website which includes local news, reviews, competitions, promotions and sends daily emails to over 70,000 people in the area. The two month campaign included:

- the creation of a 4-page microsite on the main site
- two advertorials on the site
- one competition
- inclusion on at least 10 emails
- Promotion through Manchester Confidential twitter and facebook sites

In addition, the campaign was replicated across two of the Manchester Confidential sister sites, Kids Confidential and Liverpool Confidential.

The campaign included a microsite with an introduction to 7stanes, a profile of all seven centres, details of the wider offer to make a weekend break (including the link to <http://eat-sleep-ride.com>)

The microsite received a total of 2799 impressions (page loads) by 1655 individuals.

An advertorial included on the site focussed on the food and drink on offer around the 7stanes sites in partnership and featured MBBN businesses. It was viewed 295 times in the week it was on the site.

A competition was established in partnership with the MBBN with prizes from the Aston Hotel, Bottle Green biking and The Breakpad bike shop. A prize of a mountain biking weekend break for four with half board accommodation, bike hire and tuition was offered, and promoted on the site, through emails to the mailing list, on twitter and facebook.

The competition page on the site included links to the full microsite about 7stanes, the Forestry Commission, 7stanes and competition partners logos. This page was viewed 13,696 times in total, and there were 1051 entrants.

A competition winner was selected, and has been put in touch with the 7stanes CIC team to arrange their visit to 7stanes.

**FCS Manchester Evening News visit:** Doug Knox, Development officer for the Forestry Commission Scotland (FCS) 7stanes team arranged a familiarisation trip for Manchester Evening News journalist Andy Cronshaw who came to the region between Thursday 17 and Saturday 19 March 2011.

This trip was arranged to coincide with the article and competition on [www.manchesterconfidential.com](http://www.manchesterconfidential.com) and was supported by members of the MBBN who provided accommodation and services for the trip.

The Network organised the itinerary for the trip and free accommodation was provided by the Aston Hotel and the Best Western Selkirk Arms Hotel and activities were provided by Laggan Outdoor and Clive Forth of mtbskills.

**The paper has a circulation of 155,000 and to buy this amount of advertising would have cost £15,000 based on a colour page rate £11,695.**

**Facebook and Twitter:** News, events and offers added by members to the appropriate section on the homepage of [eat-sleep-ride.com](http://eat-sleep-ride.com) were automatically sent out to Facebook and Twitter followers through the social networking pages linked to the site. By the end of the project the Facebook page was liked by 58 people and there were 160 eat\_zzz\_ride followers on Twitter.

Efforts were made to increase the number of followers by asking members to ask their customers to follow or like the Twitter or Facebook pages. Members were also encouraged to link the sites to their own social networking pages and all of this work will continue beyond the end of the project.

**Map Leaflet:** Following on from the success of the map leaflet produced in first project the Committee were anxious to renew this and to ensure that it was a high quality publication that put out the right messages. While it was seen as important to sell the region as a quality mountain bike destination it was the view of the Committee that it was important to inform people that there are many other activities available in the region.

At the time of deadline for submissions there were 79 members and the old design only had space to feature 69 adverts so a new design was developed.

The new publication was designed as a booklet with adverts for each of the members as well as information about mountain biking and other activities in the region. Each member of the network was given the opportunity to include an advert with up to 30 words about their business, contact information and a photograph as a member benefit.

In addition each business was offered the opportunity to double the size of their advert by providing an offer exclusive to the publication. 17 member businesses took up this opportunity.

45,000 copies were printed with 27,000 distributed by Direct in key attractions in Liverpool, Manchester, Birmingham, Clyde Valley, Ayrshire and the ferry terminals at Stranraer and Belfast.

The remaining leaflets were distributed through Tourist Information Centres in the region, through member businesses and will be taken to events.

The revised design made necessary by the increased membership, the wish to offer visitor discounts, and the need to strengthen the offer by including other activities resulted in a significant increase in the cost of production. This also had an impact on the distribution costs. The Committee took this view that this should have a higher priority and that the underspends in other headings should be used to fund this.

**VisitScotland E-zines:** VisitScotland has a database of over 200,000 contacts who receive regular marketing information about holiday destinations and activities in Scotland. In order to raise the profile of Dumfries and Galloway as a world-class mountain biking destination the MBBN booked banner advertising in two of their monthly e-zines.

The first is being sent to young domestic explorers, which includes families as well as singletons. The second is a generic list that represents a cross section of people from a range of backgrounds across the UK.

Readers will be able to read about the region as a tourist destination and click through from the banner directly to <http://eat-sleep-ride.com>.



**VisitScotland European Touring Web Deal 2011 / 12:** The MBBN has a listing on the European Touring Gateway Websites for 12 months. The listing appeared on the travel deals sections of the sites for Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Sweden, the Netherlands and Belgium and was translated into the appropriate language for each country.

In 2009 / 10 the sites attracted 1.9 million visits as follows:

France:	554,425	Sweden:	97,520
Spain:	443,190	Netherlands:	160,732
Germany:	380,415	Belgium:	59,552
Italy:	225,266		

The listing includes 50 words about the region and its potential as a mountain biking holiday destination, the eat-sleep-ride logo and a click through from the listing directly to <http://eat-sleep-ride.com>.

**VisitScotland Direct Mail and In Store Promotions:** The MBBN is worked with VisitScotland to provide two competitions for a direct mail and an in-store promotion.

The direct mail campaign ran in conjunction with outdoor clothing website [www.gearforgirls.co.uk](http://www.gearforgirls.co.uk). This competition targeted young women who have been identified as a potential customer base for mountain biking holidays in Dumfries and Galloway.



Visitors to the Gear for Girls website clicked on the image above and entered their details for a chance to win a two night mountain biking break. The prize consisted of two nights dinner, bed and breakfast at Kirroughtree House Hotel, a day of tuition at 7stanes Kirroughtree provided by Bottlegreen Biking on bikes provided by the Break Pad.

The in-store promotion ran in conjunction with Greaves Sports, an independent sports retailer based in Glasgow and Edinburgh. The stores' target customers are young people and families and the two cities in which they are based are key locations from which to attract new customers. In store publicity asked customers to fill in their details in order to enter the draw to win a two night stay in the Yurt at the Galloway Activity Centre including a ½ day activity session.

**Scottish Bike Show:** The project worked with the new 7stanes Community Interest Company and the Newcastleton Group to ensure a presence at the Scottish Bike Show. This show attracts over 5,100 members of the public all with an interest in cycling. Network members volunteered to take part in the Show and to work as ambassadors for the project by providing information and distributing “win an I-Pod” flyers and bike stickers.

**WHO BENEFITED?**

A repeat of the study of the Network membership at the end of the first project was carried out and the results are as follows;-

The age and gender breakdown of the members is as follows:

	Target		Actual	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Under 25	9	3	0	2
Over 25	35	28	39	40
Over 65	6	6	12	3
Total	50	37	51	45

**Finances and Lessons Learned**

The initial budget for the project was £39,000 with funding from Scottish Enterprise (£7,500), Forestry Commission Scotland (£2,000), MBBN Members (£8,200) and in kind support from the members of £1,800. This was to be matched by a grant of £19,500 from Leader. The final out turn was Scottish Enterprise £7,500, Forestry Commission Scotland £2,000, MBBN £7,248 with £1,034 of in kind support leaving a Leader contribution of £17,782.

For a number of reasons the project was underspent with a final expenditure of £35,564.16. The project was able to make a number of savings while not compromising the final outcomes of the project. These included the use of the Chamber of Commerce Customer Relationship Management (CRM) system to send out the monthly emails at no cost, securing a lower cost of producing the membership stickers.

The familiarisation trips budget underspent for two reasons. The first was that it was not possible to secure another journalist to visit the area other than the Manchester Evening News visit arranged by FCS. Considerable efforts were made to attract another journalist and contact was made with the Guardian, Sun, Daily Record, Daily Mail, Telegraph, Independent and Metro publications. While many of them expressed an interest none were in a position to visit during the period of the project. The second reason is that the in kind support for this visit was provided in the main in the form of competition prizes which are not eligible for claiming through Leader.

The saving was however used to increase the print run and quality of the directory booklet. As previously explained this had to be increased to accommodate more copy to widen the appeal of the region to prospective visitors. The additional space also allowed a trial the concept of discount vouchers as well as being able to accommodate the growing number of businesses engaging with the Network. The leaflets were distributed through two distribution routes – one to the Central Belt of Scotland and the other to the North of England down as far as Manchester. This allowed the most extensive distribution done to date.

The project underspend has allowed the Chamber to continue the employment of the Project manager to help to develop the next phase of the project – Active Tourism. The development of this project resulted in a four-month gap and had the Project Manager left then there would have been a serious loss of momentum. The Active Tourism project is now fully approved and commenced in August.

The Active Tourism project seeks to develop the information on the web site to provide a wider range of activities to cross sell to the mountain bikers. It is also aimed at encouraging those who may not be committed bikers to come along and try it out in the knowledge that there are lots of other things to do.

The development of this project has also helped to focus on the longer-term sustainability of this work. The Chamber is keen to see this work become part of the mainstream work but the income levels that are generated are insufficient to do this. The aim will be to steadily grow the membership income while at the same time exploring ways of sharing this with the other niche web sites/ specialist groups etc. working within Dumfries and Galloway. Central to these discussions are destination Dumfries and Galloway and the wish is to see these various groups linked through a central database sharing and cross selling to the various different market segments.

## **Plans for the Future**

Thanks to an award from VisitScotland's Growth Fund and a further award from LEADER the Mountain Bike Business Network will develop an Active Tourism project looking to broaden the appeal of the region and to cross sell other activities to mountain bikers.

The aim of Phase III is also to continue to recruit new members in an attempt to increase membership to a level that would enable the Network to become self-sustaining.

In addition discussions with Destination Dumfries and Galloway have been held regarding the development of a central pooled membership, shared between a number of groups which are currently seeking contributions from businesses to support separate marketing campaigns. Over the next year the MBBN will explore the possibility of developing a group that would collect a single membership payment, which would include access to participating niche websites that currently add to the diversity of the appeal to visitors to the region.

By pooling membership into a central data base then this will also allow the creation of a better marketing data base which will allow greater cross selling of product. What is clear however is that we need to convince the industry that it has to work even more cooperatively to be able to market this region effectively. It is also clear that as the financial pressures on the public sector increase then the private sector needs to fill the gap and to achieve that we need to be able to demonstrate that this will achieve significant levels of business growth.

The new project also includes the development of a mobile phone application (App) aimed at providing information to visitors to the region and which complements <http://eat-sleep-ride.com>. The App may also be capable of being developed to link to other databases e.g. the weather and nearest emergency services.

It will present the customer with a series of choices from the information on the web site including contact details, photos and location maps and will allow direct contact by email or phone to the business to book.

Negotiations are also underway to enable the trail maps (on [www.7stanesmountainbiking.com](http://www.7stanesmountainbiking.com)) to be downloaded for a charge. It is anticipated that in the first instance the app will be free to download although the Network would like to be able to consider a charge in future as part of the long term sustainability of the project.