

Kovi rides tandem with social passion and product research



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Guest post by SMB member Doug Tangwall of [End Result Marketing](#)

This week [Robb Zbierski](#), director of manufacturer relations for [Kovi](#)—a consumer validation and product research company based in Madison, Wisconsin—shared his company’s business model and strategies with members of our local Social Media Breakfast-Madison.



A Bicycle Built for Two

Now in its second year of business, Zbierski says Kovi’s founder, Patrick M. Walters, chose bicycles as the initial focus of its research “because it is a passion-pursuit industry that was missing opportunities to connect customers and manufacturers.” He says, “Bicycle enthusiasts want the latest and greatest...want to be on the inside. [We discovered] there is a huge appetite to be part of the product design process.” So much so that Kovi now has a team of members each paying as much as \$3,500 per year to participate in the company’s research studies.

Using social media tools to recruit research subjects, Kovi profiles community members who sign up and matches them to studies of appropriate products. Zbierski says, “The passion surrounding these products feeds perfectly into the social media space. We use a ‘managed pool’ to gather and share input from real-world product trials. For example, a racing enthusiast is much different than a ‘weekend warrior’ who is towing a kid around behind the bike.”

Like Netflix for Bicycle Products

Just as Netflix offers packages that enable members to receive and return a certain number of movies through the mail, Kovi’s \$500 package allows consumers to test one product at a time. For this \$500 investment, the enthusiast gains insider access to thousands of dollars of products—some of which are not yet available on the market. When the member is ready to try a new product, a postage-paid return triggers the next receipt. (The \$3,500 level includes a pro-level bicycle as well as access to multiple products at one time.)

Zbierski provided examples of handlebars, wheels, custom-fit shoes that are molded by being heated in an oven, and even a special watch developed by Timex. For concept testing, he says, Kovi generally takes a “brand agnostic” approach.

Social Channels Shift Gears to the Message

Zbierski says, the nature of the research, sharing, and emotion defines which social media channel the company uses.

- Kovi uses Facebook as a recruitment tool to identify potential research participants and to gather and share product feedback. Closed Facebook groups are used in situations with sensitive or new product information and to share confidentially.
- Facebook and YouTube help users get the feel of insider access via images and video from trade shows and bicycle-related events.
- Twitter lends itself to sharing real-time emotions through mobile updates as products are first tested. (Zbierski adds, “Our members are both media-savvy and bike-tech-savvy and ‘geek out’ on these updates.”)
- LinkedIn groups are used for industry announcements of new partnerships.

The Future of Social Product Research

Zbierski sees his company generating income streams from consumers, manufacturers and dealers.

- Consumers gain insider access and the social status of being the first to evaluate new products.
- Manufacturers benefit from improving their products, messaging and gaining the social buzz and third-party endorsement of consumer product advocates.
- And, he says, “By identifying preferences and trends in their region, Kovi will enable dealers to maximize product spend, inventory turns and profitability.”

Kovi also envisions expansion into other passion-pursuit industries. Zbierski says, “We see the Kovi model working for any industry where enthusiasts make a larger initial purchase followed by additional purchases of ancillary products.”

How are you using social research to “pedal” your products?

Tangwall is founder of [End Result Marketing](#), a company that uses research-driven marketing to educate prospects and spreads the word via social media.