European cities facing growing levels of pollution and congestion

Businesses today face the challenges of meeting their customers’ needs while attempting to minimise their impact on the environment and, of course, making a profit. But how can these needs be met while tackling the growing levels of congestion and pollution in cities? According to Public Health England, air pollution causes the premature death of 29,000 people a year in the UK. In Paris, in just the first few months of 2015, levels were so high that cars with either odd or even numbered plates were banned from the streets on certain days in an attempt to reduce pollution.

To address these twin issues of congestion and pollution European cities are increasingly restricting vehicle access to their centres. While this helps to solve the problem, it also means that local businesses need to come up with new and innovative ways of delivering their goods and services.

Get on your bike

Exciting changes are taking place in Nantes, France: Les Boîtes à Vélo, a group of 21 businesses, has broken the mould, ditched their gas-guzzling vans, and is using bikes of all shapes and sizes to gain a competitive edge and reduce their impact on the environment. This association is demonstrating the multiple benefits of pedal-power for traders ranging from couriers to plumbers and computer repairs. By replacing vans with bikes, their service is better, faster and more profitable... and more sustainable.

Collective pedal power

Rather than slowing down sales, the ‘bicycle boxes’ enable flexible and rapid delivery. Members of the collective, from couriers to caterers, have discovered another advantage: supporting each other by acting as a cross-referral network.

So far they have taken 30 trade vehicles off the streets, helping to demonstrate the true potential of cycling in the city – particularly significant as it hosted the global cycling conference, Velo-City in June 2015. And with their businesses growing, members of the collective are also taking their message to other towns and cities in France.
The collective
Les Boîtes à Vélo is an association of independent micro businesses. The members are grouped into three categories: trades people, deliveries, and catering. Businesses that wish to join the collective need to be fully operational (with all the permits required in place), using a bike as their method of travel or transporting goods, and promoting the use of bikes for business to others.

The bikes
The businesses decide which type of bike they purchase (electric or not) and which type of box or trailer it will have. This is determined by the type of work they carry out and what equipment or goods they need to carry. By using bikes, they are able to access all areas of the city and park right at the entrance of the building they need to work at. Additionally, they have no parking costs or risk of parking fines, and can use the narrow roads and access the pedestrian areas. On bikes, they are faster than using vans as they are not affected by traffic.

The cost of purchasing a bike
Purchasing the bespoke bikes can be a substantial investment for the businesses. The smaller bikes with trailers or boxes cost between €3,000 and €5,000 each, and the larger bikes with specialised catering facilities can cost up to €15,000. However, the cost of a simple delivery van would be at least €20,000.

Achievements
The independent businesses that form Les Boîtes à Vélo collectively work with over 7,000 clients each month, and have taken 30 vehicles off the roads of Nantes by choosing to use bikes.

The estimated CO₂ savings are 35 tonnes per year, resulting from eight businesses that would have used a car and 13 businesses that would have used a van. Les Boîtes à Vélo’s total distance travelled by bicycle is about 105,000 km per year.

All Les Boîtes à Vélo members agree that by using bikes they are seen as much more open and trustworthy. People stop them to speak to them in the street and their bikes are a real advantage in terms of marketing their services. It helps them to stand out from other businesses.

Financial benefits
Les Boîtes à Vélo members Ze Plombier (a plumbing business) and La Bricolette (a carpentry business) are 20% more profitable when using bikes rather than vans, due to reduced business travel costs. For example, most plumbers will charge between €40 and €60 as a standard call-out charge – this charge covers the costs of their vehicle, insurance, fuel and parking. Ze Plombier charges just €20 for its call-out fee, with only €5 of this going to cover its costs, so is making an additional €15 profit from its service.

The future
In the short term Les Boîtes à Vélo plan to have 30 to 50 members of the Nantes collective by 2016. Following that, they would like to help other cities to start up their own collectives – one is already being set up in Chambéry, a town in the east of France. Looking to the future, they would like to see many collectives across other cities in France, Europe and further afield. These collectives would form a Federation, lobby for political change and aim to influence decision makers.