

Building a Compelling Cycling Narrative

How to inspire more people to see the
benefits of cycling-friendly spaces





About me

- Director - Modacity Creative
- Storyteller and narrative builder
- Author:
 - Building the Cycling City
 - Curbing Traffic
 - Women Changing Cities

Why Do We Need A Compelling Narrative?

- ❖ Live in an era where how people *feel* has a strong influence on behaviour.
- ❖ Narratives about cycling as the *greener* and *physically healthier* option don't always resonate.
- ❖ Misinformation and/or misunderstanding has created *polarized* views on investments in cycling.
- ❖ Existing images of and text about "cyclists" *don't reflect* the people we are trying to reach.



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Common arguments against cycling in Palm Beach County

- ❖ Most people in Palm Beach County drive to work. Why are we going to take space away from them to benefit marginal travel behaviors for a select few.
- ❖ Traffic will be terrible, with not enough on-street parking, so that we won't support it.
- ❖ How will fire trucks and police get to where they need to go if the road is congested? And with fewer car lanes, buses will clog up the streets and there won't be a way to get around them.
- ❖ Nobody cycles here today so nobody will ever ride here!
- ❖ This project will remove trees, destroying the canopy. I am all for safe space for riding a bike, but not at the expense of the trees.
- ❖ The bike lanes are taking space away from me to be able to drive, park near my destination, and my ability to easily reach my community.



Ingredients for a Compelling Narrative

WHO

- ❖ Our narratives need to reflect the complex and varied people in our communities.

WHY

- ❖ What do we need the community to understand to build understanding and inspire behaviour change?

HOW

- ❖ With so many tools in our toolbox, which communications methods will be the most effective?

First Ingredient: Who

Building a reflective foundation
for our narrative



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Cycling as a tool for autonomous, resilient and happy kids

- ❖ Investment in cycling enables safe, independent childhood travel
- ❖ Supports Safe Routes to School programs
- ❖ Children and teens feel empowered to spend more time outside
- ❖ Allows for the development of vital risk-assessment skills
- ❖ Gives older children and teens freedom
- ❖ Parents and caregivers gain valuable time



Cycling without age: Improving mobility for older adults

- ❖ When driving becomes not an option, cycling can be a mobility tool for freedom
- ❖ Allows older adults to maintain social connection to community
- ❖ Investments can support:
 - ❖ Walkable and cyclable neighbourhoods
 - ❖ The creation of relaxed cycling routes
- ❖ Adapted and electric mobility extends ability and endurance



MOBILITY OF WOMEN

Female mobility is often linked to care work and therefore follows more diverse paths



Supporting mobilities of care: Cycling is for more than just commuting

- ❖ Cycling can support care trips and trip chaining
 - ❖ Makes short trips and frequent stops easier
 - ❖ Shows how trips to shops, school, etc., can be done in another way
- ❖ Cycling networks connecting care trip generators expands safe network for all users
 - ❖ Cycle lanes can make caregivers' lives easier



Women and Cycling: Social safety and freedom

- ❖ Fear of violence influences women's mobility choices
- ❖ Women's involvement helps shift priorities
- ❖ Safe and connected cycling - with good lighting, secure cycle parking, and connected to key locations - improves visibility and perceptions of safety
- ❖ Seeing more women cycling improves perceptions, and encourages more women to try



Cycling from disabling to enabling environments

- ❖ We are all on a scale from well to unwell - key is to maintain autonomy
- ❖ Requires a combination of active and reliable public transport
- ❖ “Cycling” isn’t always about two wheels
- ❖ Smooth, separated cycling infrastructure enables other wheeled trips
 - ❖ Mobility scooters, tricycles, adapted wheelchairs...



Remind existing cyclists why they enjoy it

- ❖ Even long-time cyclists need reminding of the joy and benefits
- ❖ Sometimes they've been advocating for so long they overlook their own benefits
- ❖ Investments are for them as well
 - ❖ Supporting current habits
 - ❖ Building a legacy for their future

Second Ingredient: Why

What does your vision / plan / design mean for the community



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Cycling our way to better access to opportunity

- ❖ Multi-modal transport networks give people choice
- ❖ Dutch context:
 - ❖ 81% of the population lives within 7.5 km of a train station
 - ❖ 50% of all train journeys start with a cycle ride
- ❖ Access possible through linking walking, cycling, public transport networks to essential services



(Re)shaping spaces for enjoyment through active travel

- ❖ Reduced traffic restores public space for social engagement
- ❖ Increases level of trust and desire to care for the space
- ❖ Traffic noise replaced by sounds of life
- ❖ Increases feelings of social safety - ***EYES ON THE STREET***



Cycling (and walking) helps local businesses thrive

- ❖ Increased foot and cycle traffic brings net positive to local businesses
 - ❖ Lower per trip spend but more frequent visits
- ❖ Reduced traffic stress inspires people to come and spend time (and money)
- ❖ Reduced parking requirements open space for outdoor retail / restaurants



Estimated spending				
 Calculation by Fietsplatform/De Afdeling Onderzoek based on Kien Onderzoek, Monitor Fietsvakanties 2025 and CBS, Vakantieonderzoek 2024.				
	Number of cycling vacations	Number of days	Spending per person per day	Total expenses (euros)
Base camp cycling holidays	3.4 million	2.3 (3.3 nights)	53* euro	411 million
Cycle Tours	1.4 million	2.6 (3.6 nights)	77 euro	285 million

* CBS, Vakantieonderzoek 2024.

Supporting tourism development

- ❖ Cycle-, Eco-, and Green-tourism are becoming increasingly popular
- ❖ Investments in leisure and recreational cycle routes like the EuroVelo and Dutch LF Routes supporting increased tourism spending
- ❖ Attracts both base-camp and cycle touring holidays



Cycling (and walking) helps everyone thrive

- ❖ More active travel for improved overall health
- ❖ Fewer sick days and more energized
- ❖ Improved mental health
- ❖ Inspires feelings of being part of the community
- ❖ Better access to restorative spaces

Third Ingredient: How

Effective communications tools
to build consensus



Photo: Baame
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Have a clear communications strategy

- ❖ Coordinate closely with your communications department
- ❖ Set clear goals and measurements
- ❖ Have a defined tone for your audience (see the 'WHO')
- ❖ Ensure efforts are coordinated across teams
- ❖ Avoid miscommunication by removing silos -

We are all one team working together!

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Execute the strategy: Engagement events

- ❖ Be creative! Go beyond the usual community information night
 - ❖ Open streets events
 - ❖ Public dance events / live music / film screenings / local storytellers...
 - ❖ Focus groups / small group discussions
- ❖ Engage with **ALL** of the community - kids, seniors, etc.
 - ❖ Open workshops where the community gets to co-create the solution

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Festival to celebrate and explore travel

20 March 2025

Chloe Hughes
BBC News, West Midlands

Share  Save 



The four-day festival has something for everyone, said Seb Slater from Shrewsbury BID

A four-day festival will explore and celebrate the future of travel in a Shropshire town.

The Shrewsbury Moves Festival has been organised by the town's Business Improvement District (BID), Shropshire Council and Shrewsbury Town Council.

The event, from Thursday to Sunday, includes conferences and talks about travel with community leaders, businesses and health professionals.

Activities will also be held in The Square such as yoga classes, skipping and a Tai Chi performance.

Execute the strategy: Deliberate media coverage

- ❖ If you don't control the narrative, someone else will
- ❖ Develop targeted press releases with project information
- ❖ Foster relationships with local journalists to avoid misinformation
- ❖ Have a schedule that follows key project milestones



Execute the strategy: Create a compelling campaign

- ❖ Make use of all of the tools in your communications toolbox:
 - ❖ Website for up-to-date information (and make sure it stays updated)
 - ❖ Social media (Go to the mediums all your audiences use)
 - ❖ Share aspirational and informational photos and videos
- ❖ Be aspirational - We can be what we can't see!

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**Creating successful
narratives help you
achieve your goals
for happy, healthy
communities.**

Breakout Session 1:

Creating the foundation of
a compelling narrative



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Group Activity 1

Defining Who

- ❖ Based on the information from the case studies, identify who the main users of the space are
 - ❖ Don't forget children, older adults, low-income users, etc.
- ❖ What are their core needs for mobility?
 - ❖ For the time being, we will not focus specifically on cycling



Group Activity 2

Identify Values

- ❖ For the groups identified, what are their values for this space?
 - ❖ Cultural
 - ❖ Accessibility
 - ❖ Community-building and connection
 - ❖ Urban vitality – healthy spaces
 - ❖ Etc...



Group Activity 3

Create the Narrative

- ❖ Based on who uses the space and their values, develop a core narrative for communications
- ❖ Narrative should resonate with the values and evoke a connection
- ❖ Example: A school street project
 - ❖ Our project aims to create an inviting school environment that welcomes children to a fun and playful space while providing caregivers a place to connect with their community



Group Activity 4 (if time allows)

How will you communicate the narrative?

- ❖ Define 3 communications activities
- ❖ One must involve direct in-person engagement
- ❖ Think creatively about how to engage with the “who” defined in activity 1



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Thanks!



melissa@modacitylife.com



linkedin.com/in/melissa-bruntlett

Connect on LinkedIn:



For more information:
modacitycreative.com