



photo: Slytech

SNOWBOARD RENTAL IS THE NEW BLACK

Despite several million tourists venturing to the mountains every year to spend holidays in the snow, many of which are weekend warriors looking for a good time, the rental market is still quite a taboo in the snowboard industry. A vital necessity to keep the cool core image of snowboarding or antiquated artefact from ancient times where we had to fight off the dark side with their double sticks? **Anna Langer** investigates.

If you want to make yourself unpopular in the core scene of snowboarding, ask about rental boards. With a history based on exclusion from resorts, going against the mainstream and fighting for legitimacy, it's understandable that snowboarders haven't been too keen on "outsiders" entering their bastion and someone who doesn't even possess their own shred stick can't be very "core" now, can they? Only that circumstances have changed tremendously since the beginnings – not only the environment but also the customers themselves. With varying conditions and increasing prices, renting a board for a week every year can be much more economical than buying a new stick every couple years without getting to ride it much. Especially with new innovations and technologies mesmerizing us every season.

Brands are feeling this shift too. "Initially, we took a very cautious approach to the rental business. It used to be the sort of thing a ski or multi-sport brand would be involved with, not an authentic snowboard brand like Nitro," says Team and Marketing Manager Andi Auerhammer, "many authentic snowboard brands used to feel that rental is not something they wanted to be involved with. They were protective of their cool image and didn't want to be associated with products that were clearly NOT cool." Max Thurner, Marketing Manager at Head Snowboards, attributes that to a certain uniformity in the industry: "The core scene is quite closed and engaged within itself, with not too much room for things considered not to be cool, like renting." He thinks this is also accountable for the challenges the sport

is facing currently. "This attitude has led to an ageing of the sport, by not caring about how to invite new customers or the promotion of descendants." In fact rental is the perfect way to attract newcomers: "Burton is committed to push access and participation in the sport of snowboarding and rental is one way to address that. We have invented extensive learn-to-ride programs for youth, women, and men and built a product range and marketing program around that."

But times are changing, and customers' behaviour is as well, Salomon's Marketing Manager David Pitschi noticed. "It is not as frowned upon to ride on rental products. The costs of buying equipment are high and weigh the budget down. Plus with the increasing cost of overweight in airplanes it has become a lot more efficient to rent boards during holidays. The products have evolved too, there is some very good gear available to rent that will fulfil consumers' expectations." This also means that it's "not only beginners anymore, also intermediate riders rent equipment," says Max, "as they now have access to renting better product. This offer also makes travelling easier – no need to carry your gear anymore."

Another factor are conditions, with snow coming later every season. "A lot of buyers rather rent if they feel the winter season will be short for them. If the winter starts early, people tend to buy more new products early in the season," explains Andi. By now, Nitro established their own version of a successful rental program, "and the numbers are steadily growing every year."



“We often get requests for certain boards according to the client's preferences. They like to try out new cambers and technologies and often rent different boards throughout their stay, resulting in a purchase at the end.” Corinne ‘Cozza’ Mayhew, Tignes Spirit Shop.

BOARDS

No wonder, as rental locations all over Europe report increased demands for specific product from educated customers. Boris Keskinovic from the Intersport Shop and Rental on the Stubai Glacier mentions Nitro as one of their top brands and notices a lot of customers specifically asking for certain brands and big names. His colleague Luggi from the branch in Fiss Ladis on the other hand reports the opposite: “At our place, smaller insider brands are more in demand, like GoodBoards or Amplid.” This is also trending in France, where Corinne ‘Cozza’ Mayhew from Tignes Spirit finds that “most people love the smaller, independent, rider-owned brands so we have a lot of requests for our Endeavor and Signal boards.” Apart from names and comfort such as step-in or easy-entry for bindings, the main factor for consumers to pick their gear continues to be the conditions they’ll be riding it in. “There is only demand for powder boards when there actually is powder,” says Luggi, although their clients are “more slopes and park oriented.” Tignes Spirit even offer split boards and backcountry hiking gear, which is “very popular all winter, especially in the Spring and we supply skins and telescopic poles to go with them,” Cozza tells us.

At the same time, rental customers are eager to try out new technologies and innovations instead of buying the cat in the bag. Through their website, Tignes Spirit “often get requests for certain boards according to the client's preferences. They like to try out new cambers and technologies and often rent different boards throughout their stay, resulting in a purchase at the end.” Brands addressing this by offering high-end models next to entry levels for rental could tap into a great new channel to gain new supporters and fans. “We feel that the consumer is more demanding in the product he seeks to rent, regardless of their age. Consumers expect to be able to rent the best product and not only the low end range,” David agrees and Max says it’s vital to assure that a “rental customer has the best time possible, to make him a returning customer. This means the product handed to him has to have the best fit possible, is set up in the best way possible, looks nice (as no one wants to look like a renter) and is easy to use.” Nitro also definitely feel the shift towards “higher end and ‘cooler’ rental products. However,” Andi says, “sometimes the hurdle are rental operations trying to ‘milk’ their old stuff as long as they can, instead of getting ahead of the game by investing in some more updated equipment.”

Hence it’s important to address the factors that are vital to the success of a rental operation, such as ease and speed of changing. “Time is

money for a rental shop. Each minute they can save setting up during rush hours helps them getting more sets out of the door. This is why we have developed our colour-coded size matching between boots and bindings as well as our quick setup disc system,” explains Andi. And it’s also vital for customers who purchased an expensive ski pass. “Simple size identification and easy adjustment and handling are key for both dealers and consumers to make it a quick and easy game for first-time riders,” Burton adds. At the same time, rental equipment has to be tough and durable, without looking like it, making rubber tips a thing of the past. “We are offering protectors as an aftermarket option, but almost nobody wants them anymore,” says Andi and David agrees that “consumers don’t want to have RENTAL screaming at their peers when riding,” although they do still reinforce tip and tail for more durability – just invisibly.

BOOTS & BINDINGS

While the majority of customers rent sets, boards and bindings are also available for separate rent. “There are always some who are convinced they can’t ride anymore if they don’t have their own set of bindings,” Luggi from Fiss Ladis laughs, “but that’s not a problem for us!” Occasionally, they even have requests for hardboots and respective bindings.

The ratio for boots on the other hand is almost 1:1. “We have a similar number of boards to boots. We stock quite a range of different flexes and tightening systems, so that each client can pick something that fits them best,” Corinne reports from Tignes and Boris confirms his ratio in the Stubai Valley. Luggi adds that “hygiene is becoming more important these days, boots that aren’t properly sanitized aren’t received very well”. Same goes for protection, which is increasingly demanded but also poses challenges. “Helmet rentals is challenging for operations, as they are bulky to store and need to be sanitized constantly. So we developed a special system with our partner Montana, which makes storing, renting, and sanitizing helmets a walk in the park,” explains Max and Burton work with the same partner for their “boots and helmets to be dried and hygienically treated.”

OUTLOOK

The attitude towards the rental business is changing on both sides, customers and brands alike. “It is a serious part of the business and it is addressed that way,” says David and Max adds, that “the rental market is considered to represent 30% of the market.” Quite a chunk that should not be left barren out of pride or prejudice.

