

Published in *VeloNews*,  
May 17, 1999, P. 94.

BY RICHARD ROSENTHAL

If someone plunked you down in the middle of the parking area before a bike race in New York City's Central Park, you would know you were in the Big Apple even if you couldn't see beyond the parking area. That's because there are practically no cars there.

In New York City, bike racers bike to the bike races. New York has the lowest car ownership of any major city in the U.S. And for good reason: Driving and parking are both ordeals, unless you're very, very rich.

There are always motorists not signaling turns, turning from non-turning lanes, speeding, going through red lights, double parking, squeezing cyclists aside and honking at them unnecessarily to intimidate them. Dealing with all this is how New York bike racers warm up for their races.

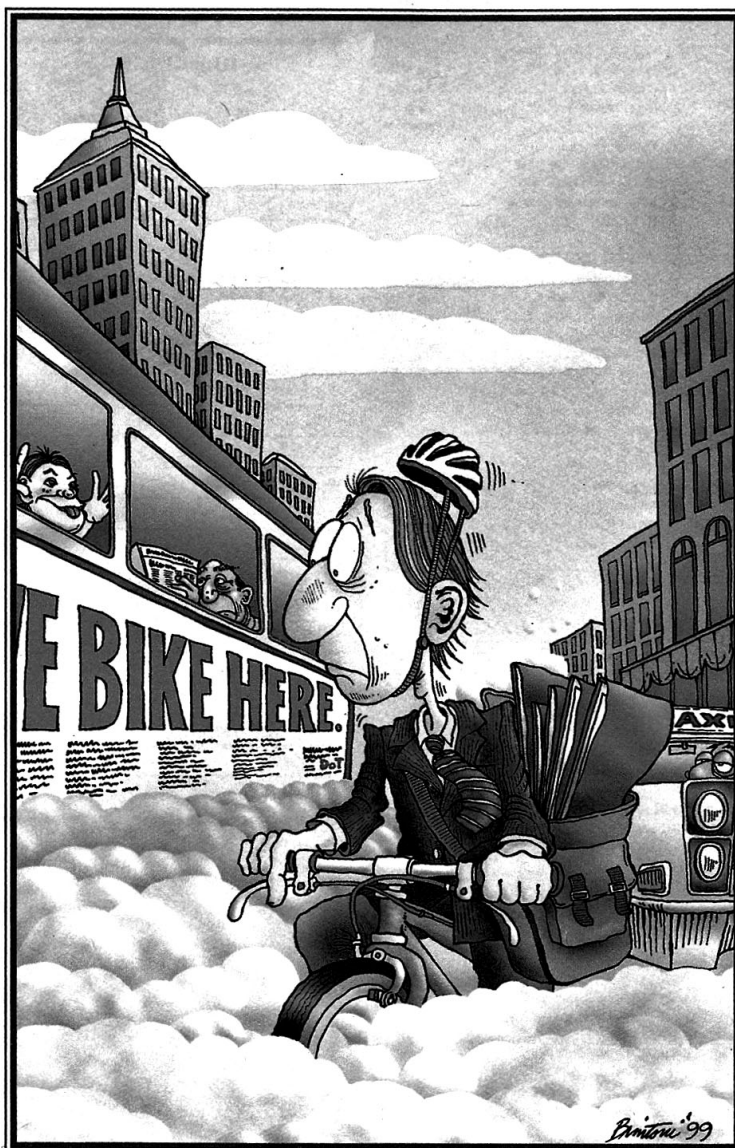
May is Bike Month in New York City — and elsewhere. Last year, the city's Department of Transportation contracted with me to create ads for Bike Month 1998. The assignment called for me to create ads that would encourage the use of bicycles in New York City. That would be accomplished the best, I thought, by increasing respect and safety for cyclists. After all, an average of 15 cyclists are killed each year by motor vehicles in the Big Apple alone.

I decided that the safety of cyclists would best be achieved by increasing drivers' awareness to the presence of bicycles on the road. So, if you were the city's DOT, where would you buy ad space that would reach drivers? Yes, right, of course: in the subways. That was the only place I was told the ads would appear, until I suggested that very few drivers drove in the subways and perhaps more of them may be found on the streets.

My ads proposed that bikes don't pollute, aren't noisy, and don't cause traffic congestion. I had a cartoon idea that showed cars literally stacked on top of one another, spewing exhaust, their horns blaring. DOT civil servants rejected it because it implied cars polluted, were noisy, and caused traffic congestion. The city's DOT reports to the mayor, and even though mid-town traffic is so congested — it averages only 6 mph and the air reeks — the mayor has decreed that an increase in mid-town automobile traffic translates into economic robustness.

I next proposed an ad in which I would find an actual truck driver, a taxi driver, a bus driver and a chauffeur who would say, "I drive here for a living, but I bike here for convenience and pleasure." DOT rejected that because it implied it was unpleasurable and inconvenient to drive here.

I was then told to create ads that expressed equal regard for drivers, pedestrians and cyclists. Now, that wasn't the assignment I



# AD MAN

versus

# THE NEW YORK CITY DOT

had agreed to, nor was it what the ads were originally intended to accomplish under the terms of the federal grant that was paying for them. The ads were intended to solely promote cycling. Besides, there's no record of a motorist ever having been killed by a cyclist or a pedestrian in New York City. No matter. It turned out that all the DOT civil servants want-

ed for "Bike Month" was merely some generic bromide. Unfortunately, "Can't we all just get along" already had been used. So I put forward the line: "Drive, ride, and walk the way your mother would want you to." This was rejected because, I was told, not all mothers are caring.

In an effort to be agreeable, I then floated

the line, "Drive, ride and walk the way your doctor, lawyer, minister and mother would want you to." DOT took exception to the word "minister" because, they said, it didn't encompass Jewish people and we couldn't exclude them. I said to them that a rabbi is a minister. That wasn't good enough. I suggested "reverend" because rabbis are reverends. No, that wouldn't do, either. Neither would "preacher." "Priest" excluded Protestants. Finally, the woman who declared we could not use mothers because not all mothers are caring, weighed in: "Let's make it '...minister or rabbi.'" Can't you just hear it? "Drive, ride, and walk the way your doctor, lawyer, minister or rabbi, and mother would want you to." What euphony! Punchy. Has a nice, catchy ring to it ... not.

Then ensued a discussion as to which race, ethnic group and gender to make the doctor, lawyer, minister, rabbi and mother. I suggested we make the mother a woman. My remark was not well received. In any event, this whole idea was rejected, because there could be no agreement on what color, ethnic group and gender to make each person, and DOT didn't want to offend anyone.

However, one of the ads DOT *did* like had the headline: "We Bike Here." My intent was to change the perception that only inconsiderate and irresponsible people bike in New York City — a perception of New Yorkers, me included, who live in fear of reckless bike messengers and biking-the-wrong-way food deliverers. The headline would be surrounded by the names of hundreds of people who bike in the city and their professions: doctors, lawyers, professors, engineers, economists, designers, programmers, school teachers, DOT employees and ad writers. My absolute favorites were a Metro Transit Authority bus mechanic and a subway maintenance man.

Among the names I had were: Ruth Messenger, the former Manhattan borough president who ran against the mayor; Fernando Ferrer, the Bronx borough president; John Kennedy Jr.; and Robin Williams. I was told I couldn't include the first three because they were identifiably Democrats, and the list would have to be vetted at City Hall for approval. And could I vouch that Robin Williams had not donated to the Democrats?

By this point, DOT employees had so altered the original assignment, perverted the use for which the federal money was allocated, and politicized the campaign, that I balked at doing further work for them. I was told I was unprofessional.

For their part, they must have really liked what they made of my work: I've heard they're using it again this year. I want to believe their doctors, lawyers, priests, ministers, rabbis and mothers agree with me as to its mediocrity ... and worse.