

CAROL CAIN

## Auto industry marketing exec left job after renting Segways in Petoskey

Carol Cain Free Press Business Columnist

Published 6:02 a.m. ET June 24, 2023 Updated 11:18 a.m. ET June 24, 2023

John Smith was rolling along in his career as a marketing executive in the auto industry and not looking to make any change until he and his wife took a vacation in Petoskey 13 years ago and rented two Segways to tour the scenic northern Michigan town.

It was his aha moment as he knew he wanted to make Segways and the unique experience of traveling outdoors in a more leisurely fashion, that was healthier and kinder to the environment, his new calling.



**John Smith opened Great Lakes Segway in Plymouth 2010 and began by offering Segway tours in downtown Plymouth. He moved his company to Walled Lake in 2018 as his wife left her job as a community resource coordinator to join the company. PROVIDED BY MEGAN SMITH.**

“My wife (Megan Smith) was in full support,” he said when he first raised the idea of leaving corporate America to become an entrepreneur. He hasn’t looked back as the company continues to grow as it pivots to address the changing mobility needs of its customers.

Smith opened Great Lakes Segway 13 years ago in Plymouth and began by offering Segway tours in downtown Plymouth. Seeing how much people liked the experience, his customers began asking him to sell Segways. He did and expanded to also sell Trikke — a three-wheeled electric mobility unit often used by security for policing arenas, airports, campuses and businesses. Two years ago, he acquired Central Florida Segway to lure customers from other parts of the country and to add more support for his growing base of customers for the products nationwide.

Additionally, he saw potential in e-bikes and became a Pedego Electric Bike distributor, with a location in metro Detroit and one in central Florida. Pedego counts among its customers “Star Trek” actor William Shatner, who told me for a past column he purchased his first Pedego bike 11 years ago to keep up with his grandkids on family rides. Known for loving fast cars, fast motorcycles and riding fast horses, Shatner said having the option of turning to electric power was exactly what he sometimes needed. He purchased a few more Pedego bikes as the California company asked him to be its spokesman, which he has done the past few years.

The U.S. e-bike market has exploded — up 145% between 2019 and 2020, according to Precedence Research. Sales of electric bikes in 2023 is predicted to reach 40 million, according to Precedence Research.

Smith moved his company to Walled Lake five years ago as his wife left her job as a community resource coordinator to join the company.

His Segway, Trikke and Pedego products are sold and shipped from their Michigan and Florida shop locations. They are in use at Belle Isle, Detroit Metro Airport and college campuses.

I posed a few questions to Smith about his business. Answers are edited for space.

QUESTION: What was it about Segways that made you leave your career in auto marketing?

ANSWER: During my corporate career, I gained a great passion and understanding about the need for micro-mobility. My wife, Megan, and I experienced Segways in 2010 and saw the potential for them as a small tour business. As we progressed in our business, we realized that we could bring transportation solutions to customers in all walks of life. We began selling Segways to consumers and then saw opportunity and need to support public safety mobilization here in Michigan and across the nation, too.

Q: Segways are the biggest part of your business today. How are sales going?

A: We have sold hundreds of Segway units to police departments, tour companies, individuals, commercial companies and others. Also, we have repaired thousands of Segway units over the years. And we have created a secondary market of certified pre-owned Segway units that consumers rely on.

Q: How did you connect with Pedego Electric Bikes?

A: We are a distributor of Pedego, known as Pedego Walled Lake, and our second location in Florida is known as Pedego Mt Dora. We saw huge opportunities as e-bikes grew and did research and found Pedego to be a strong U.S brand which stood out as it offered a five-year warranty with great dealer support. It also allowed us to have on-site technicians for repairs. And the e-bike company also allowed us to provide unique mobility solutions as we designed custom solutions for customers to do things like outfit bikes with trailers for EMS, fire and rescue use, for example.

Q: Who buys your e-bikes?

A: We sell 16 Pedego models with different kinds of frames and colors. Trail bikes seem to appeal to younger riders and low-step through cruiser bikes appeal to young-at-heart, mid to upper aged customers.

Q: You recently delivered Segway units to Nashville police for its new Community Policing Division. Tell me about it?

A: We had been working with Nashville to support its recently launched Community Policing Division with our Segways. The department is getting officers out in public and engaged with citizens. Our equipment is allowing them to stay engaged, create dialogue and respond as needed. We sold the department more Segways to use at the Country Music Awards and took them down in time for the event, which took place earlier this month.

Q: As you sell e-bikes, as well as Segways and Trikkies, are you hearing anything from potential buyers as far as electric batteries being used to power bikes, as there have been a few fires involving e-bikes?

A: There definitely have been growing concerns among some consumers based on all of the media coverage. Pedego, Segway and Trikke all have worked very hard to ensure that the batteries are highly effective and safe. They have provided us with safety materials, consumer training and battery care information. They all take it very seriously, as do we. We are working with customers to understand how to properly care for their batteries, store them and protect them.

Q: How do you see the future of e-bikes?

A: E-bikes will continue to grow as we are seeing many traditional bike enthusiasts beginning to make the switch to electric. They're realizing that they can get the exercise in manual riding mode on the e-bikes and then change the setting to assist them when they're climbing a large hill and need a little extra boost on the return trip from a long ride.

Q: Anything else to add?

A: We have a dedicated team of nearly 20 staff who support us every day to bring these products to our customers. We have repair technicians, operations, sales and others to help customers find the right mobility solution for their needs.