

# Community as a Way of Creating Sales

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BY ALISA CLICKENGER ON JUL 17, 2014

From the outside, BMW Motorcycles of Ventura County (BMWVC) looks like any other BMW dealership. Inside, however, the feeling is closer to a club house than a highly successful business geared towards selling motorcycles and accessories. This particular mojo works for them, and it works well; in 2012 they were one of seven dealerships to win the “BMW Dealer Excellence” award.

There’s a coffee bar, a comfortable seating area and nicely lit cardboard cutouts of classic motorcycles. Flashy posters line the walls, yet these aren’t professional stunt riders performing remarkable feats with large bikes; they are enthusiastic and accomplished BMWVC customers. How does a dealership collect so many good riders? By crafting a good, loyal customer base and by building a strong riding community.

Shortly after Gary and Nina Clark opened the dealership 10 years ago their team started planning, organizing and executing interesting and challenging group rides. The first was a Great Divide Ride in the summer of 2006, long before the route became as popular as it is today. Taking customers on adventures built excitement, a healthy riding population and brand fidelity for the dealership. It also cemented BMWVC’s reputation as a rider’s dealership.

Creating community has become BMWVC’s central business philosophy. “It was clear that the Ventura market had been underserved for quite some time. It was nearly three years without a local BMW dealer until we opened the shop in January 2005,” said Gary Clark. “We felt that there was a market to be served, and we wanted to bring the community of BMW Motorcycles to the riders of Ventura County.”

BMWVC’s philosophy is simple: build camaraderie and trust with customers in order to gain loyalty and repeat business. Adapting to changing customer desires, after running the Great Divide Ride for four years, BMWVC now offers shorter adventures, and there is some type of group ride offered almost every weekend.

Generally, the first Saturday of the month is a street ride with a “Gear Up Getaway” campout, with a small amount of dirt roads. The second Saturday of the month is often an intermediate to advanced dual sport ride, at times with an “easier” route to encourage newer riders to come along.

The third Saturday of the month is a street ride, this one is usually led by BMWVC customer Don Hobson. As well as his monthly rides, once a year Hobson also leads an extended weekend trip for those who want to take on a larger group adventure. Hobson isn’t the only one leading longer rides – the dealership also offers many other three to four day rides throughout California, led by BMWVC staff or other customers.



“We work hard to get people involved,” said BMWVC General Manager Michael Spencer. “We’ve built a community of enthusiastic people who like to ride together.” Spencer himself leads a semi-annual beginner’s dirt ride called the “Ground Breakers” trip.

The group riding is what Spencer credits for their terrific growth. In 2013 BMWVC was BMW’s 21st ranked dealership in new bike sales volume, and this is in spite of their relatively small market.

Building loyal customers has served them well: when BMW Motorrad sent its dealers a challenge to bring riders to a publicity event at RawHyde Adventures, BMWVC and its customers answered the call. While other dealers from larger metropolitan areas showed up with a handful of customers each, BMWVC had so many riders they had to organize themselves into three separate riding groups.

Among the innovative ideas at the dealership are its ‘Venture Riders’ program and ‘GS Venture Challenge.’ The Venture Riders are a group of customer-riders turned product advocates.

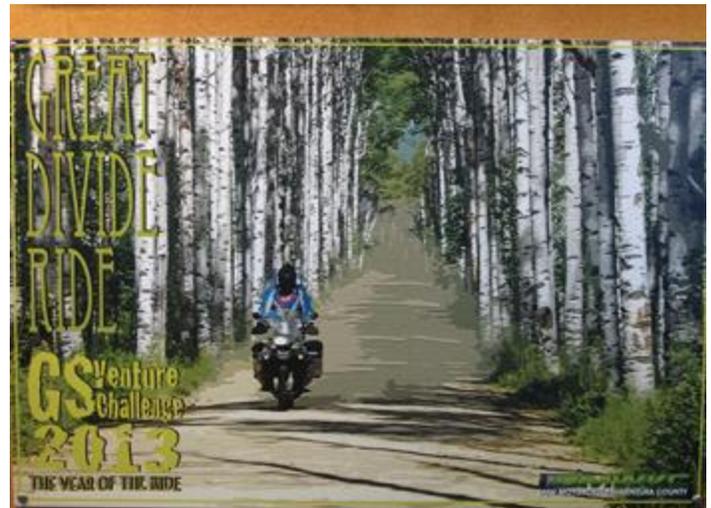
These riders enjoy the rider cohesion at the dealership and want to give back to the community by leading rides and mentoring other riders. BMWVC, in turn, supports its

Venture Riders through discounts and other worthwhile perks.

Customer and Venture Rider Neil Reynolds called the dealership one of the most proactive dealerships in the country. “This is a personal kind of place,” said Reynolds.

“I’ve been riding for 50 years and this is a great place for motorcycling and a sense of community. It’s about friendships as well as riding.” True enough. Reynolds’ wife had just conspired with BMWVC to hold Reynolds’ surprise birthday party at the dealership.

BMWVC’s GS Venture Challenge customers pay a \$75 registration fee, for which they receive their own number flag, a special shirt and club-exclusive deals. Challenge riders also receive free tire changes up to four times per year between their street and dual sport tires, in addition to free tire storage. Joining the Challenge also nets customers a wider area of free pickup for bike service at the dealership. Subscribers then participate in a number of special rides, for which they earn credits towards a highly coveted jacket.



While the program did take staff time, energy and organization, it cost the dealership very little in terms of capital outlay. What it did, however, was generously help the dealership with its bottom line. BMWVC saw a 31 percent increase in parts and accessories sales over the previous year. "I'm sure a small part of that had to do with the increasing economy, but I know a couple of new motorcycle sales were a direct result of the GS Venture Challenge," said Spencer.

Another way that BMWVC attracts business is by being brand-inclusive. Anyone can join the club and ride with them, and BMWVC will perform service on all makes and models of motorcycles. Led by a BMW Master Technician, many of BMWVC's technicians have service certifications for other brands.

Even in the land of perpetual sunshine some rain does fall, and BMWVC turns those days to their advantage as well. They pull down the large overhead screen and loop the classic motorcycle movie *On Any Sunday* throughout the day. And who better than Malcolm Smith, Mert Lawwil and Steve McQueen to help sell motorcycles?

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**BMW Motorcycles of Ventura County**

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