

This ‘Mom & Pop’ Shop is the Biggest Scooter Dealer in Florida

BY [ALISA CLICKENGER](#) ON SEP 27, 2015



Solano Cycle

Elaine Haines was on a trip to Key West, Fla. and witnessed first-hand its prolific scooter culture.

Returning home to Northeast Florida, she then imagined the possibilities of such a business in the historic town of St. Augustine, Fla. Her son, Martin Solano, was at a crossroads in his career and was ripe for talking him into opening a scooter rental and repair shop. That was 17 years ago, and while it's been boom and bust in the scooter business, Solano Cycle still continues to grow. Not only does it still rent scooters, but it also boasts four dealership locations in Northeast Florida and is one of the largest scooter dealers in the USA.

Solano Cycle also sells ATVs and dirt bikes, however, scooter sales make up the bulk of the business, accounting for nearly 75 percent of the company's revenues. The growth has come slowly with measured and deliberate progress, maintaining the feel of the "Mom & Pop" shop. They've stayed true to their roots, promoting scooters as a fun mode of



transportation and have single-handedly changed the face of student transportation in Northeast Florida. “When we opened at the University of Florida it was called motorcycle parking, and there were a few parking lots scattered around campus,” said Solano. “Now it’s called scooter parking and there are over 5,000 scooters at UF, plus countless scooter parking lots. We’re proud we had a little something to do with that.”

Solano has a Masters in Business Administration. Before starting the scooter rental business he was working in the marketing department at AT&T (now Citibank). He was happy in his suit, working in an air-conditioned building, having fun managing advertising for corporate America. Yet when the company offered him an option for a buyout on his employment contract, he decided that the scooter rental business his mother imagined would be fun, too, and got on board with his mother’s vision.

Elaine’s background is in retail. Before deciding to become the Queen of Scooters she ran a large big-box baby store. She was considered a store “fixer” by the chain, and would be sent in to straighten out other retail establishments in distress. It was this experience and know-how that helped her tame the big business mindset that Solano came from, and it was this acumen that helped the Solano Cycle team through the lean years of the economic downturn.

The Solano dealerships survived and thrived through the downturn by learning to run business exceedingly lean. Mother and son each picked a store and ran it. Each location has approximately five employees and they don’t spend hundreds of thousands of dollars on renovations and upgrades. Their stores are generally a bit older and not shiny and ultra-modern; what Solano Cycle is known for is its knowledge and huge selection of scooters.

Solano Cycle educates customers. KYMCO is the brand of choice, and the dealership has enjoyed a long and prosperous relationship with the OEM. Solano Cycle received a great deal of help from KYMCO and the Moped Hospital in Key West when it first started, and is still incredibly loyal and grateful to them. In fact, Solano Cycle has helped sign up dozens of dealers for KYMCO over the years and has spent countless hours helping to build the KYMCO brand name and dealer network.



“Back when KYMCO first came out, I’d stay up till 2 a.m. answering questions on the Internet about scooters, how to service them, and what brands to buy. Dealers from all over the U.S. would call to find out what brand of scooters they should carry. Without hesitation, I’d tell them KYMCO,” said Solano.

“We carry KYMCOs which are very high quality. We spend a lot of time educating consumers about KYMCO and who they are and where they came from and their quality and that’s helped,” said Solano. “Now, for example, at the University of Florida, students come in and specifically say, ‘I want a KYMCO. I was told to buy a KYMCO.’ Over the years we’ve spent tens of thousands of dollars establishing the KYMCO brand. KYMCO is like our family. We’ve known those guys since we started and when we first started they helped us out immensely and we are fiercely loyal to them.”

Solano jokes that he hasn’t had a vacation in 17 years, which isn’t very hard to imagine. While the dealership prefers to focus on the higher end brands, they carry a gamut of brands to fit every customer’s needs. “We try and up-sell customers to the better brands, but we’re not going to give our competition an opening,” said Solano. “We provide the lowest priced bike if that’s what you want, we provide a mid-priced bike and we provide the best bikes. We cover the gamut so we don’t give our competition an opening.”

Scooters aren’t quite as glamorous as high-horsepowered motorcycles, so at times it’s a challenge for Solano Cycle to find the right salespeople. Luckily, in Northeast Florida there’s a scooter culture centered around the University of Florida, the beaches, and historic

St. Augustine that gives them a good pool of enthusiasts to draw from. Solano trains his staff on all brands of scooters, including the competition. Solano makes it very clear that they’re selling the fun and enjoyment of hopping on a scooter and getting where you need to go, so they look for fun salespeople – both men and women.

There’s a long term plan at Solano Cycle, one learned from Solano’s tenure in the credit card industry. Research showed that people often have numerous credit cards in their wallet, and they switched cards frequently. However, they always kept the first card they ever received. Reaching customers while they’re young, getting



them familiar with KYMCO, and treating them well is a plan Solano says is just starting to pay off. Having been in business for 17 years, they're not just seeing repeat buyers getting new scooters and upgrading to larger displacement units, they are starting to see a second generation of scooter buyers come through their doors.

"If you get to the college students, these are going to be affluent people later in life. They're going to be upper-middle class and higher," said Solano. "Imagine getting to those customers with a scooter today and think 10 to 20 years from now when they go to buy ATVs, dirtbikes, motorcycles and whatever else. If you're selling those products they're going to remember the brand and your dealership, and trust you. I still remember the Puch moped I had as a child. If Puch came out with a new product today, I'd go take a look at it. Same thing with selling scooters. They are fairly new to the U.S. You have the opportunity to establish a name brand that will translate to future sales of scooters as well as the other products that brand offers. It's nostalgia and they'll come back. Don't just think about today's sales, think about future sales."