



DN 2.0 #8



COLEMAN POWERSPORTS

That Was Then... This is Now!

By Alisa Clickenger

We have all heard the saying, “the more things change, the more things for being the same.” Nowhere is that more apparent than with Coleman PowerSports in Falls Church, Virginia. Featured on the cover this very magazine back in April 1992, Kim Coleman Harrison was ahead of her time. Pictured with her BMW R100GS Paris-Dakar motorcycle in front of the Washington Monument, she was on the leading edge of the ADV market and already leading the charge for the growth of the women’s market three decades ahead of many in the industry. Just 28 years old at the time, Harrison was also in transition to take over the dealership her father founded in 1963.

THEN

Fifty-six years in business, the dealership was started by Harrison’s father, Dillard Coleman under the original Cycle Imports name. The dealership began selling just BSA, but picked up Triumph shortly thereafter. Along the way, BMW was added, and subsequently dropped, and in an ever-expanding cycle of success Honda, Yamaha,

Kawasaki, Suzuki, Ducati, Polaris, Victory, Slingshot, Can-Am, Sea-Doo, Kymco and most recently Vanderhall were all added. Multiple brands came and went through the years, so it is fair to say Kim has seen it all as she literally grew up in the shop. The dealership developed and grew, and moved a couple of times until 1986 when it permanently settled in its current 44,000 square foot Falls Church location.

In 1996 Mr. Coleman added the Woodbridge, Virginia, location, where he built a state-of-the-art facility from the ground up. Dillard retired in 1999 and the two dealerships were sold to POWERride Motorsports, Inc., which also owns two dealerships in Michigan and Louisiana. With the sale the business name was changed to Coleman PowerSports, and Harrison has continued on as General Manager, growing it into a 33+ million dollar business.

With her finger on the pulse of the marketplace, keen eye for innovative marketing ideas, and her laser-focus on being the best dealership in a highly competitive part of the country, she now runs — and continues to grow — both Virginia locations.

NOW

Walking around the 2+ acre Falls Church facility, it is apparent that even with the more than 80,000 square feet at both locations, they are still bursting at the seams. Sea-Doos are stacked up outside the locked storage area, customers circle the lot two times to find an open parking space, and at the same time a tractor trailer halts all traffic on the busy street out front and backs into the driveway to deliver yet more goodies for sale. The only traffic that sails smoothly in are the folks arriving for service — customers roll right up to the service entrance where an automatic door opens for them and they ride directly in to the climate-controlled service bay.

Even though the Coleman PowerSports parking lot can get quite full on weekdays, it gets cleared out each weekend for a great variety of marketing events throughout the year. This is where some of Harrison's brilliance shines through: in riding season the dealership hosts an event virtually every weekend. Ten to 12 times a year they offer a new rider workshop, which is usually followed by a manufacturer demo day. Harrison has found that combining these events gives the dealership maximum impact.

One activity that's supported the dealership over the years is their live auction. It started as a way to dispose of vehicles with mechanic's liens and has evolved into a highly anticipated annual event. Coleman PowerSports now auctions off their scratch and dent bikes and allow customers to enter units as well. "It's a great way for our customers to put their bikes up for sale. The low \$25 entry fee enables them to enter their bike in the auction. There's a commission cap of \$700, so for higher value vehicles it can save them \$2,000 over putting a vehicle up for sale on the showroom floor," she explains.

Coleman PowerSports has a number of other initiatives to attract new riders; among them their own riding school. Run as a separate business from the dealership, PowerRide University is another division of PowerRide Motorsports, and is under Harrison's leadership as well. Offering two- and three-wheeled motorcycle education, they teach introductory classes, basic and advanced classes for riders 16 years of age old and older. Approved by the Motorcycle Safety Foundation as well as the Virginia Rider Education Program, they can issue students their Virginia motorcycle endorsements after they successfully complete the class. The school uses many of the small, lightweight bikes from Honda, Yamaha, Kawasaki and Suzuki, all of which are conveniently for sale at the dealership.

PowerRide University currently has two closed circuit ranges in Virginia and will be expanding into other areas in the coming months. Adopting the two-day training model for the basic rider courses, each of their ranges can train up to 24 students per weekend. Harrison estimates they will train over 2,000 students this first year. In addition to motorcycle courses they'll also be offering First Aid, CPR, CED and Defensive Driving classes in their Woodbridge training center. This is an incredible accomplishment given that it was only in January of this year when they decided to open the training school.

Grand opening to public announcement took them a little over two months... once again proving Harrison is definitely a woman who gets things done!

"PowerRide University fits in with what we've been doing over the past forty years supporting riders," said Harrison. "All our brands are represented in the student bikes, and we offer a variety of seat heights to accommodate all riders. I believe that for students to have a good experience in the class the bike has to fit well." PowerRide University also has the ability to jump start a person's riding with one on one training. They can help folks with changing gears, improving their balance and getting over their fears.

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NOW & THEN

In addition to now reaching deep into the new rider market, Coleman PowerSports has a long history of supporting and enhancing the customer experience for existing riders. Downstairs next to the service waiting area they have a training room that's used for staff meetings, employee training, dealership seminars and also offered to local motorcycle clubs for their meetings.

Does it sound like business on a lot of fronts? Heck yeah. Is it working for them? Absolutely. Sure, Harrison ends up at the dealership late at night as it's more than a full time job for her, but it's her attention to granular details while simultaneously keeping her eye on the bigger picture that has kept the duo of Virginia dealerships under her purview in the lead for so long. Harrison credits her 20 Group for her ability to continually expand and evolve. She's been in a 20 Group since she was 23 years old, which is one of the things that has not changed in the years since our first article.

One of the biggest 'then and now' changes is that formerly the dealership was using a proprietary computer system built by Dillard Coleman himself, who was an early adopter of IBM computers. Harrison has followed in her father's technology-friendly footsteps and embraces it on myriad levels. They converted to LightSpeed in the late 1980s and currently use all of the software's features including CRM, texting and website inventory posting. Now instead of waiting for numbers monthly, instead they track their numbers daily. The numbers are compared to prior year as well as projected to budget. "Instead of reacting to the business with numbers a month behind, we are now looking at the numbers on a daily basis and can try and make adjustments right away," said Harrison.

Despite the business being started in the pre-Internet age, Harrison decided to focus on e-mail as the preferred way of communication with their customers early on. "We phased out direct mail and now 100% of our marketing communication with our customers is through e-mail. That strategy paid off and we now have more than 50,000 e-mail addresses," said Harrison.



"We usually do two e-mail blasts per week, but that can go up to almost once a day when we have an exciting event coming up."

NEXT

While Coleman PowerSports still struggles with some of the same problems they did in 1992 such as low margins, difficulty in finding dedicated employees and theirs being a seasonal business, Harrison has ameliorated those difficulties with insightful choices of product lines. These days they're doing a booming business with three-wheeled vehicles. Their Vanderhall models are selling like hotcakes, as are the Can-Ams, especially since the introduction of the Ryker. The autocycle market is incredibly robust for them, with the natural feed-in from their two- and three-wheeled training school.

