

Building

community

at your dealership

By Alisa Clickenger

Building community is not a new concept for motorcycle dealers, yet very often it is overlooked as a way of increasing sales. While "community" itself is an intangible concept, for many successful dealerships it's part and parcel of generating happy customers as well as a solid sales base. Community is the way they serve their customers – a way of connecting in a meaningful way and making them feel like family. It's also an effective means of generating customer loyalty and giving back to the public that we serve as dealers.

It is important to remember that the community spirit your dealership creates should be authentic. There are many ways of fostering the idea of community and many ways to develop it. Getting creative with defining, or redefining, the sense of community you create can only help your customers be more engaged with your dealership. Chances are it will help your bottom line as well.

Growing Even When It's Slow

After the market crash, Ride West BMW didn't just hunker down and wait for the market to turn around. Owners Ann and Keith Thye saw it as an opportunity to invest, invent and grow. General Manager Dave Swezey came up with a new and aggressive marketing plan including a complete rebranding of all their print and electronic materials. It took almost a year working with ADV Brands, a small-team design venture, yet it was worth it. "We grew our business, grew our company and grew our sales. Between 2009 and 2014 Ride West saw a 35.9 percent increase in sales, and we are on pace for the best new and used bike year since 2003," says Swezey.

"If you are reaching out to the community you have to be creative," says Swezey. Get creative they did: Swezey implemented 16 different marketing strategies, many of which were focused on building community where previously they had little or none. The dealership hired a full-time events manager, developed a seminar series and put on three to



five slide shows per year in their "media" room. Ride West also sponsored the local MSF schools, co-branding training events with them, which has been a huge boon to their bottom line.

Ride West's greatest expense is personnel. Swezey found a way to leverage their customers' passion for the brand and the dealership by developing an Ambassador Program, which helps the dealership save on employee costs. They have a pool of 6-12 riders that are their most enthusiastic customers – people who truly enjoy the motorcycling community – and incentivize them for helping with customer outreach. The Ambassadors aren't necessarily extremely knowledgeable about the products, yet they more than make up for it with their enthusiasm.

Swezey has also developed a "Friendship Station" that they set up at area motorcycle events. The station's signage is professionally designed and its purpose is to be informative without selling anything. The best part is it can be left unmanned. The station always offers some type of candy, insurance information, and brochures on different programs for track, touring and training, product spec sheets, plus a five gallon lemonade dispenser. In order to be the most effective they consciously set the station up in a way that it draws attention, not in a haphazard fashion.

Word of Mouth Works Best

Holiday Motorsports is an independent motorcycle shop at the end of a dead end road with four franchised dealers within 20 minutes of their shop. They've never advertised since the day they opened, yet every week they have four to five new customers. The best part is that they have quadrupled their profits – and their physical space – in just two and a half years.

How have they grown so dramatically with a miniscule marketing budget? Each Wednesday from 6-9 pm they host a garage party which they purposely do not call a bike night. They don't sell anything and they don't talk business. What they do is bring the entire community together, not just motorcyclists. They keep the event inclusive and alcohol-free, they grill food

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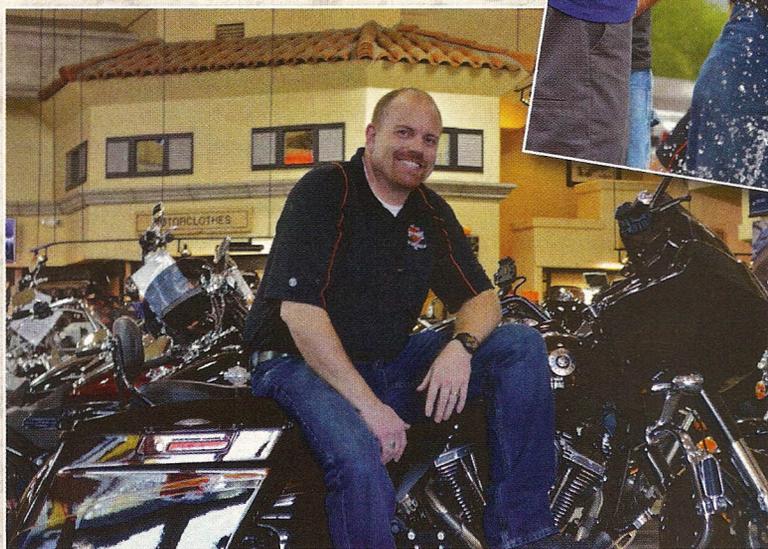
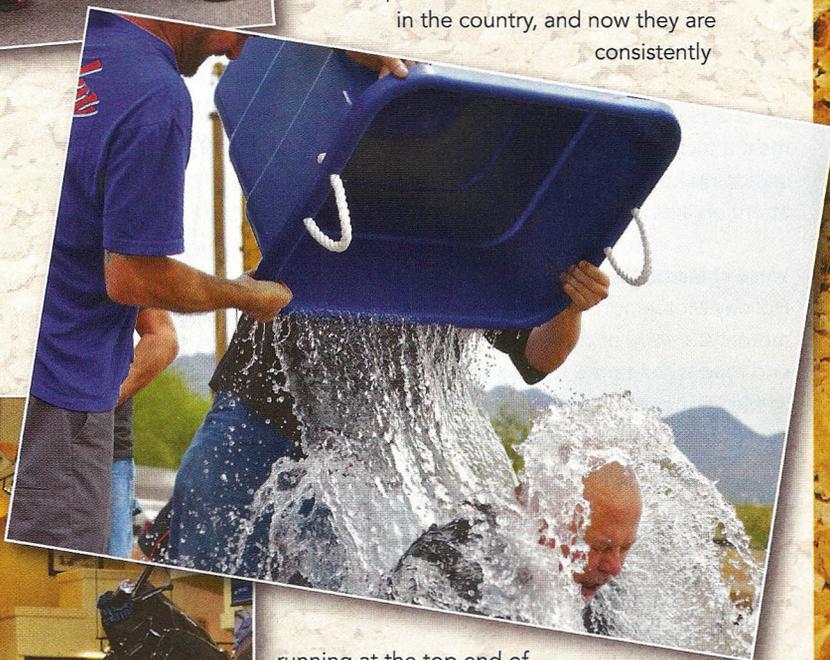
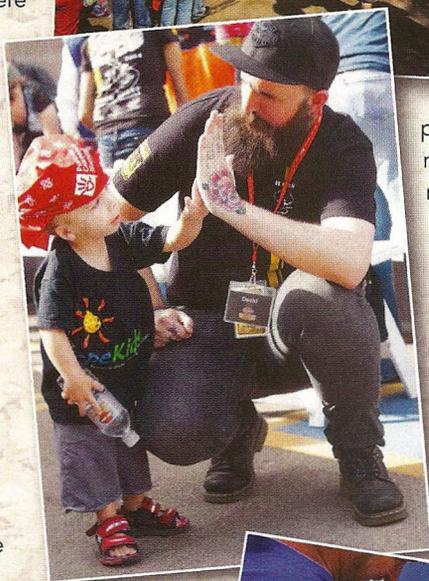
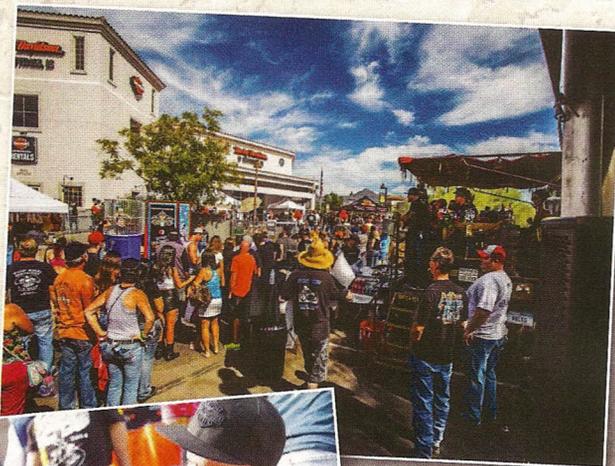
and host music and engage local businesses to come and participate as well. By being inclusive they find that non-motorcycling people then bring their motorcycling friends into the shop.

"It's amazing the loyalty that you get when you actually go into something only to give back to your customer and to make them feel like they are part of your family," says co-owner Shelly Denis. "The only reason we have survived and done extremely well here is because we do the right things with our customers and we involve them in everything. So whenever we have a celebration here we involve them. Whenever we hire a new employee we have a party. It's amazing how close-knit our community has become."

A Dealership's Biggest Asset

At Harley-Davidson of Scottsdale, building community isn't so much executed through programs or events; it's endemic within the dealership. When entrepreneur Bob Parsons, founder of GoDaddy.com, purchased the dealership in 2012, he changed the culture from within. He created an empowered environment wherein there is plenty of communication, lots of clarification and clear expectations. Great customer service is a non-negotiable for all employees in the dealership.

"We have an engaged staff that's willing to do everything they can for the customer," says General Manager Justin Johnson. Johnson admits this was a challenge in the beginning. When hiring, Johnson



focuses on 'untrainables' such as a potential employee's attitude, personality and their proclivity towards being "customer-centric."

He acknowledges, "Our biggest asset is the people coming in here helping our customers." The dealership focuses on training its employees and treating them well. One example is the safety riding gear they have

purchased for their technicians to wear when testing motorcycles. The dealership has such a widespread reputation of treating employees well that they have techs lined up to work for them.

When Parsons bought the dealership he instructed Johnson to focus on providing excellent service to customers. His theory was that if they focused solely on providing the best possible service to customers they wouldn't have to worry about sales. This approach of building the business from the inside out has provided tangible results: when Parsons took over the dealership it had some of the worst CSI scores in the country, and now they are consistently

running at the top end of the scores nationwide.

"Our goal is to build as many long-term relationships with as many people in our riding community as we can," says Johnson. Not a bad goal, especially when the owner gave away a million dollars every 10 days this past year through the Bob & Renee Parsons Foundation. ↙