

(Edited) Harley-Davidson Ranks as Showroom Brand Leader

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HARLEY-DAVIDSON AND DUCATI, BMW, SUZUKI and Victory may be worlds apart in terms of the motorcycles they sell, but a new study suggests they have something in common: if their prospects didn't leave a showroom with a motorcycle, there's a good chance they left feeling good about the experience and the brand.

The Pied Piper Prospect Satisfaction Index--the first of its kind by Pied Piper LLC, a three-year old marketing management company founded by former car executive and motorcycle executive Fran O'Hagan--diverges from the traditional automotive retail model that tracks owner satisfaction.

The Index instead is based on responses by anonymous shoppers who visited motorcycle showrooms and recorded both their own level of satisfaction with the experience and specific items including whether a salesperson asked for a shopper's name, determined a shopper's price range, or even asked for shoppers' contact numbers.

Harley-Davidson ranked highest in multiple aspects of the study, with Ducati a leader in promoting accessories; Kawasaki for financing; Honda for dealership signage visibility; Suzuki for focusing and narrowing shopper choices; and Victory for offering test rides.

The most surprising results of the study--conducted between November 2006 and January 2007 using shopper evaluations at 375 retail locations throughout the U.S., representing approximately one in 11 of all U.S. motorcycle dealership locations--may be the negative results.

For instance, according to O'Hagan, president of Pied Piper, only 35% of salespeople across all brands gave reasons why a shopper should buy from that specific dealership; only 37% asked for contact information, and only 49% tried to forward the sale in any way.

O'Hagan said the numbers reflect a structural problem at motorcycle dealerships: while the retail owner may be interested in cultivating relationships with prospects, his or her salespeople are oriented toward today's sale, and are likely to lose interest if a customer is only looking. And cliches about the horrors of a hard-selling salesperson notwithstanding, prospects would rather be pitched to than ignored.

"What we found with the shopper intercepts was that shoppers are 20 times more likely to be annoyed by being undersold than oversold, and we found that to be the case in other industries as well," said O'Hagan. "People didn't go to the dealership to look at the flowers. They went to buy."

O'Hagan said it's likely that motorcycle dealership sales staff are also riding enthusiasts, but not people with selling skills.

"If they had to make their living selling aluminum siding, they wouldn't be very good at it. The same characteristics that make someone an excellent real estate agent or car salesman, or carpeting salesperson are the same: it's 80% people skills. The motorcycle industry has so much potential for improvement," he said. "Because we are talking about very simple items to address."

Karl Greenberg can be reached at karl@mediapost.com