



Joel Martin
Scooters
BEYOND THUNDERDOME

Welcome to the Thunderdome...

This won't be your typical annual scooter fluff piece on how great the scooter market is. We won't be bashing all the Chinese products (let's face it they are all Chinese now) and claiming how we will all become millionaires and movie stars. This year I am giving it to you straight. We are in an era of consolidation, reorganization and education at all levels. It is the best of times, and it is a time of inflation. We all face a credit crunch, rising gas prices, and more competition than ever before. It is an era where some brands will do well and fight it out this summer in the "Thunderdome" that is our marketplace while others will perish.



Our story begins this past September when I was at the Piaggio annual dealers meeting. One by one, all the upper management of Piaggio Group of the Americas got on stage to tell us how the company was the American sales leader. Anyone outside of Piaggio knows this couldn't be further from the truth, yet everyone in the room was applauding. Many Chinese importers such as Jonway, JmStar, and Zongshen move many more private label units than Piaggio, Vespa and Aprilia combined. Piaggio was only using the MIC member sales numbers, which leave out all the Chinese and Taiwanese brands like SYM, TGB, and PGO. Still, I sat there until the new marketing director, fresh from Harley-Davidson got up and explained that sales had increased by over 40% and they were now the scooter market leader. All of a sudden, I heard someone comment behind me, "Ever hear of China?" I glanced at James Palazzo the owner of Scootopia who was dumbfounded looking at the numbers on the screen. The next speaker concluded by saying that Piaggio was the fastest growing brand in the United States when behind us all I heard was a snicker "Buddy 125!" I turned to see three Genuine dealers seated behind me who were obviously all trying to make a point. Now I believe in marketing and promoting your brand, but the truth is the room was divided between hardcore scooter store owners who have been doing this for years and the new car, Arctic Cat, and boutique owners who had no idea that the numbers they were looking at were extremely skewed.

Bartertown is a city on the edge of a desert in the classic Mad Max series where dealers trade goods. The Piaggio dealers meeting in Scottsdale felt like that. I went to trade information. Overall it was an incredible dealer meeting, and I left impressed. This was the best meeting I had been to in the United States for scooters. Piaggio finally was beginning to

act like the scooter giant it was supposed to be when it first reentered the market. Its technical meetings, the product quality and marketing are all second-to-none. However, it was evident that just like all aspects of the scooter industry, the numbers are all wrong and new dealers were being misinformed. The majority of the new managers have no scooter background whatsoever which meant many of the dealers were on their own to truly understand the scooter market. I could not find a single employee that I knew from 2001 except for one of the technical advisors in the parts department. The sales team and management was all new and nobody knew of certain important brands like Benelli, Malaguti, Jincheng, PGO — these were all words from a different civilization. The only people I encountered that had a clear knowledge of them were the Italian management because they knew exactly what I was referring to. It just seems to be that the greatest brand in the world of scooters has never been able to get it just right in America, but I saw the seeds of greatness in that meeting if only they could get the margins up.

I had a great conversation with Leonardo Caputo the executive vice president for investor relations at Piaggio. I told him how I had just returned from Vietnam and that Piaggio was all the talk of the town at the Vietnamese Motorcycle Show having had the foresight to invest there. In case you haven't heard, Piaggio is now a global brand with several of its models coming from different factories. Zongshen Group produces the Piaggio 50cc and 150cc units starting to arrive in America while Jincheng is producing the new Aprilia Scarabeo 200cc. Mr. Caputo made it clear that Piaggio had every intention of producing more in Vietnam in the years to come and, if needed, to export from there as well. Clearly Piaggio was ahead of the game because if you have been reading the papers lately China is beginning to export inflation and it's affecting all of us, especially; scooter distributors and dealers. This is yet another sign that Piaggio is one step ahead of the curve in the global scooter game.

Why is the Piaggio plant in Vietnam such a big deal? Well, first, because it's a growing developing market and second because it means there will be a source for inexpensive parts and scooters from the leading Italian brand. All the major players in the world of scooters like Honda, Yamaha, Kymco, SYM and Piaggio have opened factories there for the local market and are looking at eventually exporting. Manufacturers stuck producing only in Taiwan or China are going to be facing rising costs so the bigger companies are moving ahead — China's own success is causing it to choke on itself when it comes to motorcycle exports.

Chinese firms are swallowing up oil, gas, coal and all the precious metals needed to make motorcycles. All the construction in factories in Guangdong and new skyscrapers in Shanghai have allowed China to consume a third of the world's steel production and a quarter of its aluminum in 2007. This absorption of commodities affects all global production especially something metal intensive as motorcycle production. Even the Japanese big four are feeling the pinch as they feel the prices of the raw materials rise. Meanwhile this unquenchable appetite for natural resources is one of the reasons many importers are seeing the costs of replacement parts rise. Nick Lin the manager at Zongshen USA recognizes this, "All the prices are expected to rise in 2008 for the replacement parts because of the price of raw materials."

There are several factors making China less of a threat in 2009 including reduced manufacturing subsidies by the government for exporters, rising energy costs and the appreciation of the yuan which is causing motorcycle prices to go up. The biggest stroke of luck has been a new Chinese labor law which took effect this year that has raised operational costs across



the board in all industries. The mainland is losing its competitive edge leading many to begin looking at importing scooters from India, Vietnam and Malaysia. However, those scooter importers that have not found new factories will be importing inflation as those factories lose their competitive advantage.

RISING PRICES? WILL THIS AFFECT THE SALES?

Dealers in general face America's worsening economic situation, the housing fiasco, collapsing stocks and now the global rise of commodity prices on a monthly basis. Dealers are having to pass on those price increases to the consumers. As I write this a barrel of crude oil has reached \$112 and the dollar stands at \$1.59 in our exchange rate to the Euro. Anyone importing goods from Europe has watched their profits slide the way of the dodo bird. Now many would believe that the rising cost of gas would have everyone running for a scooter. To a certain degree it's true there is a correlation, but remember the price of the scooters is going up as well as shipping.

How are distributors coping with these issues? Bill Pierce president of Cobra Sales known for the Pierspeed and TGB scooter brands commented, "We rolled out a new shipping matrix and the dealers understand the need to cover the high shipping costs. They realize that there is no such thing as free shipping; someone's paying the freight." This clearly hasn't stopped sales from growing. "We had a better first quarter than last year clearly it hasn't affected sales because there is customer demand," says Cobra sales manager Mason Orr.

Several companies are feeling the pinch. "We are paying more money to import the products from Asia," says Mathu Solo president of LS Motorsports. "The cost to ship orders to our dealers using domestic truck lines increases as fuel surcharges have increased more than 20% over last

year. We have not changed our shipping programs so far this year, but there is only so much cost a distributor can absorb before being forced to pass along increasing cost." He goes on to state that sales haven't been affected yet, "The only silver lining is that dealers and consumers are all well aware of the situation and the rising fuel prices are driving sales so there is some trade-off."

For years everyone has said that rising gas prices lead to higher sales, but that correlation is starting to become clear. In a year when new ATV and motorcycle sales figures are dropping, Scooter sales are soaring, up more than 30% so far for 2008 according to MIC figures (and we all know that doesn't count every new scoot being sold in the States).

I spoke to Rick Pawelka the marketing manager at Kymco, the number one manufacturer of Taiwanese scooters and asked how they were doing in the U.S. In general, the company has moved away from having to get their name out to dealers and is focusing on consumer branding as it has in Europe and Asia. So while other companies have cut back, Kymco has been moving forward into education, working with Dealer University, and participating in the *Cycle World* consumer shows. The company even moved into larger facilities so it can meet growing demand for its products.

Overall most of the sales reps report stronger sales despite the negative economy and negative growth in the powersports industry. I confirmed this with several dealers who report higher sales of Kymco, Schwinn, SYM, Genuine, and smaller lines as well. So while Harley-Davidson's US sales are reportedly down compared to last year, there are few scooter companies this year I have spoken to that are reporting any negative issues.

OUTLIVE AND THRIVE

Anyone that was at this year's Dealers Expo clearly saw several scooter distributors missing for several factors. Some like Kymco have grown to the point where they can just focus on consumer marketing like Honda or Yamaha, but most of the missing brands were absent because of hard-

hitting times. Since the show there has been a continued consolidation and brands switching importers. For example SunL and ATVTown recently merged and became MDL Powersports. Ivan Escalante at CF toto USA believes these consolidations will continue as prices rise in China. He goes on to say, "The stateside 'importers' who are not the direct factory are getting the hit hardest ... and rightfully so! They have not respected the powersports industry as a whole and now it has come back to haunt them. With problems in recalls, federal and state licensing laws and most of all very little parts support to dealers. So there is a big house cleaning going on." Clearly he is onto something, and more of this is likely to occur as competition heats up.

Bev Fox of Redstreak Motors is teaming up with Jonway, the largest supplier of scooters to open offices in the States. "In Jonway we have found a reliable partner, someone who produces for the top name brands already in the market," says Fox. "Instead of competing against them we are now part of their overall strategy." Clearly Jonway and Redstreak understand that consolidation is the wave of the future and have found a way to team up ahead of the market.

Amongst these other challenges, the government is also inspecting scooter containers like never before. Because so many importers violated EPA laws in the last five years, several companies have had containers confiscated or returned. Korean importer Daelim Motors USA has had several containers stuck in customs for half a year with no expected date of release leaving them with little new product to sell. These delays due to customs enforcement has made estimating distributor delivery times a guessing game for dealers.





CHANGES AT THE DEALER LEVEL

Having been in the industry for close to ten years, I can honestly say that five years ago the market realities for scooter-only stores weren't there. Since I started, I've watched Vespa Miami change ownership three times and several boutiques have closed because the fundamentals for a scooter-only businesses were not there. Today the industry has changed: not only can the market support a scooter-only store it might be able to support a chain of them.

2007 marked a milestone with the first multi-state scooter-only chain in America. Scooter Superstore of America is making headlines among distributors because of its call for rapid expansion and dealership integration. Its main headquarters in Hollywood Florida has over 300 scooters in stock and in some cases more parts than its own suppliers. XXX Warrick owned the original Vespa dealership in Fort Lauderdale in 1972 and now sees that the market is calling for inexpensive reliable transportation. Warrick now owns two dealerships in Florida, two Vespa dealerships in Atlanta, and more to come this year. This type of dealer expansion allows for greater employee training, cost reductions and more support from the importers which could make these types of chains the future of the American industry. After spending some time at the Hollywood store, I've come to the conclusion that this type of shop could be the best distribution method in America in the years to come.

INCREASED COMPETITION

They say imitation is the best form of flattery. The biggest complaint I've heard in markets that are performing well is overnight opportunists that set up low-end competition. In unregulated states where you do not need a dealer's license to sell scooters, every single store on the block can copy cat and start selling 50cc scooters. Tom Glasser of Swam Cycles in Gainesville, Florida knows first-hand as several stores without dealers license's have opened up around him. "We can't stop them, but we try to offer better service and

parts support than anyone in Gainesville." Bill Pierce of TGB agrees with this and offers some advice to dealers facing a similar situation. "Sell service and quality, not

price. If the dealer offers the best parts support and aftermarket accessories they will always win in the long run. We have seen many suppliers/dealers come and go and the one's who are the cheapest go out of business the fastest. They can't offer good warranty and parts support without selling products for a profit."

DISTRIBUTORS TAKING BUSINESS FROM DEALERS

As things get tighter expect to see more competition from your distributors and the importers themselves. Some importers are opening company-owned retail outlets to take advantage of shrinking margins. Internet and catalog sales direct to the public are not the norm and should never be accepted, but smaller independent dealers usually put up with it because they have no other recourse. They want to keep the brand but are afraid of upsetting their supplier so they put up with the company selling parts or accessories direct to the public from the company website or store. Pierce jumps in to comment, "Dealers have a lot of overhead because of a building, fixtures, inventory, flooring, advertising, service, parts and personnel. I don't think it's a good idea for distributors to sell on eBay if they are trying to establish a brand name for the long haul." Pawelka from Kymco agrees saying, "That's sacrificing the short-term for the long-term growth of a brand. A reliable partner doesn't sell retail or have company stores."

As the Chinese factories lose sales and feel the margins being squeezed, they will be bypassing the US rebadgers and opening their own warehouses in America. Because they have little or no experience with branding, Chinese OEMs do not worry about appearances and sell directly online to the public. Even if these distributors take some consumers away, most buyers are not happy with Internet purchases and want a local dealer to service them. Most brand managers I have spoken to suggest that bigger dealers should always

ask their distributor if they own a store, sell parts online, or direct to the public at a company-owned store. As the economy gets tighter, this will become an issue for store owners. Every scooter is someone's first scooter and to have them continually burn new customers affects all legitimate dealerships in general

ONLINE SALES

Seven out of ten scooter-only dealers I spoke to do not have a website. This lags behind every other segment of the industry. In this day and age, everyone should have a website. Most major brand scooter-only dealers like Vespa require a dealer website, but smaller dealers or new businesses getting into the market for the first time might not have one. This is another reason they do not complain to their suppliers that sell online, because to their knowledge it doesn't affect them. In any other segment, the dealers would revolt if their suppliers sold online. Harley Dealers would go crazy if Harley sold end-users \$10,000 in parts and accessories direct, but because of the nature of the scooter dealer, a \$200 parts sale doesn't seem threatening. In the long-run it is. My suggestion is, don't buy from a supplier that competes against you online in bike sales, parts or accessories. If you don't have a site up, get one up tomorrow.

DEALER TRAINING

The lack of mechanical training is slowing the growth of scooter dealers across America. Not every dealer has a Vespa-certified mechanic, and as scooters become more complicated featuring fuel injection and other technologies like the Piaggio MP3, the industry needs more training. New Asian brands do not have as much technical support and sometimes they



even lack manuals. MMI and Motorcycle Tech schools only have access to Honda and Yamahas and dedicate minimum time to them (there is no scooter mechanic certification only a class). The industry as a whole needs to invest in more online and dealer training so that the customer experience for repairs is as good as in the motorcycle or car industry.

TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THE DEALERSHIP ENVIRONMENT

Many dealers have a mental block against stocking accessories and parts. Five years ago almost all the major distributors from Aprilia to Vespa required some purchase of common parts. These days scooter dealers pick up a franchise and rely on "Just in Time" for even common issues such as tires and mirrors. You don't want to be in a position where you rely on your distributor for parts 100% of the time. Most new distributors don't have the infrastructure to give the best parts service, so stock parts if your distributor is lagging. Most modern engines regardless of the brand or country of origin are extremely reliable, but you should always stock tires, belts, rollers, mirrors and other everyday items.

Our advice for 2008 is to pre-accessorize the scooter demos on all the brands you carry for the showroom. Accessorized scooters help the showroom look better, and it makes life easier for the sales staff. The accessories can also be financed since they make the unit a higher ticket item making the deal more profitable for GE, Texatron and Discovery. Don't lose the opportunity because consumers will go online and buy from another dealer or worse — maybe one of your suppliers!

Scooter owners want to get the most out of their machines, and if they don't see it in your showroom, they will go somewhere else. Dragon Custom, an aftermarket scooter company believes that in 2008 it

could see its sales double overall according to company president Jon Solo. "The parts allows them to envision their desired look on the street it adds to the overall experience," says Solo.

Being that I too am in the aftermarket accessories business, I completely agree with Solo. This is the most underestimated part of the market. Jonathan Rodriguez, national sales manager for Martin Racing Performance, says, "Many dealers pick up as many brands as they can and then do a terrible job at stocking parts and accessories. It's not about getting every scooter you can. It's about doing the best job possible with a few brands and that might involve customizing, painting and upgrading scooters in the showroom so the customer can define themselves with the accessories." As the market heats up and more dealerships sell scooters, it will be the parts department that separates the real scooter shop from the opportunists. "We are the only store in Gainesville you can walk into and find a full wall of exhausts, accessories, cylinder kits, LED's, from MRP to LeoVince we stock them all," says Glasser from Swamp Cycles. "Nobody in Gainesville stocks as many racing parts or upgrades as us. In the end it's what makes us a better scooter store. They can buy the scooter elsewhere, but they come here for service."

GOOD NEWS ON THE HORIZON

New models are hitting the market and they drive sales into the dealerships.

Interest in the Vectrix electric model and the MP3 have consumers coming in the doors. Take advantage of this and use the local press to your advantage.

Lambretta returns! The brand name which is as iconic as Vespa has resurfaced thanks to the Khurana family of Seattle, Wash. The new company Lambretta USA has released three U.S. models and thanks to the brand name, it should generate interest for dealers looking to carry a recognized name.

Genuine has released the Roughhouse 50, manufactured by PGO of Taiwan, it is destined to take the Zuma's place in

the 2-stroke category since the Yamaha has converted to a 4-stroke in 2008.

In my opinion, the best news actually comes in the form of a hybrid moped. This year the MadAss returns with a new importer having been picked up by Cobra Sales. "We are rolling out a complete line of Sachs products including a 125 MadAsa and the new X-Road," says Pierce. "We will also have four new 50cc scooters from Peirspeed in May or June and two new 150s. By late summer we should have a new Peirspeed 250cc and 400cc."

Steve Guzman widely known in the scooter industry for his website www.thescooterscoop.com, is now the national sales manager for Italjet USA and got us the scoop. "Our big announcement for the summer is the expected arrival of the all new Italjet RollerCraft."

Daniel Pak, Sales Manager for Fly Scooters believe his new "La Vie" should inspire lots of sales. "We believe our new scooter should sell very well this year as its distinctive European look and colors combined with its performance, reliability, and affordable cost will capture the heart of our consumers," says Pak.

The biggest surprise for 2008 could belong to Carter Brothers with the SYM WoW which could single-handedly transform the U.S. scooter industry. This retro looking Honda Cub inspired model could be the first test of the retro craze. It is based on the best selling step through design in the world. The new model is also supposedly coming from the SYM Vietnam plant allowing for better margins at all levels. If this model is a success, the US market could change overnight. ⚡

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Carrollton, TX 75006
(877) 944-9937
www.whizzermotorbike.com

Xtreme Motor Co.

135 Midway Drive
Russellville, AR 72802
(888) 844-9440
www.xtrememotorco.com

Yamaha Motor Corp. USA

6555 Katella Ave.
Cypress, CA 90630
(714) 761-7300
www.yamaha-motor.com

Zongshen America

3511 NW 113 Court
Miami, FL 33178
(305) 500-9989
www.zongshenamerica.com



Are scooter sales in your future? More than just moving units, adding a scooter lineup opens up multiple profit centers in your store: a pumped up demand for service, additional F&I income, plus a whole new lineup of aftermarket parts and accessories. Here are just a few sizzling scooter P&A picks. Check out our scooter industry hot list on page 66 for a full list of scooter manufacturers, distributors and P&A suppliers.

Dragon Custom

Dragon Custom offers up a comprehensive line of hopped up aftermarket scooter add-ons, including four chrome wheel options. One of the only companies to offer chrome wheels for scooters, Dragon Custom has four main designs: Black Widow, Hidden Dagger, 9 Bladez and Shuriken Assault. The current lineup works on most Chinese scooter clones, and Dragon Custom is currently expanding the lineup to work on other popular brands such as Yamaha, Suzuki, Honda and Kymco.

The company's goal is to take scooter performance to the next level by combining performance with a custom-made look that is unlike anything in the industry. Dragon Custom developed custom performance exhaust with a matching custom performance air intake that allows dealers to offer custom looks and unbelievable performance.



Dr. Pulley

Dr. Pulley Sliders, made from nylon, are claimed to be 20% to 30% faster and turn more RPMs than standard variator rollers for scooters. They are available for a slew of brands, including Genuine, Kymco, Vespa, Malaguti, Fly and TGB, and are priced at \$25, from the Martin Racing Performance crew.

Givi

The astronomical price of petrol has got more people than ever turning to scoots to commute. Givi's got 'em covered with its luggage specifically designed for the scooter enthusiast. The company offers three console/tunnel bags, each with an approximate 20-liter capacity, which get secured to the front of the scooter seat cushion with a strap and Velcro pads. Retail ranges from \$99 to \$116, depending on the model.



MRP

Industry insider Joel Martin shared his insights on the scooter market on the previous pages. Here he shares the newest addition to his Martin Racing Performance parts lineup — this clutch for the SYM RV 250. "Many dealers ask us why it's essential to change the clutch. Well in all honesty it's because the stock clutches are usually not that good ... you can see an increase of up to 40% in power just by changing the stock clutch," explains Martin, speaking of scooters in general. Pump up the power on this model for \$150.



Nelson-Rigg

We all know co-eds can't get enough scooting around town, but your average college kid doesn't have a garage to protect her ride from the elements. Suggest Nelson-Rigg's scooter covers which are made from a water-resistant, lightweight Tri-Max polyester with a non-scratch dura-soft backing for ultimate protection. The elastic hem gives the cover a nice snug fit while two security grommets located at the front and center of the cover will accommodate large locks or cables, starting at \$39.95.

Suzuki

Suzuki dealers take note: This Genuine Suzuki Burgman 650 aluminum luggage rack is ideal for small items and easily attaches in minutes. Built-in bungee hooks and rubber pads help eliminate cargo movement on this \$229.95 rack.

