

SEMINAR 4

18/03/09

Harley-Davidson
Motor
Company is an
American
manufacturer of
motorcycles
based in
Milwaukee,
Wisconsin.



The experiential meaning of Harley-Davidson B2, B3, B4, B1, B6.

Harley Davidson is an American-based motorcycle manufacturer that preaches an image of freedom and adventure when riding its motorcycles. The company is also very proud of their history, which started in the beginning of the 1900's. Four young men were trying to build an internal combustion engine and ended up succeeding at making the first motorcycle. That motorcycle lasted for over 100,000 miles and was owned by a total of five different people over its lifespan. The company's message is that since 1903, they have been making quality motorcycles for America and the rest of the world. They are the oldest and the most quality name in motorcycles. (Harley Davidson 1, 2009)

Harley Davidson is committed to forming a family-like attachment to the people who ride their motorcycles. To quote their website, "all roads lead to home. We have a reputation for seeking freedom and adventure. We are also known for taking care of our own – those communities where we live and work. So while Harley Davidson can be found in all corners of the world, we are firmly rooted in all places we call home... and deeply connected to the people we call friends and neighbors." (Harley Davidson 1, 2009). This statement shows that Harley Davidson is a company that wants to build lasting relationships with their customers by building an environment where all owners of a Harley-Davidson motorcycle can feel that they are a part of a family.

Harley-Davidson also wants to attract riders from all stages of life. They strongly preach that diversity is important to their image. In another statement from their website they say, "like you, we are different. Like you, we share a passion that transcends age, gender, and race – a passion that brings together riders from all walks of life." (Harley-Davidson 1, 2009). Based on that, Harley-Davidson wants to find riders from any age group. They want as many people to be riding their motorcycles as possible.

The image perceived by consumers can be divided into two groups. Those that own a Harley-Davidson and those that do not. Non-owners may have various opinions and views. On the one hand, generally, it is the legend and the association with freedom that forms the image of Harley-Davidson, which gives prestige to the brand. On the other hand people may perceive the consumers as being rebellious and "bad boys" and draw relationships to groups such as the "Hell's Angels" (Paperblog, 2008). Stereotypes exist as to what the Harley owners are like. The outer appearance is a leather jacket and denim jeans as well as sunglasses and a bandana, while the person is associated with a rebel or a tough guy (Willis, 2009). Lately, Harley Davidson has suffered from being perceived as an old and overweight man's bike, which lead to creating a new motorcycle for younger target groups (Harley Presentation, 2008).

Fieldwork carried out by Sharon Schembri (2008) in Australia concerning the Harley Owners Group (HOG) shows what owning a Harley Davidson entails and confirms the image that Harley Davidson has of itself. The personal experience of the brand Harley Davidson is installed in the social act and becomes a symbol of freedom. Owning a Harley Davidson is about riding the bike with the freedom to go wherever you want to, whenever you want to. Buying a Harley Davidson is not just a financial investment but is the fulfilment of a dream to many. With the purchase of a Harley Davidson, one gets a complimentary one year membership in the HOG, which operates world-wide in district chapters and has over one million members globally. New members are unconditionally accepted as long as they respect the "bike, the time on the road, as well as [...] others, including authorities" (Schembri, 2008: 5). The HOG is like a brotherhood, in which members keep looking out for one another. This includes looking out for each others' safety, thus HOG has a safety officer in each chapter and reinforces safety rules regularly. (Schembri, 2008)

In this HOG community festivals and events are a very important part of the Harley Davidson lifestyle and symbolic rituals bring into being a shared way of life. As mentioned above, being a member of the Australian HOG differs from some of the prejudices about this legendary and iconic brand. However, their ways of "Harley-living" is still about freedom and cohesion. This occurs through participation in the monthly rides, annual rallies, social nights, and various other activities and events. (Schembri, 2008)

The Harley Davidson website, for instance, divides the events into Australian Events, International Events, Touring Rallies, US National Events and US State Rallies (Harley Davidson 2, 2009). Travelling to one of those annual rallies in Australia involves several days of travelling long distances. On these occasions the adventure is not only about riding on the routes together with your fellows, but it is also about arriving at the destination, where the members usually set up a camp and celebrate together. (Schembri, 2008)

Some of the events are about riding, and others give the opportunity to just watch and enjoy. The Australian events and rallies are obviously more about riding, which is a great way to explore the country and its beautiful nature in an adventurous way. This relates to the image of freedom the brand wants to achieve. The activities are well-organized and therefore limited in attendance, which means that the possible participants have to register in advance. The events are published in the monthly member magazine, in the yearly event calendar and in the online community. This is also where members can sign up for participation. The international events are also worth mentioning since they are representative for Harley Davidson, a world wide popular brand. Members are spread all over the world, and this means that the international events are a unique way to experience a culture unlike your own with locals, who share the passion for Harley Davidson motorcycles. (Harley Davidson 2, 2009)

One specific characteristic regarding the customs of the HOGs, is that many riders are travelling together with their families, who are for example accompanying in a back up car. This motorbike club, which can be described as a social organisation, is promoting a kid-friendly environment and some families are transforming the rallies into their annual family holiday. Since this is not everybody's understanding of freedom, others, who are not interested in including their families are using these events for escape.

Both ways of experiencing freedom make the events and the journey to these memorable experiences. This leads to the interesting point that the participants of those Harley events also try to increase their memorabilia, by means of collecting buttons, pins and patches from each activity to put them on their typically worn leather vests. This is nothing else than collecting souvenirs. (Schembri, 2008)

Summarising, it can be said, that Harley Davidson is a strong brand whose consumers appreciate the image of the brand by means of experiencing it and thus turn the consumption into a way of life.

References:

Schembri, S. (2008). Reframing The Brand Experience: The Experiential Meaning of Harley Davidson. *Journal of Business Research*.

Websites:

Harley Davidson 1 (2009). Company. Retrieved March 16th 2009 from http://www.harley-davidson.com/wcm/Content/Pages/H-D_History/history.jsp?locale=en_US

Harley Davidson 2 (2009). Australia/New Zealand. Retrieved March 17th from http://www.harley-davidson.com/wcm/Content/Pages/HOG/HOG.jsp?locale=en_AU

Harley Presentation (2008). Retrieved March 16th 2009 from http://creativeextract.110mb.com/harley_presentation/HD_Brief.pdf

Paperblog (2008). Retrieved on March 16th 2009 from <http://www.paperblog.fr/570214/85-bonnes-raisons-pour-laisser-les-harley-davidson-aux-hells-angels/>

Willis, Carl (2009). The Harley Davidson Image. Retrieved March 17th 2009 from <http://ezinearticles.com/?The-Harley-Davidson-Image&id=1762152>