



Learn to embrace China

Opinion by motorcycle journalist Peter Plummer

It won't be long before 70 per cent of bike and scooter sales in the UK will be in the 50-125cc sector, and price alone will dictate they will be of mostly Chinese origin irrespective of the badge they carry. For sound commercial reasons most of what we buy and sell will be made in China!

Taiwan and India will also feature, and of the remaining 30 per cent across the larger capacity classes, half that number will be produced in Asia. The industry will have to embrace it and learn to live with it. The borders are coming down.

A market (albeit a shrinking one) for European and Japanese-built exotica may still survive, however.

BMW sources its parallel twin engines in China. QianJiang produces Generic, Keeway and Benelli brands. Zongshen employs 18,000 people and has partnership agreements with Piaggio and Harley-Davidson. And Loncin has the capacity to produce 150,000 ATVs and three million engines a year.

In less than five years the quality of Chinese product has come on

by leaps and bounds. China now outstrips Japan as the world's largest producer of motorcycles and many Japanese lightweights are made in China.

SPIRALLING COSTS

We make much of legislation and the weather being stacked against us, preventing sales, but it is the spiralling costs of the major brands that is hastening the decline in motorcycle sales.

Niche marketing together with more power, speed, sophistication and glamour is very much 21st century, but the more expensive a product becomes (including parts, clothing, accessories and professional services), so less people can afford to buy it.

The manufacturers of premium brands are now struggling to come to terms with this law of diminishing returns as demand slows, but with China and others producing bikes and everything for bikes down to a price, then the trade will look to them as the means to stay in business and make a profit.

Is it really surprising that low budget (£1500 OTR) 125cc bike sales far outstrip the premium brand £4000 125s? And at the big capacity top end, is it any longer realistic to expect customers to pay £15,000 for a bike plus a jacket at £600, a helmet at £550 and gloves at £150 a pair, which are essentially selfish purchases when a car for the family to enjoy costs less?

ALIENATION OF CUSTOMER BASE

As an industry we have alienated our potential customer base.

From 1955 to 1975 and prior to the advent of American-style marketing of Japanese products, motorcycling was sold off the back of consumer advertising as cheap fun transport.

The ads by the manufacturers showed happy people (no full-face helmets to hide the smile) enjoying riding scooters and bikes of all engine sizes. The road testers may have glossed over the shortcomings of the product, but they portrayed sensible, legal riding in the right kit on the public highway.

Why wouldn't the reader want to buy a bike and encourage his kids to enjoy the experience when the clean-cut image of motorcycling is promoted like that?

Fast forward 30 years and we still have the product (albeit from different countries of origin), but lightweights and scooters for fun and transport are an afterthought and rarely promoted outside this industry.

In the public domain the car has taken over because we have not and do not put up a fight.



Marketing arrived after the Japanese invasion of the Isle of Man TT with the mistaken belief that we all wanted race replicas. With the Island packed with road race fans it was an easy mistake to make at the time, so we ended up with bikes we didn't know we wanted.

Now we also have niche marketing, which has further compartmentalised and complicated the sale and manufacture of motorcycles.

IDIOT WHEELIE TESTERS

Motorcycling over recent years appears to have been all about 200bhp, 200mph sports bikes and excitement in a dangerous way.

It's there in print in WH Smith with idiot 'testers' in racing leathers and knee sliders pulling wheelies, stoppies and seeing how fast they can lap the M25. It is an image we will take years to recover from, despite the recent best efforts of Ewan, Charley and BMW.

We've mixed up want with need and lost sight of value for money, and now times are hard again our buying patterns will return to the way they used to be, and that won't mean buying an expensive bike every year or so. The industry is going to have to cope with that.

Today's downturn in the demand for motorcycles in Europe is at last forcing manufacturers to reappraise the whole situation. Meanwhile we are disappearing up a blind alley and cheap Chinese product may just about keep us going – like the Japanese once did. ■