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## A fine plant tour turns PR disaster

Posted on June 29th, 2015 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



Thanks to those of you who took the “virtual ride” with me on Boaterz n Bikerz of America: Hull of a Tour — The Freedom Ride via my blog, which appeared daily on Trade Only Today.

If you’re unfamiliar, it was an awesome nine-day, 2,000-mile boating and motorcycling adventure from Sarasota, Fla., to Washington, D.C., sponsored by Freedom Boat Club, Hurricane Boats and Soundings Trade Only. The tour featured a sporty mix of boating and motorcycling experiences, along with visits to several historic venues, concluding with the 900,000-motorcycle Rolling Thunder demonstration on Memorial Day weekend, coupled with a visit to Arlington National Cemetery.

One unfortunate event transpired during my travels that I lamented in the blog, but I feel it deserving of additional commentary. The facts present a compelling argument and reminder about the critical importance of customer and prospect contact and how it can make or break future sales.

Here goes.

When road captain Jim Krueger of Regal Boats and I conferred about the ride route, we agreed that it would be cool to stop at the Harley-Davidson factory in York, Pa. We own Harleys and are big brand enthusiasts. In addition, we have had responsibility in our careers for boat manufacturing plant tours. We thought it would be really interesting for our group to learn about Harley manufacturing. We also thought it would be terrific to see firsthand how the motor giant conducts its tours.

Unfortunately, aspects of the factory tour proved to be a huge disappointment. I had called in advance to make reservations, as required if there are more than 10 people in a group. When we showed up with 30 minutes to spare, Jim got the first taste of poor PR. No warm welcome, as you might have expected, but a gruff, cursory instruction by a guy who obviously wasn’t very excited about our arrival.

Everyone in our group received a card with a prescribed start time, along with a postcard that was to be completed and turned in when the group was called.

When our time was announced, one of our riders was yanked out of the line. He hadn't completed the postcard because it was all marketing data, and he rides a competing brand and had zero interest in a future Harley purchase. He was publicly berated and told in no uncertain terms to complete the card if he wished to go on the tour.

I'm a marketer, and I understand fully the need to extract important data from prospects. I don't argue with any of that and I would do the same thing. My complaint was about the way they treated him. That was the major turn-off. Why not simply ask him to step out of line for a moment and explain quietly why the information was necessary? To embarrass him publicly was just wrong.

We settled into a comfortable theater and watched two videos that captured all of the good vibes Harley lovers have about the iconic brand. The first covered the company's storied history and the second provided an overview of the plant and the forthcoming tour. Great flicks!

I had swept away the earlier incidents when, unfortunately, rudeness showed its ugly head again.

At the conclusion of the movie, our guide and her assistant reviewed some basic protocols and distributed earphones. Our group of about 35 included international visitors. We lined up single-file and headed out to the manufacturing floor. As we waited to start, one of the international guests asked whether any language translation was available. The guide snapped back, "This is America. We speak English here." Silence followed. I couldn't believe my ears.

The tour itself was fascinating. Everything from the robotic manufacturing components to the way the bikes are built on a conveyor belt through several stages of assembly was downright riveting. The red, yellow and green overhead traffic lights that control and signal production movement and flow were mesmerizing. The product testing was also amazing to watch, as skilled workers throttled the finished bike through all gears without moving an inch, all the while checking numbers and measurements to ensure compliance. The tour script was well written and our guide nailed the delivery.

However, as we wound through the large plant, we were literally prodded, like cattle. The safety assistant continually chided us: "Keep up," "Move faster" and "Get with it." The tone and the treatment were disrespectful. The guy actually rolled his eyes on multiple occasions.

At the conclusion of the tour, we were strategically dumped into the gift shop. For the first time since I began riding, I didn't buy anything in the Harley store. No pins, no shirts, no memorabilia. Although I learned lots of interesting things about Harley's manufacturing and saw impressive manufacturing processes, the brand lost a wee bit of luster for me and my fellow riders that day. The factory tour was worth the stop, but the personnel were sorely lacking.

If I had to guess, the folks recruited for the tour jobs probably came up the ranks from anywhere other than sales or marketing. Those who have contact with the public should be your best, brightest and most enthusiastic brand champions. These folks needed a course in customer relations. We witnessed an unusually poor reflection on our brand of choice. It definitely was not the shiny side, for sure — and it is in dire need of polish.

Years ago, I published a column about why I changed automotive brands. I had owned three BMWs and was moving into a new phase of life as a soccer mom. I was trading my beloved black 535 coupe for an SUV. I visited the dealer who had sold me the past two Beamers and was assigned to a new sales guy who totally missed the mark, failed to follow up and basically lost the business.

After that experience, I decided to visit a Lexus dealer. From the moment I walked in the door until the moment I rolled out with my brand-new SUV, I had a fantastic sales encounter. What I recall is genuine enthusiasm for my visit, the reinforcement of positive product knowledge and the warm introduction to every key manager of the dealership team. I was given a tour of the entire dealership as part of the sales process, and that investment of time convinced me that this was my new dealership of choice.

After the column was published, I learned that the GM of the BMW dealership had read the piece and called the sales team together to review it. Too little, too late, but I do have to give him credit. I received a phone call, an apology and a standing offer to return again anytime for a better customer-service experience. Case in point — I never returned.

Let the lesson be learned as it relates to your marketing activity.

I don't care whether you work at a small or large dealership, at a boat manufacturing facility or a marina. Where you work doesn't matter. What you and your team must understand is that when someone visits to learn about your products and/or services, you have one opportunity to make or validate a positive impression. You have equal opportunity to lose the sale.

Chances are, your current customers or prospects have already researched your product or service and have come to further review or make important decisions based on their findings. They should be prized as highly qualified prospects. How they are treated will directly affect your ability to make a sale.

I encourage you to examine your entire company's customer experience process. Have you identified every point of potential customer contact? Is there a plan? Is there a professional sales presentation in place? Is it standardized? Has every member of your team been trained, including the receptionist or greeter? Do people understand how their attitude affects the sale?

What information do you share with your customer or prospect? What do you include in your presentation to ensure you are delivering the best impression possible? Who does your prospect meet in the process?

This is too important to leave to chance.

I recall my four years at Legendary Marine's headquarters in Destin, Fla. Besides a truly first-rate team of sales professionals, a thorough sales presentation had been established to best position not only the boats for sale, but also the facility, the company and the people. Having a powerful streamlined presentation and ensuring that those who are responsible for representing the company buy in is absolutely necessary. It's the difference between being the No. 1-ranked retailer in North America and the bottom of the barrel.

Investing the time to best present your story and the benefits associated with doing business with your company will foster the growth of new customers while building loyal brand champions.

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