

## Plain City Harley-Davidson dealership actively seeking out female riders

Business First of Columbus - by [Ben Crites](#) For Business First

Marsha Kiss could not miss the phalanx of motorcyclists when they pulled up to the Michigan restaurant where she was dining.

The powerful growl of the motors turned heads. Clad in leather and helmets, the riders were something of a mystery to Kiss and other restaurant patrons.

Watching as the bikers dismounted, Kiss saw something she was not expecting: Long hair tumbling from helmets as they were removed. She quickly realized these bikers were women, not men.

"It was kind of an inspiration to me," said the 59-year-old Broadway, Ohio, woman. "Women out riding together, having fun ... I think it's neat that they do that. It made me think I can do it too."



Owners Adonna, Dena & Barry Besece in front of C&A's showroom & Rider's Edge® expansion site.

Such a sighting is becoming more common. In an industry long dominated by men, women are the future. And motorcycle distributors are beginning to develop strategies to wheel them in.

"They're the untapped market," Lance Oliver, spokesman for the American Motorcyclist Association, said about women. "Several manufacturers have recognized that in order to reach out to new customers, they have to reach out to women. You can't ignore half of the population and sell anything."

That has not been lost on **C&A Harley-Davidson** in Plain City, a private distributor of the motorcycle juggernaut. Partly owned, managed and marketed by women, it is geared toward the target segment.

There's been a spike in purchases by women at C&A during the past five years, said Dena Besece, general manager of C&A and herself an avid motorcycle rider. Such purchases account for 15 percent of C&A's new motorcycle transactions, 3 percent more than the national figure Harley-Davidson Inc. outlines in its 2007 annual report.

With new strategies and programs in place to get more women involved in motorcycling, Besece and others at C&A are confident that number will rise.

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"I think women get a little neglected," Besece said. "We've heard women say they went to another dealership with their husbands and (the sales representatives) were strictly talking to the husbands. That's a huge turnoff for women. Since women control the purse strings, once you get them in the dealership and make them comfortable, it's going to be an easy process."

## At ease

One way C&A makes women more comfortable is by staging a garage party specifically catered to them, and where they are introduced to the biking world on everything from motor clothes to customizing bikes.

They can sit on a bike to get a feel for it. Some of the women who attend are already experienced riders, and they share their experiences with those who are new to motorcycles over food and drink.

Alexa McAllister, C&A's marketing director, says the women are building camaraderie and a connection to a world that once was frightening or blocked off.



Dena sits atop her Screamin' Eagle Fat Boy with C&A's facility expansion in the background.

Kiss, from the Michigan restaurant, is determined to buy a motorcycle at C&A, and she said she finds the atmosphere at the dealership welcoming, particularly to women. She made a friend at a garage party she intends to ride with.

But Kiss says it's the Rider's Edge course C&A begun this month that has been the main selling point for her. The 25-hour, motorcycle safety course takes place over four days at the dealership. At the end, students take a skills test that could lead to getting a motorcycle license.

"It's for people like me who are not experienced," Kiss said. "They teach you everything you need to know, so I can sit on that bike and feel comfortable. It gives you confidence."

Another program draw, which is certified by the national Motorcycle Safety Foundation is potential riders don't have to take the test with the state, the courses for which often are booked in advance.

McAllister said Rider's Edge is good for the rider and C&A. "When they go through the course and gain that confidence that they can ride, that builds our loyal customer base," she said. "They buy the bike, the gear and the clothing to go along with it."

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And there's a large selection of apparel for them to choose from at the dealership, especially items catered to women, such as leather jackets in a variety of colors. There are even items for pets, home decor and children.

## **All dressed up**

C&A officials say over the past three years, clothing and apparel sales are up 12 percent, largely due to a stronger female customer base. As a corporation with 684 independent dealers, Harley-Davidson last year sold \$305 million in general merchandise - or 5.3 percent of the company's \$5.7 billion revenue - which includes apparel, according to the annual report.

Still, aside from offering apparel and a service department, the bulk of C&A's revenue is generated through motorcycle sales, whose figures the company declined to divulge citing area competitors. Bikes range from about \$9,000 to \$30,000, depending on models and specifications.

C&A is relying on women for a vibrant future. Sales of Sportsters at the local dealer - which accounted for 30 percent of all Harley-Davidson domestic sales last year - and which are a popular bike among some women because of their smaller size, have jumped 20 percent over the past three years resulting from more female riders.

Negative stereotypes about bikers are dissipating. More doctors, attorneys and other professionals are gripping the handlebars. So, too, is the long-standing stereotype that motorcycles are for men only, the motorcycle association's Oliver said.

"Women see other women ride and think 'Hey, I can do that, too,' " he said.

That's what convinced Kiss to give it a shot. As a longtime nurse who worked in intensive care at a hospital, Kiss says motorcycling remains attractive to her because it's both freeing and empowering.

"We're not afraid to step up to the plate anymore," she said. "We can have just as much fun as the guys."

*Ben Crites is a freelance writer in Columbus.*