



Report: Mark Shippey

CHINA IN YOUR HANDS...

Mark Stone, owner of BMC, may have stumbled upon the secret to dealer success – a trip back in time to old-school values of excellent customer service, quality of product and putting the customer and supplier relationships to the forefront of his business plan.

BMC was born in a Devon barn as Battsford Motorcycles in 2009. The name derived from its base at Battsford Farm, a stone's throw from Plymouth.

A former REME (Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers) soldier, Stone had been made redundant from his post-military career as a motorcycle mechanic and needed a new income stream. His knight in shining armour, wife and co-owner Tina, set the ball rolling with a minimal outlay and to this day the business still doesn't hold any loans. To keep costs down even further, all staff are self-employed.

Battsford Farm was then commissioned as the main warehouse and motorcycle assembly site and a new retail and workshop store opened in Plymouth city centre in May 2013.

The move to the big West Country smoke derived from a need to get son, Leeroy, into full-time work. Despite attending endless courses and gaining qualifications in the IT field, Leeroy hadn't found a full-time career by his early twenties. He'd been brought up working on motorcycles with his dad, something for which he had a real talent. A city-based retail outlet and service-centre experience allowed Leeroy to come into the business as the service manager, running a small, successful workshop at the back of the original city-based store.

Stone senior's vision for a successful company was there from the beginning: a straightforward business model with loyal relationships and simple business terms.

LOOK EAST

It's for that reason Stone looked to Chinese importer Llexeter. He's been with them from the start and has a great long-term relationship with the Exeter-based company. Stocking the full range of Lexmoto and Pulse bikes and scooters, Stone

added larger-capacity machines from Lincolnshire importer WK Bikes to cater for those wanting a little more power.

"We choose all our relationships with suppliers because of the way they do business," said Stone. "Llexeter offers a very transparent dealer package with no pressure or unrealistic stock levels. We are very loyal to our suppliers and all our current suppliers offer reciprocal loyalty. It allows us to offer the right products at the right price points for our customer base.

"All the bikes and products we sell offer very good quality and are priced correctly – no over-inflated pricing where you are just paying for a name or a company infrastructure. This allows flexible stock. We can react quickly to market changes with new models. We have a fast turnover of bikes – it's rare to have a machine on the shop floor any longer than three months. We won't sell Japanese or European bikes because of the business model and the pressure to over-stock and over-commit. We are proud to be part of the Llexeter family, now a 130-strong dealer network. We all work closely together, stick to retail pricing and help each other out."

SHOW AND TELL

Self-promotion and marketing takes the form of selected local shows to attract new customers, dealer listings and continued presence on social media – the latter an important sales tool in a world becoming more and more focused on the online experience. "Most of our in-store custom is a direct result of our continued online presence," explained Stone.

"We feel the secret to our success is giving the customer the right sales, products and service. We

"The quality coming out of China now is exceptional. In the early years of Japanese bikes they received the same criticism and just look where they got to!"

Main photo: New Plymouth showroom gives more space to display new scooters and motorcycles. Top: Previous premises. Above: Mezzanine floor accommodates clothing and accessories range.

work hard to provide a nice friendly environment for our customers. This may involve just having a general chat and a cuppa. Establishing a great regular customer base creates lots of repeat and referred business." The shop certainly gives a feel of a "traditional" bike dealer – small and family run, friendly and helpful.

"Our customers range from aspiring 16-year-olds looking to purchase their first 50cc scooter to seasoned bikers to retirement age. It's difficult to put an average age on them. Some are new to motorcycling, starting out and buying their first 50cc. We make a point of nurturing these customers into motorcyclists and end up selling them larger bikes as they progress. Part of the reason for introducing the WK range is to offer bikes over 125cc and keep these customers in the years to come," explained Stone. "There is no competition between Llexeter and WK, so the brands complement each other perfectly. Many of our older customers have nice sportsbikes at home but want an affordable and reliable bike to commute on. Many of the Plymouth dockyard workers and military personnel buy bikes from us specifically to commute."

Stone continued: "Sometimes the initial customer perception is 'Cheap Chinese Crap' but within ten minutes of walking through the door they are converted to Chinese motorcycles. To be honest, the products speak for themselves and customers understands that they are paying the right price for a good-quality product."

IMPROVING QUALITY

"We have definitely seen an impressive increase in quality over the years. Manufacturers are listening to the early feedback and have continued to improve quality. The quality coming out of China now is exceptional. It's no secret that the vast majority of Japanese and European machines are now manufactured side by side with Chinese counterparts in Chinese factories. In the early years of Japanese bikes they received the same criticism, and just look where they got to!"

Of his sales philosophy, Stone said: "We don't believe in selling bikes over the internet with no customer interaction. We advertise bikes on our website as a virtual shop front but this just drives customers to come to see us in-store. Motorcycle sales should be a personal sale, it's not like buying your groceries on-line. We can sell direct from the site but we also insist on talking through their requirements over the phone. The bike would have the same stringent PDI checks and be delivered by a specialist company, which can offer the same personal overview of the bike on delivery that we offer in-store."

"We only sell new bikes," said Stone. "Interestingly, second-hand Lexmoto bikes don't come along too often, and in many cases they are sold through eBay for more than their original value!"

"Our sales process is a seven-day turnaround if finance is involved. This includes registering the bike with DVLA and the PDI process. A cash buyer can have their bike quicker. We are linked directly with the DVLA and can register their new machine from the shop, giving them a choice of number plate."

"We've sold around 90 bikes so far this financial year. We have been known to sell 20 bikes in a month but a realistic average is four bikes a week. This makes for good business for us. Price points for Chinese bikes are immensely different to the rest of the market but the sales margins are still good. The range on offer is superb but I would like to see more models to cater for the gap between 125cc and 650cc – an area that always used to be a thriving sector of the market and has been somewhat ignored by many over the past 20 years. A bigger-capacity cruiser would also be a good seller for us."

BMC offers a free tuition session with each new bike purchase and will set the machine up to an individual's requirements, altering footpeg position, bar angle, anything to make the rider's experience more pleasurable.

Service and spare parts form a vital part of the business. The uneducated spectator may presume that this is a problem for a Chinese-only dealer. Service manager Leeroy disagreed. "We can have spare parts to our workshop or direct to a customer in 24 hours, less in some cases. There is never a problem with spare parts being available and, like the bikes, they are reasonably priced and great quality. Bikes are easy to work on and offer a robust ride for our customers. Regular, cost-effective service plans are set out from the point of sale. Our new bike-build process results in us having PDI'd the bike three times before it is handed over to a customer."

"The fast delivery and turn-around of parts from CMPO (Chinese Motorcycle Parts Online) enables us to deliver a great service to our



Right: Workshop space was tight in the previous retail outlet in Exeter Street, Plymouth, but the new premises (above) provides far more scope.

customers," commented Leeroy. "The warranty scheme is fantastic, our importer knows and trusts us, and if we submit a warranty claim Lexmoto knows it's genuine. We'd never charge our customers labour on warranty work unless it requires a longer job such as an engine change, but that would rarely ever happen."

As you would expect with their location, BMC has a large service personnel customer base. "Insurance can be a real issue for the military," said Stone. "We use MotoNovo as a first port of call but have also just sourced First Response, which is the only company that insures service personnel and offers a more flexible approach."

So what about clothing and accessories for the rider? Stone explained: "Motohart is our distributor of choice because of the business model it offers, along with a great product range to suit our customers. Pricing is affordable and reasonable. We can offer a rider package of helmet, jacket, gloves and a lock and chain for £149. This is immensely popular with new bike sales."

NEW VISIONS

Looking to the future, BMC has just re-located to purpose-built premises at Grace Mill, down the road from the old retail site. "The new shop provides us with 197sq.m of showroom space for bikes and clothing," said Stone. "The workshop allows for additional space and more workbenches." The new showroom allows them to expand and stock the full range from Lexmoto and comfortably houses the existing range of Viper clothing and helmets from Motohart in a specific mezzanine area. The additional space will see the re-introduction of Quadzilla quads which were first stocked in 2009.

A proportion of the showroom will be allocated to the used-bike market, a new venture for BMC, but only Chinese bikes will be offered.

It would seem that the simple approach to business, teamed with some old-fashioned relationship values, is a winning formula, and the South-West is now full of Eastern promise. ■



Top: Mark Stone, BMC owner. Left: Leeroy Stone, workshop manager. Right: Sam Atrill, service manager.

DEALER DATA

- 2009** Opens at Battsford Farm and starts as a Lexmoto/Quadzilla dealer.
- 2010** Adds WK Bikes machines to the range.
- 2013** May - Opens first shop-based retail and workshop outlet in Exeter Street, Plymouth.
July - Adds Motohart-distributed clothing and accessories to the range.
- 2014** April - Invests in computerisation of the whole business, sources branded staff uniforms and updates POS marketing materials.
June - Approved finance provided via MotoNova Finance.
- 2015** May - Closes Exeter Street and moves to purpose-built Grace Mills showroom, workshop and warehouse.
June - Closes original Battsford Farm warehouse and brings the whole operation under one roof at Grace Mill.

Battsford Motorcycles
Grace Mill
Maxwell Road
Plymouth
PL4 0SN

01752 396294