



# 2016: A YEAR OF FIRSTS FOR WOMEN IN MOTORCYCLING

This year marks the 100th anniversary of Adeline and Augusta Van Buren each riding her own motorcycle across the United States. In 1916 the two intrepid sisters set out from Brooklyn, New York, riding a series of farm roads and tracks that had just been conceptualized as the Lincoln Highway a scant three years earlier. On the cusp of the U.S. entering World War I, the Van Burens wanted to prove that women could serve as dispatch riders in the war effort. What better way to prove their point than to ride across their own as-yet-unpaved nation by themselves?

In 2016, we may think the Van Buren sisters' journey was extraordinary, and in a great many ways it was. Considering that women of the era were expected to wear dresses and be confined to certain "roles" in society, the courage it took for them to set out on this journey is unfathomable. And yet, looked at through the lens of the times, women riding motorcycles wasn't so incomprehensible as one might think; motorcycles were the de facto mode of transportation for every family of means.

Thanks to the twists of nations, commerce, and the inventions of the automobile assembly line, motorcycles have a much different place in our modern society. Now primarily recreational vehicles with modern conveniences such as ABS, electric windshields, cruise control as well as traction control, these machines have a different significance for women in society as well. No longer merely a form of transportation,

these machines express individual tastes and are a metaphor for how women choose to show up in the world. Motorcycles represent autonomy, freedom and self-mastery, and for many of us women, are the perfect vehicle for self-transformation.

That's a lot for one machine to deliver, but the proof is in the numbers: women are the fastest growing segment of the motorcycle industry. According to the Motorcycle Industry Council's latest survey, women accounted for 13.5% of all

motorcycle owners in 2014, up from 9.65% in 2003.

Even more significant is that women account for 25% of all riders, up from just over 18% in 2003. And if those numbers haven't impressed your dealership yet, perhaps this will: 57.3% of women purchase new vehicles.

Female customers are different than male customers. We think differently, and motorcycling very often means something philosophical, perhaps even

spiritual to us, plus we have unique consumer habits. We also have different body shapes (as you well know if you've ever tried to fit us for apparel or tried to stock your store with a full size run of an apparel line), and have different desires for our machines. Having the right attitude towards female customers who walk through your doors can mean a meaningful difference to your bottom line.

BMW is putting significant focus on outreach to the women's riding community. "To see the MIC report of female motorcycle ownership rising to 14% is encouraging for our



goals here," said Sarah Schilke, national marketing manager for BMW Motorrad. "The women's segment is underserved by the industry in general so the increasing number of women riders shows they are determined to get on bikes."

BMW was the presenting sponsor of the Sisters' Centennial Motorcycle Ride, which celebrated the 100th anniversary of the Van Buren Sisters' achievement. For BMW, the 100 year anniversary of the ride was a perfect tie-in to its own BMW Group 100 year celebration this year, and there were a number of direct sales associated with the event. "We've received quite passionate feedback from women who are talking about BMW because they appreciate us for recognizing and supporting them," said Schilke.

Yours truly was the event organizer of the Sisters' Ride, and our history-making cross-country ride event culminated in more than 200 riders riding into San Francisco July 23, 2016. Riders rode in from all over the west coast to congratulate the cross-country riders. Allstate Motorcycle Insurance made a heavy contribution to the Grand Finale Party, and the event made national news.

Indian Motorcycle, another strong supporter of the Sisters'

Ride, doesn't design motorcycles specifically for females, however the company typically sees female riders aiming for more "pure" motorcycles. "They are drawn to the Scouts and the Vintage. The new Springfield has similar interest," said Robert Pandya, external relations manager for Victory Motorcycles and Indian Motorcycle. "Cruisers that have lower seat heights but still perform and have solid and predictable

handling are sought out, and we deliver through several models. There is a classic style about our bikes that does bring in new eyes on a regular basis. Expanding the market is important."

Women have been always been active in powersports buying decisions, whether as individual owners or members of a family buying vehicles. In fact, according to Bloomberg.com, women make 85% of household purchasing decisions, and influence over

50% of all major buying decisions. "We [at Suzuki] are now seeing marked growth in their participation as riders, said Kerry Graeber, vice president, Motorcycle & ATV sales and marketing at Suzuki Motor of America, Inc. "The MIC survey is one important factor in our decision-making. We also consider social media communities, data from events, input from our dealers and sales team, other industry research, and more."



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At the manufacturer level, "female-friendly" motorcycles now permeate the industry and resources for selling to women abound. "Since we created adventure riding with the original R 80 GS, this segment continues to be our core market and we now even offer an entire range of GS products," said Schilke. "You could say the touring segment as well, and when we introduce the G 310 R we hope to attract people who are new to the sport. With the R nineT heritage bike and the just-launched Scrambler based on it - we are getting noticed in the café racer and vintage bike scene."

Dealers can be more aware that comfort is not just fitting the bike but also fitting the psyche of the rider. "Confidence in products and dealerships grows with customers when they are sold the right product and given superior service," said Pandya. "It's easy to aim for quick sales, but building a strong foundation of female ridership through having the right products, accessories and attitude will payoff for everyone."

Suzuki strives to help its dealers serve the local communities of powersports enthusiasts. Those interests change from dealer to dealer, and from town to town. "It's important to stress that dealers will best know their own market and the needs of riders there," said Graeber. "For some, that 'womens' motorcycle is a GSX-R750 or Boulevard C90, for others it might be a DR200S,

SV650, or RM-Z250 motocross bike."

Kawasaki dealers have access to many training resources through KMC. Dealers can leverage these resources to help retain current female customers, as well as gain new ones. BMW Motorrad takes women riders seriously; they don't assume she wants the smallest bike in the store or has limited experience. That said, low seats are generally very popular with women riders. "As 'Family CFO', women can tend to be more cost conscientious than men," said Schilke. "Since BMWs are viewed as being 'expensive', dealers can leverage our industry-leading Jasy Ride and other Financial Services products to show premium products at a tangible rate."



While women riders for the most part want to be considered "just another rider," there are nuances to selling to women. When mastered, the sky's the limit in this growing demographic of riders. As Robert Pandya of Indian Motorcycle so aptly put it, "Everybody gets the same rewards from riding.

Freedom, control, being outside. So we all enter the sport in similar ways. But treating each individual male or female rider with the same respect is critical for all of us. Dealers who connect with female riders will not only have a customer, they will have an advocate who will bring in more customers."

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**Sidebar:** Why is it important to support women's riding initiatives and/or events?

**BMW:** "Supporting women's motorcycling is important for the industry as a whole. For one thing diversification of the

marketplace is good. Also, since 'women in motorcycling' is newsworthy and the MIC media department reports frequent requests for information on the topic, supporting women's events can garner exponential publicity for the brands and for motorcycling in general."

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**Indian:** "As female ridership grows, finding events that support it is important. But we want to always be authentic in our actions, not just invent stuff for attention. We try to appeal to all riders, but we are conscious about representing female riders as pilots, not just passengers in our catalogues, websites and apparel images."

**Suzuki:** "We've supported female motorcycle racers, and we know that many Suzuki dealers support women riders in their own ways. We want to gather as much input as possible from varied groups of riders, especially from groups that are as passionate about riding as are the many women riders we meet at events nationwide. And we always want to support the interests of our customers and our dealers."

**Kawasaki:** "It's no doubt that women have had a small presence in the motorcycling industry in the past; however, that is changing at a rapid pace. More women now are taking advantage of the opportunity to learn to ride a motorcycle, growing our industry as a whole. Many women are choosing to ride a Kawasaki, so it is important for Kawasaki to show support among female riders."

**Sidebar:** MTA Distributing on sponsoring two staff members  
"MTA was very lucky to have the opportunity to support Sue and Gin with Olympia adventure gear on the Sisters' Centennial Ride. This was a great chance for MTA and Olympia to be a part of an amazing event that celebrates such an epic ride created by the Van Buren sisters. MTA and

Olympia look forward to supporting more iconic events like this in the future." – Jeff Laird, national marketing manager, MTA Distributing.

**Sidebar:** Industry "Firsts" for Women – A Year in Review

ADVWoman Rally – First adventure rally organized and instructed by all women ([www.ADVWoman.com](http://www.ADVWoman.com))

Babes Ride Out – More than 1,000 women ride to a weekend event in the desert ([www.babesrideout.com](http://www.babesrideout.com))

MIC's Powerlily Gas Tank Program – First industry mentoring program for women in the powersports industry ([www.mic.org](http://www.mic.org))

SheADV – A community-driven web page for female adventure riders ([www.sheadv.com](http://www.sheadv.com))

Sisters' Centennial Motorcycle Ride – First large-scale cross-country ride for women ([sistersmotorcycleride.com](http://sistersmotorcycleride.com))

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