

# BOB PARSONS' CONTAGIOUS SPIRIT

HOW HE'S PARLAYING WHAT HE LEARNED SELLING SOFTWARE AND DOMAIN NAMES INTO SELLING MOTORCYCLES

By Genevieve Schmitt  
Photography by Scooter Grubb

**IT'S HARD NOT TO GET EXCITED** when listening to Bob Parsons talk about his businesses. The rhythm of his baritone voice, the smile that slips through periodically and the glimmer in his eyes are accents on a conversation that has Parsons hopping out of his chair every so often, hands gesturing in the air, when talking about the success of the two Top 100 motorcycle dealerships he owns in Scottsdale, Ariz. — **Go AZ Motorcycles** and **Harley-Davidson of Scottsdale**. He's practicing what he preaches.

"Our No. 1 job here is to create excitement and take care of our customers and be that special place for them, and after that we think about making money," he says.

If excitement is part of this 62-year-old's formula for making money, then he's never sat still. *Forbes* lists Parsons' net worth at

\$1.5 billion. He could easily sit back and retire — and he did for a short time in the mid-1990s after selling his financial services software company to Intuit for \$64 million — but Parsons had too much energy, so he came out of retirement in 1997 to launch GoDaddy, a domain registrar and web hosting business. Today more people have their domain names registered with GoDaddy than any other registrar in the world.

That success, plus Parson's passion for two wheels, re-ignited seven years ago, fueling new ventures into motorcycling using the business philosophies that propelled him to where he is today.

"You can succeed in anything," Parsons explains, "if you do this one thing: Give the people what they want. They make the decisions for us. If you are off-base, they will tell you. If you listen and try to

## HOW GO AZ CAME TOGETHER

It's not easy assembling nine manufacturer lines in less than four years, but leave it to Bob Parsons and his team to pull it off. Here's a timeline on how the different brands were acquired and when.

### 2008

- Go AZ Motorcycles founded in June
- Initial brands: BMW, Ducati, Vespa
- Originally located in a small strip mall in North Scottsdale
- Gina Marra hired as general manager in September

### 2009

- Purchased single-line Honda store (Canyon Honda) at beginning of the year
- Purchased KTM and Aprilia store in North Phoenix (Motohouse KTM Aprilia)
- At end of 2009, purchased Hayden Road location (old car dealership) and moved the Honda store onsite; it remained a single-line store.

### 2010

- Purchased new 26,000 sq. ft. facility, referred to as Northsight, located behind current campus. Moved BMW, Ducati, Vespa, KTM and Aprilia there, and added Triumph.
- Moved Honda back to Canyon Honda store location on Butherus Drive
- Began construction on current facility on Hayden, adding three new buildings
- Purchased Kawasaki franchise; moved it to temporary location on 87th Street in Scottsdale

### 2011

- Construction project completed on Hayden facility. Moved BMW, Triumph, Ducati, Honda, KTM, Aprilia, Kawasaki and Vespa onto new campus

### 2012

- Acquired Ural franchise
- Built track/training facility; opened in September
- Bought Harley-Davidson of Scottsdale



Gina Marra, GM of Go AZ Motorcycles, and Justin Johnson, GM of H-D Scottsdale

make it exciting, they will tell you."

Parsons and his team at Go AZ Motorcycles, including general manager Gina Marra, are listening well: In the five years Go AZ has been in existence (most of that time with the country in a recession) this nine-line dealership has won multiple industry and manufacturer awards — and boasts annual revenues of \$20 million.

"The biggest difference is we are selling the Go AZ experience," Marra says. "I want customers to feel this is more of an education dealership. It's not a dealership where they are going to be sold on something, especially with an entry-level rider. It can be intimidating to buy a new motorcycle. It's a soft sell here. We find out the customer's wants and needs, and guide him or her along in the process."

Go AZ Motorcycles launched in 2008 when Parsons saw an opportunity to buy a BMW and a Ducati dealership that was going out of business. Over the next four years Vespa, Honda, KTM, Aprilia, Triumph, Kawasaki and Ural (see timeline, left) were

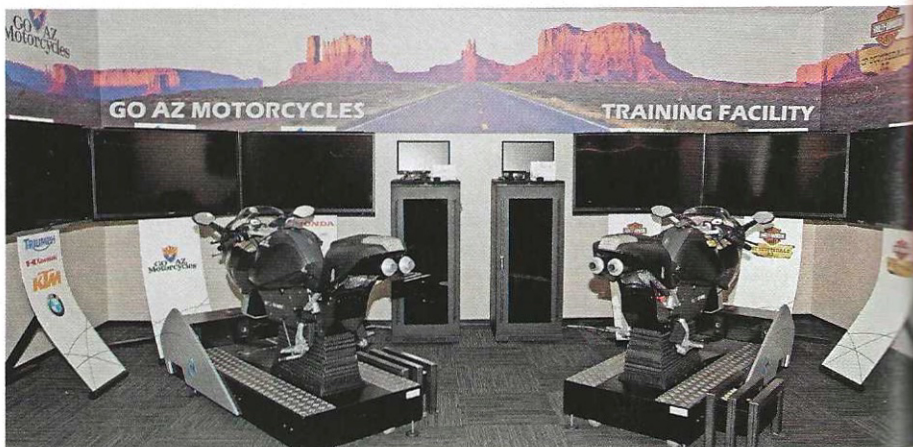
added, with all brands eventually housed in one new location.

### THE TURNAROUND PROJECT

In January 2012 Parsons purchased Hacienda Harley-Davidson, located next door to Go AZ, and renamed it Harley-Davidson of Scottsdale. Parsons is proud of the turnaround there. "When I bought that dealership, their customer loyalty was in the bottom 5 percent of all dealerships in the country," he says. "We are now in the top 5 percent in a little more than a year. Our allocation of bikes from Harley has been increased 300 percent."

"Bob is huge customer-centric; he's all about the customer," says Justin Johnson, general manager of H-D Scottsdale. "We came into a unique culture that wasn't necessarily as customer-centric as what we expected. It was a challenge to come in and change the culture to 'we're here to serve the customer' versus 'the customer is here to serve us.'"

A good example of this customer-centric



Go AZ Motorcycles unveiled its indoor training facility in 2012.



Above: The team at Go AZ Motorcycles. Right: Harley-Davidson Scottsdale staff



philosophy in action began one day when Parsons overheard a conversation in his new Harley dealership.

"I went by the service area; it was a Wednesday," Parsons recalls. "I heard the service guy say to a customer, 'Bring it in next Tuesday.' I said, 'Next Tuesday?!' Then I asked the service guy what we needed to do to get more techs in here, and he said he wouldn't do that because the techs' living depends on getting enough work — and they all get paid by the job. If they don't have work, they don't get paid.

"I changed that immediately," Parsons continues. "We are the only dealership that pays them downtime if they don't have work, and you know how much downtime I'm paying? Almost nothing!"

After beefing up parts inventory levels, an extra lift was installed in each service bay so when one motorcycle is waiting on a part, the tech can be servicing another. "I want these technicians to get up in the morning and say 'Yes, I get to go to work!' and that is not necessarily the norm in our industry," Johnson says. "Bob also green-lighted an open invitation for training for our technicians, which is huge as it's really expensive for continuing education for them. They sincerely appreciate it."

Similar upgrades were made in the Go AZ service area, even painting the logos of the brands the techs work on in their service bays. "Gives it the 'wow' factor when you walk in," Marra says. "The techs are proud of the brands they work on."

## COMMUNITY PARTNER

When the employees are enthusiastic, it naturally spills over to the customers. It's an environment Parsons is proud of, and he's already started giving back. Last October, just 10 months after opening Harley-Davidson Scottsdale, the first-annual Bob's Biker Blast

was held. The all-day party featured a performance by George Thorogood and was free for riders with a motorcycle endorsement and their passengers. Non-riders paid a \$20 fee, which was donated to the Phoenix Children's Hospital, just one of the charities with which the dealerships' partner.

"It's really fulfilling for our team to be part of the environment Bob has built with the charities, giving back, and being a good community partner," Johnson explains. "That's special. People see that. Talk about setting us apart."

Parsons' goal is to create a motorcycling destination, and that's already started with a new training facility that includes two motorcycle simulators, a demo track and underground storage, all located behind the dealerships.

Future plans include moving H-D Scottsdale to a new, larger facility on a parcel Parsons owns across the street; construction is tentatively slated to commence within the next 12 months. After it's completed, the current Harley dealership building will be leveled to allow for the buildout of another new facility to further expand the services available to riders and their bikes.

Parsons recognizes he's got the capital to make these improvements and that some dealers are still bouncing back from a tough four years. His advice: "You have to make a difference. You have to be something special to your customer. You have to have an edge, and the edge we have in the motorcycle business is that ours is a *relationship* business. If you have a good relationship with a core group of customers, you have an edge.

"So work to develop whatever edge you have, and have a group that is dedicated to you — and that you are dedicated to," he continues. "Make them feel special. That is something that any dealership can do, and it can make a big difference." **D**

## GO AZ? GO WOMEN!

"It's always been in the back of my head: How do women really feel when they walk through the door? It can be so intimidating. They have Garage Parties at the Harley dealership, but there are really no metric dealers catering to females. Why aren't we doing it?"

That's the question Go AZ Motorcycles' general manager Gina Marra asked herself earlier this year. Marra wanted answers, so she called a meeting with Go AZ's marketing director, Misti Graham, tasking her with developing ideas that would attract women to the dealership.

Graham used International Female Ride Day, started seven years ago by Vicki Gray and her *Motoress.com* online community, as a kickoff to a month's worth of women-focused events held in May, now officially known as Women Rider's Month across the industry. On May 3, more than 60 women riders on all brands of bikes paraded out of the Go AZ lot with a police escort, embarking on a 50-mile scenic ride to a lake, with dinner to follow.

Word spread about the ride mostly through social media. Many of these women were visiting Go AZ for the first time because of this ride. In their gift bags, they'd learn about six other events for women riders held that month, including two Girls and Gear seminars, two Bike Buying 101 workshops, a Team AZ "riding at low speed" seminar, and an Apparel Roundtable where Marra and her team gleaned info on what women want to wear and see stocked in the store.

Did it pay off? "We definitely saw a boost in social media. Our female likes on Facebook skyrocketed the month of May," Marra says. "We're watching sales. We're seeing a lot more traffic by women."

*(Note to readers: I'm a leading expert in helping companies attract women to their dealerships and to their brands. My advice for anyone making the effort like Go AZ did? Follow-up is key here. You can do all the parties, workshops and seminars you want, but none of it is valuable unless you follow up afterward. Did you gather each participant's contact information? Is your sales staff following up by email or phone to gauge interest? Are you tracking sales by females in the months to come, finding out how they first learned of your shop? The best laid efforts are all for naught unless there's follow-up, today, tomorrow and beyond. — G.S.)*