

Planned Obsolescence

AT ONE TIME, you could hardly hear two dumber words than "Planned Obsolescence." The very idea that a complex mechanical object should have a deliberately abbreviated life expectancy was nothing less than a kind of mortal sin against proper engineering.

In a way, that attitude coincided precisely with our self-definition as Americans; based on the way our history had defined our cultural philosophy.

Rugged Self-Reliance was one cornerstone of the American personality, a trait prized in those bold settlers that made up the first wave of American immigrants; like refusing to accept any form of handout or charity as a matter of pride. Resourcefulness was another leg of the structure.

Humphrey Bogart, John Wayne and Clint Eastwood are some of the popular film archetypes. Never fazed by adversity, they overcome obstacles by sheer will if necessary. The Entrepreneurial Spirit was another great American trait (the popularity of TV's *The Apprentice* still testifies to that). It wasn't enough to simply build a log cabin, but the smartest ones opened a sawmill to enable other settlers to establish a thriving community. The Outlaw Ethos has had a similar effect on a substantial portion of us—motorcyclists especially. A disdain for laws that don't recognize individual freedom, a willingness to go it alone regardless of what anyone else thinks, and a certain style that flaunts your individuality are part of that.

Perhaps there are other factors that I'm blind to, but I'm certain there once was such a generally accepted image of what it meant to be an American. And in the past, the design of our motorcycles clearly reflected that philosophy: Machines could be repaired by the side of the road and were designed to last virtually indefinitely. The only model Frodo was other classic examples. And whatever politically incorrect reputation he may have acquired today, Henry Ford regarded himself as an individualist proponent of that American Character. And perhaps alone among modern motorcycle manufacturers, Harley-Davidson has prospered by expounding that same image. It's obviously still a powerful element, and Japanese companies are rightly frustrated that they cannot capture that same All-American spirit, even though their products are often assembled here in the US.

As a former mechanic, my favorite example of Planned Obsolescence is when it became common practice to mount overhead camshafts directly in aluminum cylinder heads, without machining room for



replaceable plain bearing inserts that could come dry be exchanged or-correct for want. The need to replace a cylinder head to keep an engine running there the maintenance costs straight on the window, as far as I was concerned. The manufacturer obviously expected the whole bike to be thrown away instead. The old 900cc Kawasaki Z1 was the last inline-four in my memory to include plain bearings in the head. Of course, at the time I grabbed to anyone that would listen, but most didn't notice and now the practice is near universal. Bearings in place of bearings in suspension linkage is another case. Slop or stiction that develops in the rear suspension will ruin handling, but those little design details escape notice in most cases.

I'll bet that many of you genuinely enjoy working on your bikes, like I do. Way back when, I learned firsthand that shops would sometimes cut corners on accuracy and techniques when possible, just to get a job done more quickly, so I learned to do it myself. And, after time-ups, I learned to do the maintenance that was generally ignored, like regular brake fluid and suspension oil changes.

But modern bikes, heavy on electronic controls, have effectively eliminated a number of systems that used to be handled mechanically in a way the owner would understand and could then tweak into better order. I've had to upgrade my skills and equipment to keep up, but many mechanically inclined riders are keeping older bikes rather than trading up for machines they can't deal with. But, personally, I can't bear to accept inferior braking equipment, old-fashioned fuses, or honey suspension any

longer. I'm spoiled by exposure to the best and greatest.

So you have to ask yourself, if coming technology can thoroughly outdate in less than a decade what passes for excellent today, is it still a sin not to build a bike to last forever? Just as America is changing quickly, so is our attitude toward Planned Obsolescence. As we witnessed so clearly while putting this issue together, the Japanese motorcycle manufacturers are in such a fervent race of development that what passed as State Of The Art just two years ago has been totally eclipsed this year.

If you could afford it, would you really want to ride a bike with warty output brakes, tires or suspension? And if you're intrepid, how could you pass up the latest engine, which delivers such stunning high-rpm performance while retaining delightful durability at lower rpm? Given these realities, you have to ask yourself if Planned Obsolescence isn't simply an appropriate response to an accelerating rate of change, and that to cling to the past is to miss the advantages of the present.

Well, for many of us, the act of riding remains an antidote to the creeping dilution of that essential American Character. In an environment where split-second reactions can have life-and-death consequences, we have the freedom to make right or wrong decisions. Talking responsibility for being MSF aware of your surroundings, as well as the presence, velocity and acceleration of every vehicle within your personal danger zone—and to ride accordingly—also serves to make riding well a seriously unaccustomed effort. And by doing this successfully, repeatedly, the exercise becomes a way to build our psychic muscles, so that we are able to cope with an ever-changing world without losing our identity.

The pace of change may make us accept that Planned Obsolescence is truly inevitable. But I will never stop enjoying the fact that motorcycling is a way to express that unique American Character. As a child, I told friends that I wanted to be either a cowboy or a fireman, two professions that fully embraced that attitude. Well, I never did become a cowboy or a fireman, but I did become a motorcyclist, and that will do just fine, thank you.

Dave Scoble

—Dave Scoble
Editor