

Happy Birthday To Us

YES, IT'S TRUE—this issue marks the 14th anniversary of the very first issue of *Motorcycle Consumer News*, in January 1991. That was the month when all those readers who had been used to getting a full-color, glossy commercial motorcycle magazine, called *Road Rider*, suddenly found a smaller, black-and-white, non-commercial publication in their mailboxes in its place. And I'd be lying if I tried to tell you they were pleased about it.

Though we had been warning and prepping our readers for over three months in advance about the changes coming, it had to be quite a shock when they first saw something so different as MCN. After all, it was a totally unheard-of concept at the time. Our only hope was that if they took the time to really read the content, and see what we were all about, they would eventually learn to appreciate it. What we figured we had going in our favor was that over half of our subscribers were paid up for six months or more into the future, and our fervent hope was that they would learn to like the new publication enough before their subscriptions lapsed that they would stick with us. But we figured that also meant we would probably take quite a hit during the first three or four months among the readers whose subscriptions lapsed soon after the switchover. And we were right.

If I remember correctly, in the first 90 days of MCN, we lost about 2500 readers from our subscriber base. Though we had expected that, and even planned for it, it was still pretty scary. If the attrition continued at that rate for 9 or 10 months, there would be no choice but to shut the operation down. Though our circulation department only made up monthly reports on subscription re-up rates, we began bugging them for weekly updates. We watched the downward spiral continue all the way through the fourth month, and into the fifth. I was sweating blood, because I had the most to lose. Bob Carpenter had assumed the duties of Lead Editor for three different magazines, and Patti was his assistant, so even if MCN went belly-up, they'd still have jobs. But I worked exclusively for MCN, and had quit my other job and moved to California only four months previously for this opportunity. This project was do-or-die for me.

Four months and three weeks into the transition, the miracle began. We were still losing subscribers, but the attrition rate was finally slowing instead of accelerating. Even better, a small number of new subscribers were starting to come on board. Still, talk within the industry was that we were "dead meat," and there were even a



few editorials in other publications predicting our imminent demise. I'll never forget how disheartened I was when *Cycle World* founder and industry icon Joe Parkhurst wrote that he didn't believe we could last a year. And yet, by the end of the year, we were still in business, even if only hanging on by the skin of our teeth.

We knew that our only real hope of survival was to make good on our promise of testing and evaluating products in as scientific and unbiased a manner as possible. This would help us stand out from the other motorcycle magazines, and hopefully convince our subscribers that we had something to offer worth hanging around and paying for. The problem was, we had virtually no budget for such projects, since the number of paying subscribers was dwindling. So, we put together some tests of relatively inexpensive products, designing and performing our own tests on them, since we couldn't afford to pay a research lab. We tested aftermarket halogen headlight bulbs, horns and alarm systems, and purchased 30 different kinds of helmet faceshields, which we tested for scratch resistance and shatterproofing. The response to these articles showed us we were on the right track.

Because of that, Bob gave his approval to spend the most money we ever had to date on a pet project of mine, buying 15 different kinds of oil additives to test. The project took over six months to complete, and still couldn't have been done without the *gratis* help of a couple of local physics and chemistry professors from California State University, some borrowed time in their labs, and some old friends of mine from my days in power plant operations, who happened to be lubrication specialists. In the end, we produced a seven-page feature article called "Snake Oil," which was published in the

August 1992 issue, and which proved to be a major turning point for the magazine. This article was exactly the kind of thing we had been promising all along, and our readers had been looking for—and we had finally delivered. Almost immediately our new subscriber rate began to increase, and we haven't looked back since.

Reading over some of those early test articles (which I did today), they really weren't all that good. In fact, they were rather elementary by comparison to the sort of things we do these days. But they were enough to get us off the starting block, and into the race. And they also established our reputation with readers, as the "go-to" place for factual information, and for reports on subjects that other magazines either won't touch, or simply don't care about. As the editor of one of the major motorcycle magazines once told me at a press conference, "Basically, we're in the entertainment and sales business, and you're in the news business." Which I thought put it rather well, but is also a double-edged sword, by the way, because it means we also set ourselves up as very much a "niche" magazine. MCN will never appeal to a wide audience of motorcyclists, and was never meant to. Since you're reading it, you know what I mean. So, we'll never get really big, and we'll never make a whole lot of money. That's the downside.

But on the upside, it means we have the most ardent and loyal subscribers of perhaps any motorcycling publication in the world. Where a very large percentage of the readers of other motorcycling magazines pick up a copy every two or three months from the newsstand, every single one of our readers is at least a one-year subscriber. And where most other magazines lose about 80% of their first-year subscribers after the first year is up (according to the last time I looked at the national ABC Audits), MCN retains over 85%. In other words, people who are casually interested in motorcycles don't read MCN. People who eat, sleep, live and breathe motorcycling, do.

Like I said, our ranks will never be all that large, but I can pretty much guarantee they're totally committed, die-hard, lifetime motorcyclists. And that's the way we like it.

Thanks for sticking around to celebrate our birthday with us.

—Fred Rau
Senior Editor