

What do we motorcyclists want? And why? What's the true source or dyno graph. It's all in your head

By Dexter Ford



YOU'RE BEING manipulated. Yes, even unique, freedom-loving, ruggedly independent you.

How do I know? Because for the past 14 years I've been one of the people manipulating you. From the time I left the *Motorcyclist* staff in 1990, I

107,000 miles on it, a crack in the dashboard and a dent in the right rear fender. But it's a Porsche, a red one, and a Turbo Porsche at that. And while a Mazda or a Nissan or any one of a dozen other cars might work just as well and go just as fast, this one feels better to me. Because it's a Porsche. I know

the right, emotional side—every time we test a motorcycle with a strong brand. When we give a bike with a strong brand a negative review, we hear about it. Big time. The letters and e-mails come in like rocket-propelled grenades—so far just figuratively, but we're keeping the blinds closed just in case.

responses shouldn't surprise me, though. Because when I criticize a certain bike, I know that to the disciples of its particular brand, I'm not talking about a product, a motorcycle, a machine. I'm talking about them. I might as well say they're pathetic losers whose children sniff glue and, actually,

BRANDED!

worked at big-time ad agencies, nudging people into craving Lexuses, Mercedes-Benzes and all kinds of other shiny gee-gaws. I learned the ins and outs of pulling your emotional strings, of getting you to want something so badly you can almost taste it—whether you need it or not. Got pretty good at it, too.

And I've come back from the dark side to whisper a few secrets. The main one being that motorcycle companies—all motorcycle companies—are in the business of mind control. They don't want you to just buy their products—they want you to love their products. And the key to this mind control is a little thing called branding.

HOW DOES IT FEEL?

The idea behind branding is that people make many of their buying decisions on an emotional basis—no matter how smart and rational they think they are. In a world where almost every product works really well, we tend to choose our motorcycles, our cars, our clothes and our sunglasses not on how well they actually work and how much they cost, but on how we feel about their brands—and how their brands make us feel.

Even though I know how branding works, it still works on me. I've got an old sports car in the garage that cost me \$8500 seven years ago. It's worth all of \$6500 now. It has

it's silly, but I even feel better about myself when I drive my Porsche. Did I mention that it's a Porsche?

PORSCHEOAKLEYNIKEAPRILIA

We routinely use brands to define ourselves, to tell the world how smart we are, how hip, how successful, how attractive. Instead of telling a stranger your name, your occupation, your home town or your astrological sign, you might as well say you're a "PorscheOakleyNikeAprilia" or a "HarleyChevyBudweiserLevis." It'd tell them more about you.

Brands are not just easy ways to stitch together a personality. They're also a practical way to save time and energy. Nobody has the time to completely, objectively evaluate every product they buy. It's much easier to find a brand, decide that it fits you, and simply stick with it.

BLINDED BY THE RIGHT

In the motojournalism biz, we are mainly concerned with the left, rational side of the brain. We go out, ride everything, and tell you honestly and objectively how the bikes really work. But there's one thing that's always missing when we publish a road test—and that one thing just may be what matters most to you. It's the brand, of course.

Here at the big *M* we're confronted by the conflict between objective testing and branding—between the left, rational side of the brain and

We're routinely amazed at how nasty and emotional the responses are. I've had just about every aspect of my person and personality attacked. One owners' club appointed me the Antichrist in its monthly newsletter. And all because I had—and continue to have—the naïve notion that if a motorcycle actually sucks in some way, it's my job and duty to tell you.

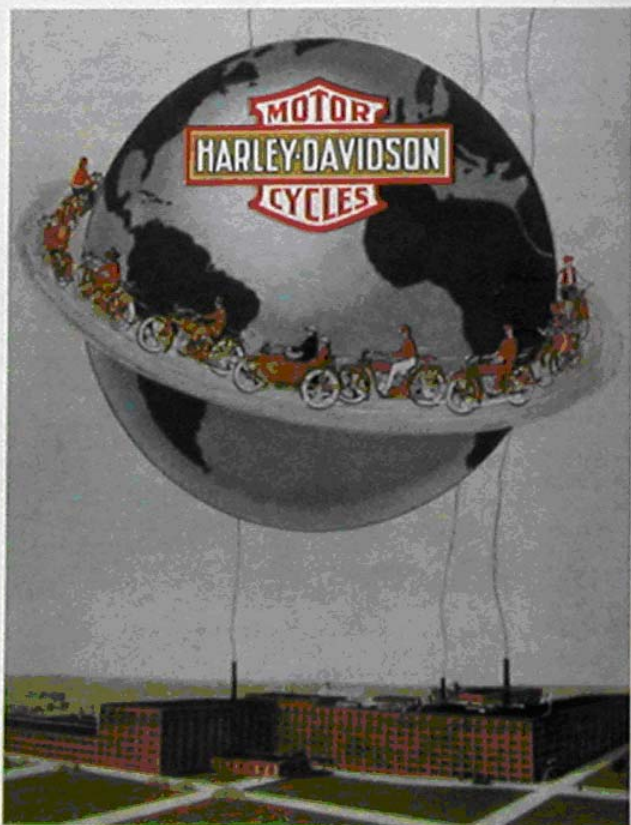
The violent emotional

might not be theirs after all.

GETTING UNDER YOUR SKIN

Branding is powerful stuff. It's also very aptly named. You see it in grimacing, ink-stained action at any tattoo parlor. Because the ultimate in branding is convincing somebody to love your company logo so much they'll pay to have it permanently etched—branded—into their skin.

Harley-Davidson has this



HARLEY-DAVIDSON: MOTORCYCLES. COPYRIGHT HARLEY-DAVIDSON

of moto lust? The answer lies not on the spec chart

branding thing figured out. The H-D shield is, after all, the most tattooed corporate logo in the history of the world. But that wasn't always so.

In the early '80s I and a lot of other people figured Harley-Davidson was a goner. Compared to their Japanese competition, Harleys were slow, shaky and crude—a decade or two behind the times. Their customers were few: outlaw bikers, middle-American tourers and Elvis. Even some outlaw bikers chose other machines. Remember the big, bad Harley Marlon Brando rode in *The Wild One*? Look again. It was a Triumph.

When Harley executives bought the company back then, I shook my head. A Harley was never going to be as objectively worthy as, say, a Honda CBX. So how could people—lots of people—be convinced to buy them?

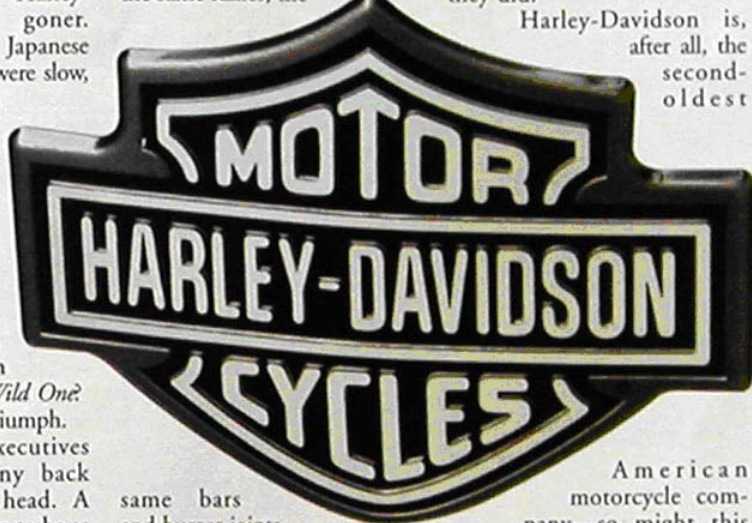
WORLD'S BIGGEST GANG

The folks at Harley knew something I didn't. They weren't selling motorcycles. They were selling a dream. A brand. They knew recreating Harley wasn't about making their motorcycles faster, cheaper or more comfortable.

They took a struggling motorcycle maker and turned it into an exclusive club—the biggest motorcycle gang in history. To be sure, they made the motorcycles better, in part by adopting some of the manufacturing and quality-control techniques pioneered by the Japanese. But they also knew they could build an irresistible lifestyle around the Harley mystique, that they could make Harley an icon for freedom, toughness and America. And that they could then sell that icon, one bike, one piggy bank, one T-shirt at a time. Forever.

Think about it. Every Harley rider thinks of him or herself as a rebellious, rugged individual, doing his or her thing in his or

her own rebellious, rugged way. And what do they do? Dress up in virtually identical black leather and denim get-ups and ride the same motorcycles in great roaring packs to the same rallies, the



same bars and burger joints, Sunday after Sunday. Just like all the other rebellious, rugged individuals.

BELT BUCKLES AND PIGGY BANKS

Think Harley-Davidson is a motorcycle company? Harley's revenues last year were just under a billion dollars. With a "b." Not the revenues from selling motorcycles, which were also huge, but just from selling accessories, parts, clothes and piggy banks.

You might be getting the idea that branding is a bad thing. Not so, hog breath. Branding helps us figure out who we are and who we want to be. And it helps us tell other people who we are—and who we want to be—in ways we otherwise couldn't.

People who buy Harleys feel better about themselves. They are prouder, happier, more fulfilled. They may be more attractive to the opposite sex, even if the opposite sex's parents are not amused. They may pay more, and wait longer, for a motorcycle with no better reliability, longevity or performance. But that's not the point. They don't want to go faster—they want to be a

Harley person. And when it comes time to sell said Harley, they'll get a lot more of their money back, because the next guy in line wants to be a Harley person just as much as they did.

Harley-Davidson is, after all, the second-oldest

American motorcycle company—so might this

Harley case study be a little misleading? Wasn't Harley always a great brand? Well, they were just as second-oldest in '82—and the brand was dead in the water then. But just for the sake of argument, let's look at a more recent example of branding in action.

INSTANT CARMA

In 1989, there was no such thing as a Lexus.

Toyota is a great car company—maybe the best in the world. But Americans didn't want to pay \$40,000 for a car that said "Toyota" on the trunk. So Toyota took a deep, inspired breath and created a brand from scratch, a brand designed to go head to head against Mercedes-Benz, the company that invented the freakin' automobile way back in 1886.

Toyota built some great Lexus—cars that in Japan and elsewhere proudly carried the Toyota nameplate. But mostly it created a great brand. Lexus didn't act like a cheerful, diffident, eager-to-please Japanese car company, it acted like a big, impressive, world-class luxury car company, with

the engineering horsepower of Mercedes and the sheer, decadent luxury of Rolls Royce. It spent a lot of money on advertising—some of it really good advertising. It decided who it wanted to be and set out to tell everybody. And it got its advertising money right back every time it sold a car. With lots of interest.

While a Toyota Camry sells for \$20,000 and change, a Lexus ES300, basically the same car, sells for over \$30,000—often way over \$30,000. Multiply that 10 grand "Lexus tax" times 250,000 cars a year and you've got 2.5 billion dollars, which can buy a lot of ads in *Motor Trend*, *Esquire* and *The Wall Street Journal*. Even on the Super Bowl. In just a couple of years Lexus went from a gleam in a marketing guy's eye to challenging Mercedes-Benz's 106 years of heritage. How did Lexus do it? Branding, my son. It created a brand, built the products to match, and stuck to it. It believed—so we believe.

THE SMELL OF FEAR

Other attempts at creating new brands have met with less success. Our beloved Honda launched Acura four years before Toyota launched Lexus, and for those four years it had the "Japanese luxury" market to itself. It won all kinds of awards and sold lots of nice cars. But when Lexus launched in '90, its commitment to brand blew Acura out of the water. Acura had what many regarded as the world's best sports car at the time, the NSX. Lexus had four-door sedans. But in the branding wars, Lexus kicked butt. Why? Because Lexus believed.

Acura couldn't decide what it wanted to be. Luxury or performance? American, Japanese or European? Honda, or not Honda? The public abhors a brand that doesn't know itself or lacks self-confidence. If they sense fear, they attack. Lexus showed confidence while Acura

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showed fear and indecision. The rest is history. Lexus is now the largest-selling luxury brand in the U.S. Acura, after 18 years of trying and using essentially equal engineering

their businesses into brands—into emotional monuments and money-gushing geysers?

Well, no. Ducati is potentially a great, Ferrarisque brand, but for now it's stuck in a low-

thing as too much money, at least to an investor or a company executive. Call it greed, call it capitalism, call it profit motive. It's all the same thing. And if you like motorcycles, you

heavy and quirky. [Although this is changing with the introduction of the new R1200GS and K1200S. —Ed.]

TURNING JAPANESE

That leaves the Japanese makers, who have pretty consistently failed to distinguish their brands from one another, let alone break out into becoming any kind of must-have social phenomenon.

All the Japanese brands stand for essentially the same things: performance, engineering, value. Which, if you ask me, will forever doom them to battling one another with ever-escalating performance, engineering and value, clawing for scraps on the ground while smart marketers such as Harley sneak away with the whole carcass and drag it up into the crook of a nearby tree.

Part of it is cultural. Lexus—which was created, in large part, by Toyota's American sales arm—notwithstanding, Japanese companies are typically dominated by engineers, who tend to downplay the impact branding and marketing have on a company's success. Call it left-brain dominance. That's pretty ironic in the motorcycle business considering that the

Japanese are building the most exciting, best-performing vehicles the world has ever seen.

They're not selling a necessary commodity such as cars or cornflakes. Instead, they're selling fun, recreation and exhilaration; you'd think

they'd find ways to make the marketing and advertising as captivating and emotional as the experience they're selling. But even the Germans are beating them at the emotion game, in both high-performance cars and motorcycles. And when the notoriously left-brained Krauts are kicking your butt at evoking emotion, you've got problems.

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When Did It Start For You?

Maybe it was the first time you heard one, or the second time you saw one, or the first time you saw one in the city. Or maybe it was the first time you heard one that had a certain look or sound or feel that made you want one.

Maybe it was the first time you saw one that had a certain look or sound or feel that made you want one.

Maybe it was the first time you saw one that had a certain look or sound or feel that made you want one.

Maybe it was the first time you saw one that had a certain look or sound or feel that made you want one.

resources, is still struggling to separate itself from Honda in the public's hearts, minds and wallets (though it's just had its best year ever in '03). You know what Lexus stands for because Lexus told you. Acura doesn't know what Acura stands for, so it sells fewer cars for less money—cars that are essentially equal in quality and performance. It doesn't take its brand as seriously—so it loses.

LOOKING FOR LOVE IN ALL THE WRONG PLACES

Back to motorcycles, and none too soon. Harley has obviously worked this branding thing like a rented mule. But what about the other motorcycle manufacturers? They can presumably read the business section, which means they must have seen how well Harley—and Harley's stockholders—have done. So have they followed Harley's lead in turning

volume, cult niche. Without concerted, aggressive marketing and advertising—deciding who it wants to be and doing what it takes, including spending money, to tell the world—it'll remain a minor player. And make no mistake—every company wants to become bigger and bigger and bigger. Nobody wants to be a tiny niche player and stay a niche player, even if, as in the case of Ducati, that happens to be some of its charm right now. Business people don't invest in a company for their health or because of the company's small-town innocence. They do it to make money, and there's no such

should understand that the better a company succeeds at being a business, i.e., making money, the better it'll be at surviving and giving us the wonderful machines we all want to ride.

Aprilia is a prime example of a great product without much of a brand; think of it as the Italian Victory. Triumph seems to be stuck between celebrating its heritage and building near-Japanese-level sportbikes and sport-tourers, doing neither

quite well enough to catch fire. BMW does wonderful advertising, has some heritage to work with, and demands a premium price for its products. But the machines are



SOMETHING'S MISSING

Could Honda—or any of the others—take a deep breath and do its own two-wheeled Lexus? Not a luxury brand, of course,



but an invented brand that would bypass the generic implications of being one of four barely indistinguishable Japanese motorcycle makers? It would make perfect sense. Because in the huge and obviously lucrative cruiser market especially, a Japanese name is as effective at killing desire as a turd in a hot tub. They try to dodge that truth by adding butch cruiser sub-brands (Vulcan, Road Star, Shadow, Intruder), and co-opting traditional styling cues; Kawasaki,

after all, was making more convincing Indian replicas than Indian. But if it comes from Kawasaki and is sold by a Kawasaki salesman in a Kawasaki dealership filled with Kawasakis, it's a Kawasaki. The net result is that Japanese makers are forced to sell generally superior



cruisers for much less. And sell many fewer, put together, than Harley sells all by itself. The Japanese cruisers look, sound and feel like Harleys (well, mostly). But the important thing is missing—that would be the brand.

A Japanese maker could create a brand the way Toyota created Lexus. It would require a long-term commitment—a real, emotional commitment from one end of the corporation to the other. Not to mention lots of money. But it could be done.

FORWARD INTO THE PAST

If one wanted to take a shorter, less risky route, however, there is one brand out there, packed up and ready for shipment, that could challenge Harley at its own game. That brand, of course, is Indian.

Harley was the second American motorcycle. Indian was the first. And for the first 50 years of its life, Indian went toe to toe with Harley. Indian won the Isle of Man. It won the first Daytona. It carried thousands of American troops to war. And it battled Harley, tooth and nail, in the hearts and minds of American

riders. The name Indian still turns heads, even among people who don't ride motorcycles.

Because it's such a strong brand, the Indian name has been bought, sold and resold time and time again since the original company went under in 1953. Like Harley-Davidson, Indian has been owned by people who probably shouldn't have owned it. And the brand has been tarnished recently by the sudden bankruptcy forced upon it by its gonad-free financial backers. But like Harley-Davidson, Indian is a brand—a true world brand on the level of Mercedes-Benz and Ferrari—that can, and should, rise again.

FEELING THE LOVE

Indian didn't go belly-up this last time because people didn't love the brand. The day the bean counters pulled the plug, Indian was selling more motorcycles than several European manufacturers. It had a terrific '04 product line with hundreds of improvements and some truly eye-catching new models. The demand was there, even

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for a line of motorcycles based on the architecture of its arch rival, Harley-Davidson. Production and management were the problems—making enough motorcycles well enough and fast enough to keep enough money moving through the pipeline. When Indian was cold-cocked this time, Victory was making much better motorcycles and selling them for significantly less. But Indian, with higher prices, worse product and a much smaller ad budget, was outselling Victory by a wide margin. Why? The brand, palface.

IF I OWNED A HAMMER

If I were on the Harley board, I would take a collection around the table, scrape up the current asking price of \$10 million or so, and buy the Indian brand name in a heartbeat. For two very good reasons.

One: Indian is the only brand in the world that can beat Harley at its own all-American game. And if I were Harley, I wouldn't want to find myself fighting a fierce, well-financed competitor—Honda comes to mind—who had both the technological wherewithal to make better bikes and the branding horsepower to actually make people want them.

Two: The Harley phenomenon may go on forever, but certainly not at the pace it's maintained for the last 20 years. The

bikes are selling well, but to older and older riders. And pretty soon, everybody who wants one will have one. Or three. I believe there's plenty of room in the world for a new Harley—a Harley with a different flavor, a Harley aimed not at the black-jacket-and-studs crowd, but the more casual, more laid-back, bomber-jacket crowd. A luxury Harley, a slightly kinder, slightly gentler Harley. In other words, Indian. If I were Harley, I would suspect that somewhere down the road there has to be a new Harley, in terms of sheer marketing momentum. And if I could own that Next Big Thing, or something that threatens to be that, for a relative pitance, I'd do it yesterday.

AMERICAN HONDA

But if Harley is not smart enough to buy Indian when it can—and the bankruptcy court's asking price of \$10 million is less than one day's revenue for Harley—I know some other companies that should be.

If I ran Honda—or for that matter Yamaha, Kawasaki or Suzuki—I'd jump on Indian like a puma pounces on a poo-

dle. I'd recruit a team of great American designers, engineers and marketers and let them disappear for a couple of years. I'd have them crank out a few kick-ass Indian models and a great branding and marketing campaign, and then launch the new Indian the way General Motors launched Saturn: as an independent, scrappy, all-American brand.

In the advertising and P.R. areas, I'd emphasize the noble struggle to keep a great American brand alive. I'd get people emotionally involved with the effort. I'd find ways to connect Indian fans with Indian, blurring the line between the brand and the customers. I'd get the fans to feel they were part of a team, get the public pulling for Indian to succeed. And I'd keep it feeling as grass-roots, down-home and American as possible.

It wouldn't be hard, or that far from reality. Both Honda and Kawasaki build their American-bound cruisers and tourers here in the U.S. And Honda, for one, has formidable engineering resources on tap here as well; most Acuras and U.S.-spec Honda cars are designed and engineered in America by Americans. I would tell everybody all about it, the American part, that is. But I'd never, ever say a Japanese-sounding word out loud.

THE COMPANY BEHIND THE CURTAIN

If pressed, I'd portray the effort as a noble tribute—one great motorcycle company helping another—not unlike the way Bill Gates and Microsoft stepped up to help Apple when the MacSters were in a jam. Repeat after me: "Indian isn't Hondayamakawazuki—it's backed and helped by Hondayamakawazuki, just like Hondayamakawazuki sponsors a local 10K or a Walk for Leukemia." See how much better that feels? Pay no attention to that company behind the curtain.

I'd set up truly separate dealerships that look and feel not like Hondayamakawazuki stores but like Indian stores—vintage gas pumps outside, the works. The last Indian had no trouble finding dealers. Can you imagine how eager current Hondayamakawazuki dealers—or anybody else with a brain—would be to sell the best of both worlds: a brand as strong as Harley with the technology, production skills and financial resources of Hondayamakawazuki?

THE O'HAGAN FACTOR

Fran O'Hagan was the head of marketing and new-product development for Indian before it folded. He's a smart guy, a dedicated GSX-R1000 rider, and has worked for big-time brands, including



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Jaguar and BMW cars. Before the money and the clueless investors ran out, he thought Indian had the potential to be not just a major force, but a dominant force in the world motorcycle market. Because he knew that if he could create the capacity to build motorcycles as well

Buick engines, are now powered by old BMW engines. Jaguar is owned by Ford and Saab is owned by GM. And Jeep, which so proudly helped defeat the Germans in World War II, is now owned by Daimler, who powered the Messerschmitts that strafed those Jeeps.

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and as efficiently as Honda and do it with a brand as strong as Indian, he could kick Honda's left-brained butt. He once told me he felt sorry for Honda and where it would be in the next five years.

Well, Honda already has the capacity to build like Honda. So do the other Japanese builders. That's the hard part. All they need is the brand—and the commitment and maturity to not let it be confused with their current brands, such as they are. They would just have to be grownups about it, and not mess it up.

REVENGE OF THE RIGHT

Would some people know, intellectually, that a Japanese-backed and Japanese-company-built Indian was actually, sort of, well, Japanese? Sure. But in a naturalized, let's-celebrate-diversity, Japanese-American sort of way. Americans have little patience for other cultures, but we're perfectly willing to accept other people into our culture if they're willing to make the effort to look, sound and act like us. If Hondayamakawazuki—excuse me, the new Indian—did its branding right, built the great products the brand deserves, and did it with real dedication and commitment, very few people would really care. When the left brain and the right brain disagree, the right brain wins every time. Think about it. Which guy takes the hot girl home from the bar: the smart, kind, sensitive guy she'll actually enjoy being with, or the flashy, cocky guy who can spin a good line of BS—the one with three other girlfriends?

ACHTUNG, ALABAMA

Remember that this is a world in which Ducati is owned by Texans, Mercedes-Benzes are made in Alabama, BMWs are made in South Carolina, Chevy Impalas are made in Canada, Porsches are made in Finland, Italian Aprilias are powered by Austrian engines and Toyotas race in NASCAR. The Mini, that icon of essential Britishness, is made by BMW. Land Rovers, which used to be powered by old

The lesson here is that it's not important who builds a thing and where it is built—if you play your cards right, the important thing, let me hear it one more time, is the brand.

Is it better that Honda, Yamaha, Kawasaki or Suzuki, already great motorcycle companies, revives Indian? Or perhaps you'd prefer a clueless group of Beantown bean counters who fired all Indian's workers in a day and flushed the brand down the john like a dead goldfish? I'll take one of the Big Four any day.

ALL FOR THE GOOD OF THE COUNTRY?

Could Honda—or any of the Japanese makers—do this? Yes, but only if it learned to get serious about this branding thing. It'd have to keep Indian rigorously independent from its current motorcycle bureaucracy, with its own headquarters, management, marketing people, P.R. people and ad agency. If it did, it would be good for Honda, good for American motorcycling, good for the U.S. economy and good for the heritage and legacy of a great American motorcycle company. For all those reasons, I hope one of them does. They should.

12-STEP PROGRAM

I hope this has given you a little more insight into why people—even you—want what they want and don't want what they don't. And if you've bought a Lexus, Mercedes, Infiniti, Acura or Nissan Z in the past few years and don't like it, I'm really sorry. They all seemed pretty swell to me when I was writing the ads and brochures.

OK, I feel better now. I've gotten that off my chest. They say that to have a complete recovery, first you have to go back and apologize to everyone you've hurt along the way.

Well, I'm off to the garage. Got to finish rebuilding that old Harley Sportster, the one right next to that tatty, wonderful Turbo Porsche. Did I mention that it's a Porsche? **MC**

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