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Doting bike owners help a transport business take off

By RICK ROMELL
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Ken Durik hauls iron and holds hands. When you're trucking someone's beloved motorcycle across the country, you'd better take care of both the bike and the biker.

There are some customers of Durik's small but growing firm, Daily Direct, who telephone every day to check on their goods. A doctor once came out of surgery to call about the status of his Harley.

"You're basically Santa Claus bringing them a motorcycle," Durik said. "They can't wait to get the bike."

Which has been good for Durik. Satisfying that sort of passion has helped take his business from a one-employee shop five years ago to an ambitious little enterprise with 11 full-time employees and designs on bigger things.

The business of transporting motorcycles has taken off nationwide in recent years, thanks to two trends - the rising popularity of motorcycle rallies and other gatherings, and sales of bikes over the Internet.

A wider Net

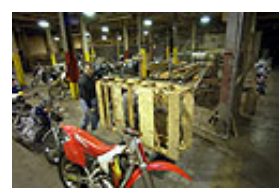
Ten years ago, cycle transporters say, person-to-person motorcycle sales were largely a local affair. That all changed with eBay, Cycle Trader and other Web sites.

Daily Direct



Photo/Jeffrey Phelps

Shane Keaton straps down a bike that eventually will land in Japan as he loads bikes for the Seattle area from Milwaukee. Daily Direct, 944 N. 45th St., is growing along with the demand for motorcycle transport by vacationing bikers and Internet customers.



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Some 52,000 motorcycles were sold last year on eBay alone. Many of them had to be taken from seller to buyer, which is where firms such as Daily Direct come in.

Or consider the owners of the 450,000 bikes that swarmed through Sturgis, S.D., last year for the annual rally, or the half-million people who hit Daytona, Fla., for Bike Week.

Time-strapped motorcycle enthusiasts - particularly affluent professionals and business people - increasingly have turned to bike-hauling companies to get their machines to and from such events.

"It's very popular," Rob Bluma, sales manager at Suburban Motors Harley-Davidson/Buell in Thiensville, said of services such as Durik's. "Very, very popular.

"It comes down to what your time's worth."

Durik, 35, who spends much of the day with a headset on, handling sales calls, has ridden motorized bikes since he was 8 but got into motorcycle transport almost by chance.

His father founded Daily Direct in 1988, and for several years its main business was trucking beer bottles to Miller Brewing from a warehouse in West Allis. Then Durik happened to be in his favorite Harley dealership on a day when the owner was livid over problems he was having getting motorcycles shipped to Daytona.

Hey, Durik said, we like bikes, and we have a trucking company. Maybe we can help.

That was 1993. The next year, Daily Direct hauled six motorcycles to Daytona. The year after that it was a truckload. Then the firm added Sturgis, and "it snowballed into doing all the events," Durik said.

But motorcycle transportation was still a sideline for the company until 1998, when Durik bought the firm from his father and made bikes the focus.

"I saw the potential," he said. "I saw the need."

The main event

The potential will be more than realized this year. Harley-Davidson will hold its 100th anniversary party in Milwaukee in August, and Durik figures he'll haul 400 to 500 motorcycles for that event alone.

His company typically gets its first reservations for Daytona Bike Week three or four months ahead of time. For Harley's 100th, they started rolling in more than a year in advance.

Photo/Jeffrey Phelps

Ken Durik moves an antique crated motorcycle as it is loaded onto a truck Wednesday at Daily Direct. Most bikes are not crated; Durik says strapping them down for shipment is quite safe.

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"I guarantee this will be the busiest year ever for us," Durik said.

Huge events such as Sturgis, Daytona and the 100th are the most visible, but the last 15 years or so also have seen smaller motorcycle rallies multiply nationwide, said Jordan Daniels, general manager of Allen Auto Transport, a California firm that ships motorcycles as well as cars.

And not everyone is a die-hard, cross-country biker.

"Motorcycle riders now are your businessmen - your yuppies and business people," Daniels said.

Take, for example, Glendale dentist Gerald Salinsky. He took up motorcycling in his 60s after attending a Harley-Davidson annual meeting as a shareholder and deciding it would be fun to have a bike.

Now 72, Salinsky rides maybe 5,000 miles a year, often with his wife, Judy, 67, on the back. But a few years ago, when he got an itch to take his Ultra Classic to Sturgis, he decided he'd rather spend two weeks cruising the Black Hills region than use several days getting there and back.

So he and his friends shipped their motorcycles with Durik and flew to South Dakota, where the machines were waiting for them.

"It's become a means of getting the bike to where you want it without riding a long distance, if that's what you wish," Salinsky said. "It's an accepted thing to do."

Six trucks, going on eight

Durik hauls motorcycles on custom-fitted, two-tier semi-trailers. Bikes are rolled onto the trailers - Durik generally doesn't put the machines in crates or on pallets - and fixed in place at six points with 4,000-pound test nylon straps.

The company has six trucks and plans to add two more within a few months. Durik said all his drivers ride motorcycles, which he considers important: Motorcyclists are very sensitive about how their bikes are handled.

Each truck travels a regular route through a given section of the country every eight to 10 days, picking up motorcycles and delivering them, or bringing them to the Milwaukee hub for shipment to a different region. Shipments cost \$195 to \$695 one way, and average \$300 to \$400.

Durik took on two investors in 2001 and organized Daily Direct as a limited liability company. The firm works out of temporary quarters near Miller Brewing but plans to move to Wauwatosa by March.

Besides hauling motorcycles to events and after Internet sales, Daily Direct does work for dealers and manufacturers. All told, the firm ships about 3,000 motorcycles a year. Durik expects that to rise by nearly a third in 2003 and sales to hit nearly \$2 million.

A version of this story appeared in the Milwaukee Journal Sentinel on Feb. 14, 2003.

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