

## The Decline Of The Motorcycle Club?

Are motorcycle clubs dying? Almost every club has seen a decline in membership. A few clubs have folded due to lack of interest, dwindling funds, increased costs, aging members, and other factors that eventually bring the club to its knees. The club's engine seized and it was tearfully abandoned by the side of the road.

*"While I've belonged to a couple of brand/model associations in the past, I've only been a member of a formal MC for about 5 years. It's an enduro/race-oriented club, established in 1971 and hosting several race and poker run events annually. We celebrate our 50th anniversary next year. In truth, we may already be dead but no one wants to admit it."* - Brian Englund, Off Road Racer and Club Organizer

Popular rally speaker, author, and humorist Jack Riepe wrote, *"Clubs aren't dying. Their members are dying. The average BMW rider is 234 years old. Millennials don't join anything, and club vacancies go unfilled. There is no sense of 'To hell with this... I may be dead by 2pm so anything goes', anymore. The new thought is, 'I paid to attend this event so entertain me.'"*

The reasons why clubs are on the decline is hugely complex - I don't claim to have a crystal ball that gives me the answers. Society is changing. Most riders don't join clubs anymore, instead they prefer to do their own thing.

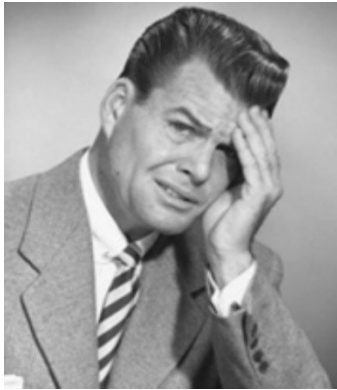
*"Clubs were formed around a brand of motorcycle, or type of motorcycle, or a geographic region, or a common bond or special interest. Their primary purpose was socialization or sharing information."*

- Ian Schmeisser, Community Marketing Expert, BMW Clubs and GS Giants Guru

At a club meeting or at a rally, members could socialize and share information, kick the tires, swap lies over a campfire, share a few beers, and those face-to-face interactions established a bond. Clubs charged a membership fee which opened the door to an exclusive group - you became part of something special. Your investment entitled you to club clothing, pins, patches, and perhaps a small discount on gear thru your local dealer. If you wanted to ride with the group, you joined the club. If you wanted to go to their rally, you joined the club. Clubs competed in riding events, raised money for charities, raised rider awareness, and promoted safe riding practices.

*"Clubs are feeling the pinch because people just aren't as willing to go to a club event. And why go to an event when you can simply hit your buddies up on Facebook from the couch, meet up at Saturday morning, and then do it again next weekend? We're a bunch of dinosaurs living in a bygone pre-social media era where you had to actually find people if you wanted to talk to them. You had to go hang out with someone or go to a shop to learn about our bikes, maintenance, events, or anything else important to a rider. Seems to me that no one is doing that nowadays."* - Brian Englund

The "old way" a club gathered members and kept them engaged doesn't seem to be working. Today people rely on Facebook or Twitter or social media to give us connections to our sport. We develop "internet friendships", we organize rides via email or text message, we substitute the face-to-face interactions we get at a club meeting, with something found on a desktop or a cell phone. This "new way" seems great on the surface, but those social media connections don't lend themselves to keeping a motorcycle club afloat.



Another reason why clubs are choking on a chicken bone: **POLITICS.**

This includes the politics of society and the politics of the club. It goes without saying that discussing societal politics within the club is a sure-fire way to cause division. Politics are a minefield that everyone must avoid. A motorcycle club should be a “safe zone” away from the politics of the day. We’re in a club because of our love of motorcycles. Allowing politics to creep in is like filling your bike’s gas tank with diesel - the gauge says the tank is full, but the bike won’t run.

Then there’s the club’s internal politics. When you get more than two people in a room, you’ll have a list of rules and bylaws. Add a newsletter or an on-line forum, and it’s quickly followed by the need for a moderator, an editor, or a bouncer. Too often they must jump into the ring and break up a cat fight. Someone said something and someone else took offense. Feathers were ruffled and members dropped out. Whenever you make a comment or post a message, keep in mind that others might not (probably don’t) hold the same viewpoint. When you disagree about oil or tires or riding gear, keep things civil. It may surprise you to learn the other person isn’t “the stupidest person on the face of the planet”, they just have a different opinion. Allow them to have one.

A few people rise to a position of leadership (club officers). Some are natural-born leaders who make great contributions. Others are dismal leaders who drive away members because of their personality. When a club elects leaders, they don’t want to choose from that second group. If an officer goes off in the wrong direction, members need to speak up. Silence allows the problem to grow. Good leaders can take constructive criticism. Poor leaders get offended and defensive. You want good leaders.

Officers get re-elected because they did a good job. Some officers get re-elected because nobody wants to take over their vacant office. Rather than leave the slot empty, that officer reluctantly agrees to continue. A reluctant club officer is almost certain to become ineffective over time. When this happens it’s a sign that a club is on life-support. By contrast, a healthy club will have a number of people willing to serve on the board.

There’s a disease called “Club Burnout’ (CB). An officer or key member who gets things done often finds they’re the only one doing the work. Eventually they get a bad case of CB. They preside over too many club meetings, run too many rallies, organize too many social functions, do too much hard work, put together too many rides, etc. After a few years they become weary and they eventually fade away, leaving a void in the fabric of the club. Mending that empty hole isn’t easy. When an officer or key member leaves due to CB they often take the heart and soul of the club with them.



Look around you and see who’s doing all the heavy lifting. Is that person happy or are they starting to show signs of CB? If that’s the case other members need to come alongside and pick up their load before it’s too late. Club Burnout, left untreated, is fatal.

It’s painfully clear that most club members aren’t willing to step up to the plate. They’re not willing to put any work into their club - the kind of work needed to keep it running, to keep it alive, to keep it vibrant, to keep it relevant. The average member sits back and lets others carry the load. They don’t want to do any of the work but they want all the club benefits.

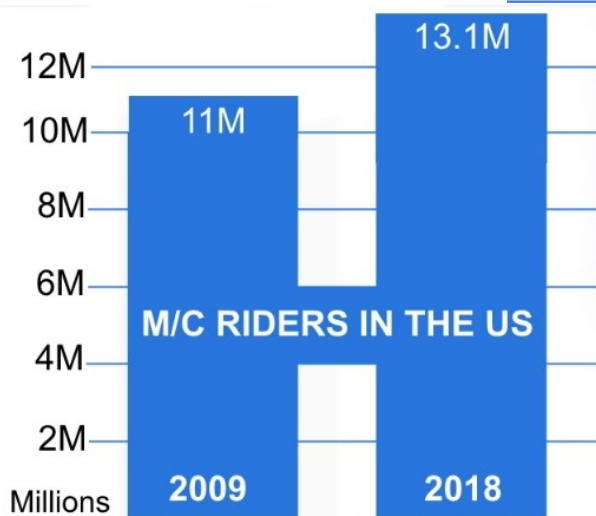
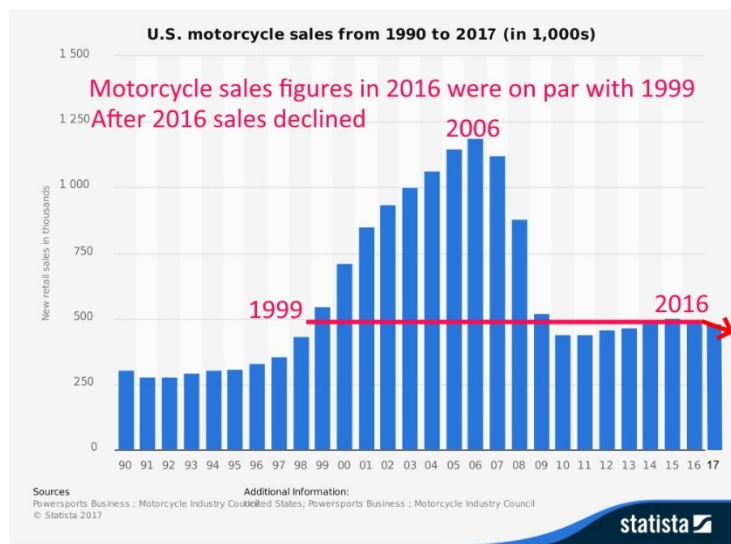
Members might be afraid to volunteer because they've seen what happened to others: Joe raised his hand at a meeting and now he's got a can of worms wiggling in his lap. However, if a dozen hands went up at the call for volunteers, those tasks would be easy because the workload would be shared.

The best example is that of the Rally Chair. When a club appoint an RC (better yet, appoint 2 co-chairs), make sure he/she/they understands he doesn't have to do all the work himself. His job is to get one volunteer to do one task, another to do another task, and so on. If everyone eats just one worm, nobody goes to the CB hospital. Keep the jobs simple and clearly defined. Once a volunteer has filled their commitment, they're done. Don't pile on task after task, don't drain your volunteers. Leave some blood in their veins so they can ride home. Don't burn them out or they won't volunteer again. Give them some positive feedback.

Of course, it'll be necessary to screen (and monitor) volunteers. You don't want a volunteer who never follows through. If a person has zero graphic design experience don't give them the job of creating rally t-shirts. If a person has doesn't know how to use a GPS, don't ask them to lay out tracks and routes. Give volunteers a job they're suited for and give them tools to get the job done. If a volunteer has success at one job, they'll be willing to volunteer for something else in the future.

Let's look at some statistics. Motorcycle sales are on the decline. These graphs show that new bike sales peaked in 2006, then took a steep dive. Today's sales are lower than those 1999.

In 1990 the average rider was 32 years old. In 2009 the average rider was 40. **Today the average age is 47.** We're growing old, together, painfully. While younger folks are still getting into the sport, their numbers don't make up for the older members who are retiring, and who normally fill the club's leadership positions.



In 2009 there were **11,015,105** riders; in 2018 there were **13,158,100**. Despite the increase we still see motorcycle clubs struggling to attract new members and retain existing members.

The average age of a street club is in the mid-60's. Take an informal poll at your club next meeting - if you have one or two members in their 40's that's unusual. If you have members in their 20's you win a trophy. Dollars to donuts it's the older guys and gals that keep those clubs afloat.

About 81% of all riders are male, 19% are female. What is your club doing to reach those 2.5 million lady riders? Does your club hold events geared toward their interests? Do you see the ladies at club functions? If you don't then your club is missing something.

For the younger rider (or even the middle-aged rider who's new to the sport) a typical weekend club meeting doesn't hold much appeal. The most exciting part of the meeting is the breakfast buffet. What they find is a bunch of grumpy seniors who spend the entire meeting arguing about the next rally lapel pin. A new rider might attend ONE meeting, but you'll never see him/her again because there's nothing of interest, nothing to make them want to come back.



Many clubs hold monthly meetings on Sunday mornings, which conflicts with those who want to attend church or have other plans on that day. Would more riders attend if you switched meetings to a Saturday? Since the club exists to serve all the members, if those dates and times don't work for the majority, things need to change. Raise that question at your next meeting. Keep in mind that if you take a vote on a Sunday, you won't get any support for changing the meeting date, because those Saturday people won't be present to cast their vote.

Every club should take a long hard look in their mirror. What do you see? Is your club alive, vibrant, growing, and healthy? Or is it on life-support? Be honest when you give your answer, then figure out how to make changes. Not willing to change? Then be willing to accept the way things are, which is on the slippery slope that leads to club failure.



Ask your governing board (and the membership as a whole) if they really want to keep the club alive. If they do, then **everyone** must be willing to pull on the club rope.

Members must understand that the club exists only as long as everyone contributes. Members **must** get involved, **must** volunteer, **must** participate. This doesn't mean they have to spend 10 hours a week on club business; it does mean they need to do **something**, no matter how small, how mundane. One hour at a club meeting. A few hours at the annual rally.

#### Ask your club a few simple questions:

1. What do we offer as a motorcycle club?
2. Do people really want what we're offering?
3. Are we preaching to our own choir?
4. Are we reaching outside our own little circle?
5. Are we attracting new members?
6. Are we retaining existing members?

When you get your answers make sure you're not listening to your own press releases. In other words, don't filter those answers through a pair of rose-colored goggles purchased with club funds. Be honest with yourself and with each other.

If your club is built around a specific brand? Do you hold events that appeal to <most> of the models made by that manufacturer? Are you focusing on a narrow segment of their model line-up, while ignoring other models? This is a common failing when a manufacturer produces performance bikes/ADV bikes/and street bikes. Find a balance that appeals to all genres. Organize road rides and GS rides and the occasional track day. Appeal to as many models and as many riding styles as you can. Don't get in a rut.

Should there be a limit on how long an officer should hold their elected position? If they're happy in their role and they're doing a good job, remaining in office year after year <seems> to be in the best interests of the club, but if they stay too long then others can't rise through the ranks. If an officer stays too long there's a danger that the club will eventually be viewed as "Joe's M/C Club". Whenever one person becomes the face of the club, warning bells should be ringing. Clubs are not about individual personalities, they're about the group.

Leadership turnover ensures the club won't become stagnant and it also prevents Club Burnout. A system where officers serve a couple years then rotate out makes a lot of sense. Keep things fresh. Allow senior officers to "train-up" junior officers. This applies to presidents, secretaries, treasurers, and other positions. It also applies to key volunteers. Don't count on just a handful of volunteers – develop scores of volunteers. Spread the load.

**"All these ideas are well and good but in My Club nobody wants to serve as president or treasurer or secretary. I don't, because there's too much work involved, and I've got other things to do".**

– a typical club member

Yup, we're all busy with work and family, but if you want your own club to stay afloat, then everyone's gotta start bailing water. That means you either need to pick up a bucket and get to work...  
or abandon ship and start swimming for shore.



Let's say you're a former club officer who served your term - now it's time for others to keep things running. Fair statement, but for the good of the club, re-reconsider that line you've drawn in the sand. Maybe you could step back into leadership for a year, or until the club gets back on its feet. If you don't want to serve as an officer, work as a key volunteer and show others how it's done. Lead by example, mentor others, and help members learn from your experience. Help them become a leader for the next generation.

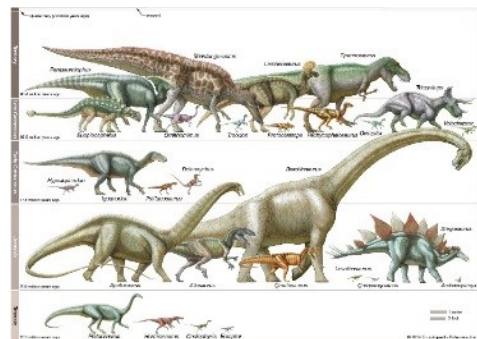
Are motorcycle clubs dying? Are rallies on the decline? Is your club in trouble? I think you know the answer.

It's not too late to turn things around. The club's gas tank might be on reserve, the oil needs to be changed, the brake pads are worn to the rivets, the tires are showing their cords, but there's still some life in your club. It just needs some work and a little TLC, or more specifically some VLC (Volunteer Loving Care).

If you want your club to keep riding into the Roaring Twenties, the next steps are up to YOU:

- √ **Attend meetings!**
- √ **Volunteer!**
- √ **Get involved!**
- √ **Serve as a club officer!**
- √ **Do something for your club!**

Or you can sit back and watch your club go the way of the dinosaur.



David Petersen

Mr. BestRest (aka Pufferfish Petersen)



© 2020 Pufferfish Productions. BestRest Products LLC.  
Edmonds, WA USA. [www.BestRestProducts.com](http://www.BestRestProducts.com)

Editorial assistance provided by Steve Irby, Jack Riepe, Ian Schmeisser, and Brian Englund. This article may be distributed for personal and club use. Commercial distribution prohibited.