Electric Love – sustainability

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Years ago, when we were still working as ethnographers for Harley-Davidson Inc., it was common for us to hear riders talk about how much fun their bikes were, or how liberating, or how essential to their mental health. What we almost never heard was how useful they found their motorcycles to be, or how much they saved on gasoline by commuting on their Harleys. This probably comes as no surprise, and yet, and yet … when we think of electric vehicles, why do our thoughts immediately turn to issues of range, price and carbon dioxide equivalents? When we read about battery-powered electrics why does the discussion go directly to the environment?

Of course atmospheric carbon and the global greenhouse are important considerations when making decisions about transportation. So is price. And so are other issues of practicality. But if we've learned anything from two decades

worth of ethnographic research in the motorcycle and automotive industries it's this: The heart often overrules the head when it comes to actual purchase decisions. When a woman or a man falls head over heels in love with a motor vehicle, it's not because of its efficiency or its trunk space. More likely it's because of the curve of the sheet metal, the feel of g-forces under acceleration, the caress of leather, the purity of surrounding sound, or the way she imagines others see her as she's gliding past or blowing by.

When we began collecting stories and experiences in the world of electric vehicles we did so with the sense that, from a marketing standpoint, the real message may be more in the sizzle than the steak. Dozens upon dozens of studies, after all, confirm an intransigent gulf between consumers' attitudes and their

behaviors with respect to green products. They know what they should do; they say they will; and then they don't. Well reasoned 'shoulds' fail to move them. What's more, marketing research, coming from a dominant position in psychology, can't seem to see past its cognitive biases.

We decided to let consumers talk to us about the real payoffs from operating electrics. What we learned came from their embodied experiences. From builders of electric race bikes we learned that, yes, green is probably the inevitable color of motorcycling's future, but speed and handling are their passion, and electrics deliver.

> *From a professional videographer we learned that the electric motorcycle isn't only a gas to ride, it also serves as a smooth and silent camera mount. From Tesla Model S buyers we learned that, yes, emissions matter, but status and distinction are the real keys, along with luxury and fun. From users of electric snowmobiles in Lapland we learned that quietness in the pristine woods was the primary motive for ditching internal combustion.*

In a retirement golfing community in Oregon we pulled together some wine and cheese, and our seventy-five-year-old informant called a handful of friends to come talk about their electric golf cars. This community permits residents to drive their golf cars on the streets. We organized the impromptu focus group after our informant told us that she almost never drove her car any more. She took her golf car to visit neighbors.

She took it to the beauty salon, the post office, the pharmacy and the liquor store.

In effect, she was using it as a battery-powered car. Did her friends do the same? They did. So with no more than a few phone calls we had a group of seven seniors, aged from sixty-something to ninety-two, sitting around a dining table talking fondly about their electric golf cars. After a while Diane asked if there was anything that would improve their golf-car experiences. With a twinkle in her eye the ninety-two-year-old said, “More speed!” Diane asked them if they could sum up their feelings about their golf cars in a word. “Fun” and “Liberating” were the words people agreed on—not coincidentally the same words you’d hear from a Harley-Davidson owner talking about her bike.

A colleague of mine owns a Tesla Roadster. It’s a sporty little two-seater designed by technology nerds and built on a Lotus platform. One day my colleague asked if I would like to drive it. He picked me up on campus and drove to a café in the countryside for lunch. After a leisurely meal he put me in the driver’s seat. After accelerating tentatively through a few tight turns and feeling glued to the road I

got to a place where the road straightened out, and I pressed the accelerator with commitment. You can know the statistics. You can have a cognitive sense of what it means to go from a standstill to a hundred kilometers per hour in four seconds. I could extrapolate from past experiences on fast motorcycles.

> *But nothing prepared me for the experience that followed. With not a millisecond of lag time, before I could mentally brace myself for it, by body was rammed back into the seat. My internal organs grabbed onto my spine and held on for dear life. I imagine my pupils dilated and my sphincters slammed shut.*

Then with a touch of the brake it was over. Except that it wasn't. That was two years ago and I've never lost the sense of exhilaration I got from those two or three seconds of transcendent speed. Would I buy a Tesla Roadster if I could afford it? Damn right I would. It would be completely irrational, and in our Downtown Helsinki neighborhood it would create nothing but headaches. But I'd do it. Tesla no longer builds the Roadster. And I couldn't afford one anyway. But … an electric motorcycle? An electric bicycle? Maybe. When I think about it, it's hard to justify. But when I tap back into the experience of that single burst of acceleration I realize how weak my rational side becomes when my body and emotions are really engaged.

Electric vehicles are a rational choice for consumers, for cities and for the environment, but we suspect that the future of sustainable transportation may not hinge on its sustainability.