

The Art of Implausible Business: Fast Internet Revs Up Coast Motorcycle Shop

by Jeffrey Parker 1/12/2017

For those who fantasize about exotic motorcycles, Point Arena on the remote Mendocino coast is probably not the first place that springs to mind. Think San Francisco or LA, maybe Milan, London, Munich, Tokyo. But for a growing number of aficionados across California and far beyond, this colorful coastal town – and a blink-and-you’ll-miss-it bike shop under a soothing hand-painted sign – is motorcycle restoration nirvana.



The Zen House: The Art of Motorcycle Maintenance has invested eight years making the implausible possible, and a key to its success – apart from unparalleled wrenching and a mellow Mendo vibe – is some of the best internet bandwidth anywhere.

“Without fast internet, this simply would not be possible,” said Kelley Litle, half of the couple that founded The Zen House in 2008 after abandoning southern California for the beauty and community of the rural north. “Our website has been crucial. People read it thoroughly before contacting us. But that’s just the start.”

If success depended only on having a nice website, growing the business would have been easier. But customers willing to allow mechanic David Harris tear into a rare Italian bike that could be worth a quarter

million dollars if pristine insist on extensive videoconferencing and picture exchanges before packing up their steed and shipping it to Point Arena. That takes the kind of fast bandwidth, both sending and receiving, that has only become reliably available since wireless internet service provider Further Reach arrived in 2013.

“With satellite internet, email downloads were OK, but uplinking was impossible,” Kelley said. “It took 10 minutes to send a single batch of emails. We couldn’t attach more than one picture at a time to an insurance claim, so these took forever. Videoconferencing was not possible, but without video David can’t consult with clients. Our business requires fast up speeds as well as fast down.”

Fast internet has enabled The Zen House to expand its marketing and build customer ties with exotic bike circles across California and far beyond. All summer, Kelley promotes international MotoGP race gatherings, and scores of riders savor a thrilling ride into Point Arena to watch the latest race, which David will have just downloaded. Reliable social media, email and downloading are central to the success of these unique gatherings, which energize neighbors businesses as well as their own. Kelley shudders at the memory of two early MotoGP events when the big video downloads failed and they couldn’t screen the race.



Today, business still can be challenging but David and Kelley are starting to relax. Gross sales grew 52% in fiscal 2015, and while they can't put their finger on any one factor, Kelley says solid broadband ensures reliability, efficiency, flexibility and, above all, confidence. David's restoration of an extremely rare 1951 Mondial won best of show at the 2015 Quail Motorcycle Gathering, a top US event. Bikes now arrive from as far away as Hawaii, Colorado, Texas and Canada, and David's national reputation is luring local riders delighted to learn such expertise is nearby.

"People around here often think they have to go to Santa Rosa or at least Fort Bragg or Ukiah to find a mechanic," Kelley said. "We are changing that."

The Zen House can be contacted at 707-882-2281 or Motorcycles@TheZenHouse.net.

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