

Harley's rejoinder

by The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel

Milwaukee Iron isn't headed for the scrap heap just yet, at least judging from Harley's spunky ad in The New York Times last weekend.

Harley-Davidson's rejoinder to a Times business section article the week before showed a bit of the feistiness that helped build one of the world's best-known brands.

The ad, heavy on patriotism and attitude, told detractors to "file our obituary where the sun don't shine."

The Times ran a freelance piece March 22 that laid out Harley's challenges with an aging customer base amid a severe economic downturn.

There's no doubt Harley is hurting. Demand for the company's signature motorcycles was off 10 percent to 15 percent in January and early February compared with the same period a year ago, according to Robert W. Baird & Co. Dealers expect a 10 percent drop in motorcycle sales this year, although it could be bigger than that, Baird says.

And, yes, Harley does have to find a way to appeal to younger riders. The average age of Harley riders is close to 50.

But during its 106 years, Harley has been down before. It survived the Great Depression and came close to bankruptcy in the 1980s. It survived and thrived in the past 20 years by appealing to baby boomers and greatly expanding its brand recognition. We wouldn't bet against the company that popularized the Hog this time, either.

As Harley might put it: Screw it. Let's ride.

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