

Harley-Davidson introduces electric motorcycle (Update)

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Harley-Davidson will unveil its first electric motorcycle next week, and President Matt Levatich said he expects the company known for its big touring bikes and iconic brand to become a leader in developing technology and standards for electric vehicles.

Harley will show handmade demonstration models Monday at an invitation-only event in New York. The company will then take about two dozen bikes on a 30-city tour for riders to test drive and provide feedback. Harley will use the information it gathers to refine motorcycle, which might not hit the market for several more years.

The venture is a risk for Harley because there's almost no market for full-size electric motorcycles. The millions of two-wheeled electric vehicles sold each year are almost exclusively scooters and low-powered bikes that appeal to Chinese commuters. But one analyst said investment by a major manufacturer could help create demand, and Levatich emphasized in an interview with The Associated Press that Harley is interested in the long-term potential, regardless of immediate demand.

"We think that the trends in both EV technology and customer openness to EV products, both automotive and motorcycles, is only going to increase, and when you think about sustainability and environmental trends, we just see that being an increasing part of the lifestyle and the requirements of riders," Levatich said. "So, nobody can predict right now how big that industry will be or how significant it will be."

At the same time, Levatich and others involved in creating the sleek, futuristic LiveWire predicted it would sell based on performance, not environmental awareness. With no need to shift gears, the slim, sporty bike can go from 0 to 60 mph in about 4 seconds. The engine is silent, but the meshing of gears emits a hum like a jet airplane taking off.

"Some people may get on it thinking, 'golf cart,'" lead engineer Jeff Richlen said. "And they get off thinking, 'rocket ship.'"

One hurdle the company has yet to address is the limited range offered by electric motorcycles. The batteries typically must be recharged after about 130 miles (210 kilometers), and that can take 30 minutes to an hour.

San Jose State University police Capt. Alan Cavallo helped his department buy two bikes from Zero Motorcycles, the current top-selling brand, and said officers have been "super happy" with the quiet, environmentally friendly bikes made nearby in Scotts Valley, California. But he said American riders who like to hit the highway would likely lose patience with the technology.

"That's the deal with the cars; you can't jump in a Tesla and drive to LA, it won't make it," Cavallo said, adding later, "People want the convenience of 'I pull into a gas station, I pour some gas in my tank and I go.'"

Zero Motorcycles introduced its first full-size motorcycle in 2010 and expects to sell about 2,400 bikes this year, said Scot Harden, the company's vice president of global marketing. That would give it about half of the global market for full-size, high-powered electric motorcycles.

In comparison, Harley-Davidson alone sold more than 260,000

conventional motorcycles last year.

Outsiders focused on electric vehicle development predicted Harley would help boost sales for all electric motorcycle makers by creating greater awareness of and demand for electric bikes. Yamaha also has shown an electric motorcycle.

"It's the old 'a rising tide raises all boats,'" said Gary Gauthier, business and technology adviser for NextEnergy, a Detroit-based nonprofit focused on energy development.

John Gartner, a research director for the consulting firm Navigant Research, noted the major automakers helped drive sales for hybrid and electric cars.

"Their marketing budgets are much larger and they have dealerships set up everywhere, and so it's much easier for companies like Ford, BMW and Honda to advertise about their electric vehicles," Gartner said.

Levatich said true growth will require common standards for rapid charging and other features, as well as places for people to plug in. Harley expects to play a key role in developing electric vehicle standards, and its dealership network could provide charging stations to serve all drivers, he said.

"We've been very silent up to this point about our investment in EV technology," Levatich said. "... but now that we're public, and we're in this space, we expect to be involved and a part of leading the development of the standards, and the technology and the infrastructure necessary to further the acceptance and the utility of electric vehicles."

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