



BMW NA 50th Anniversary | 50 Stories for 50 Years

Chapter 42: “From Antagonist to Ally: The BMW Car Club of America and BMW of North America Work Together to Foster Enthusiasm for the Brand”

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If a brand is to succeed, it needs loyal customers who'll stick with the brand for years if not decades, and who'll keep buying its cars even as their needs and circumstances change. Those customers are usually found within the membership rolls of its affiliated club, the size of which

is a good indicator of a brand's strength overall.

The creation of BMW's first North American clubs was sparked by a groundswell of enthusiasm for the Type 114 two-doors: the 1600-2 and 2002 that debuted in 1966 and 1968, respectively. By the spring of 1969, enthusiasts of those cars had formed the BMW Car Club of America in Boston, Massachusetts, the Stanford BMW Club in Palo Alto, California, the Kansas City BMW Club, another in Dayton, Ohio and others. The clubs grew quickly, and more were formed around the country as BMW owners sought out like-minded enthusiasts of these little-known German imports.

It wasn't long before the Boston club founded by Bob Mehrman and Michel Potheau became the de facto nationwide organization for BMW enthusiasts, thanks to a strong response to ads placed in magazines like *Road & Track* and *Car and Driver*—which had jump-started the 2002 craze in April 1968 with David E. Davis's "Turn Your Hymnals to 2002". With the BMW CCA ascendant, smaller clubs became affiliated chapters of the larger organization.

Over the weekend of October 10-11, 1970, the BMW CCA began a 50-year tradition when it staged its first "Oktoberfest" at the Colonial Inn in Concord, Massachusetts. The event included tech sessions, an autocross, a road rally, and a concours d'elegance. For the next half-century, CCA chapters would stage Oktoberfests across the U.S., giving members an excuse to drive their BMWs far and wide.

Early CCA member Michael Izor drove his 2002 from Boston to the first Oktoberfest in Concord, and to everyone that followed for the next 49 years. “The next year, it moved to Washington, DC, and I’d never been there. The year after that, Virginia Beach, and I’d never been there, either,” Izor said. “Year after year, Oktoberfest got me to see this country like I never would have otherwise, in a car that I absolutely adored.”

In 1970, the BMW CCA gained a friendly rival in the BMW Automobile Club of America, founded by 2002-obsessed enthusiasts in Los Angeles. Though smaller than the CCA, and with only a handful of chapters on the West Coast, the ACA had a distinct advantage over the CCA: official recognition by BMW importer Max Hoffman.



The CCA had formed without Hoffman's consent, and its relationship with Hoffman was antagonistic. By contrast, Leif Anderberg had sought out Hoffman's cooperation when founding the ACA, and he got it. Anderberg hailed from Sweden, and his European origins—along with those of German-born Mike Dietel, another early member—might have smoothed the relationship. In any case, Hoffman's endorsement facilitated the ACA's recognition by the International Council of BMW Clubs in Munich, and the participation of ACA members in BMW's driving schools at the Nürburgring from 1974 to 2002.

Even so, the ACA never became a truly national organization, and plenty of BMW enthusiasts within its geographical reach joined the CCA instead. When BMW of North America took over from Max Hoffman in 1975, the new corporation was determined to unify the clubs into a single entity. That task fell to Tom McGurn and Carla Harman of BMW NA's Corporate Communications Department, but they wouldn't succeed until 1997, when the Los Angeles chapter finally merged with the CCA. (The last of the ACA chapters wasn't absorbed until 2000, when the Puget Sound ACA chapter switched its allegiance to the CCA.)

With that, 71,000 BMW enthusiasts nationwide became a unified club: the BMW Car Club of America. It was reportedly the largest single-marque car club in the world, which it remains to this date even though membership has dropped to approximately 65,000. That's still an impressive figure for a club that emphasizes real-life activities when so much of our lives take place online.

A crucial factor in keeping the CCA relevant to its membership is a strong

relationship with BMW of North America. That wasn't necessarily the case when BMW NA took over from Hoffman in 1975, Harman said. "A lot of the people at BMW NA had come from other industries, and they couldn't fathom why people would come together to form a club over cars."

Harman did, and she succeeded in fostering a closer relationship between BMW NA and both U.S. clubs. "It was an adversarial relationship in 1975, but by 1980 it was more like an uneasy friendship. As the '80s progressed, it was well on the way to developing into a mutually supportive relationship," she said. "I spent a lot of time going to events and meetings to see what they needed, and I was able to increase BMW's support quite a bit. It took almost 20 years for the BMW NA Marketing Department to see the benefit, but about when I left in 1992 the club responsibility was handed to Marketing, and they really went to town."

Indeed, 1992 marked a sea change within BMW. Victor Doolan arrived from BMW Canada as Head of Sales, then as President, bringing an intense product focus and a determination to restore BMW's appeal to enthusiasts. In 1994, Doolan hired longtime CCA member Rich Brekus to lead product planning and strategy. Brekus knew that the club was home to BMW's most loyal customers, and so did Erik Wensberg, who worked under Brekus as BMW NA's Motorsport and (from 1995) M Brand Manager.

"Erik did a great job in building the relationship with the car club," Brekus said. "A lot of people within NA thought club members were driving 2002s and smoking a pipe, but we knew they bought a ton of M cars, lots

of options, and big engines. They're by far our most profitable customers."

As BMW NA's club liaison, Wensberg worked with BMW CCA Executive Director Mark Luckman and President Paul Johnson to promote the club with BMW NA customers. "We asked our friends at the vehicle prep centers to put a club solicitation in the glove box of each car," Wensberg said. "That got us thinking that the more the club succeeds, the more we'll succeed. A few years later, that led to the first purchase incentive program. We were already spending a king's ransom to offer low-cost financing or lease rates, and I told Doolan that we should be doing this for our most devoted fans who buy multiple cars. Doolan grasped it immediately, and we developed the first sales incentive for club members in 1995 or '96."



That was happening just as the U.S.-spec E36 M3 was arriving on these shores, spurred by a letter-writing campaign inspired by BMW CCA Roundel columnist Bob Roemer, among others. The club's role in making that car a reality—as well as a huge success—saw Wensberg affix “BMW CCA” stickers on the rear wing and front bumper of every M3 raced by BMW NA in IMSA GT.

“Our point from the very first race was that this racing program was for the club,” Wensberg said. “And at the races, we invited club members into the pits, introduced them to the drivers, let them ask questions, get autographs and hats, etc. We wanted the team to be as inclusionary as possible with the club. Everywhere we went we had a terrific fan base, and the dealers were selling all the M3s they could get their hands on.”

After Wensberg left BMW NA in 1999, Larry Koch took over as Motorsport Manager and Club Liaison; he'd later serve as M Brand Manager, as well. Though club engagement constituted to be only a small portion of his responsibilities, he made considerable effort to strengthen the relationship between BMW NA and the CCA. Like Wensberg, he invited club members to IMSA races, adding entertaining and informative paddock tours that highlighted racing history. He also restored BMW NA's historic race cars to active duty, giving rides to raise money for the BMW CCA Foundation, as BMW Classic USA continues to do today.

Koch helped the CCA draft a forward-thinking mission statement and fostering the final rapprochement between the CCA and the remaining ACA chapters, as well as the CCA's relationship with the International

Council. He supported events like Gateway Tech and Oktoberfest, as well as the club's presence at the Monterey Historic Races and Lime Rock Vintage Festival. "I also worked hard to bring the CCA to BMW NA-sponsored events like the M Power Tours, 3 Across America, etc.," Koch said. "It enhanced BMW's exposure while providing a lot of fun for club members."

To enhance BMW NA's connection to the vintage community, Koch worked with Goetz Pfafflin to establish the BMW Classic Car Club of America. "It's a small group, but if an event brings out 40 vintage cars, there's a big benefit at very little cost," Koch said. "BMW's heritage was the third most popular reason people buy BMWs instead of another brand, and people who own antique BMWs have an 85 percent chance of owning a newer BMW. The guy who owns an M1 or 2002 also has an X5 or 5 Series."

Koch also facilitated the sale of classic car parts through BMW dealers, keeping that business in-house rather than sending customers to third parties.

When the BMW CCA needed larger offices, the high price of Boston real estate made a local expansion prohibitively expensive. After considering other cities, the club—then led by Executive Director Wynne Smith and President Phil Marx—settled on Greenville, South Carolina, which placed the club in close proximity to BMW Manufacturing and the BMW Performance Center, which began hosting new-car deliveries and driver training programs in 1999.

The CCA held its annual Oktoberfest in Greenville in 2000, then opened

its new office downtown in 2001. The BMW CCA Foundation established itself in Greenville two years later, then opened its museum and archive in nearby Greer in 2013. On the CCA's 50th anniversary in 2019, the club moved into a spacious new campus just down the highway, which it shares with the BMW Motorcycle Owner's Association (BMW MOA).

Following Koch's retirement at the end of 2012, the club liaison position at BMW NA returned to the Corporate Communications Department. Head of BMW Group Product Communications Tom Plucinsky served as lead liaison, with his entire team engaged with the club, as well. For lifelong BMW enthusiast Matt Russell, serving as club liaison was "one of the greatest honors of my career."

Russell put his MBA to work quantifying the club's contribution to BMW NA's success, and he arrived at some interesting conclusions. "One of the greatest challenges in business is to quantify why one customer can mean more to a brand's success than another... beyond the rather blind metric of transaction price," Russell said. Once we grasped the activity level multiplied by the scale of the BMW CCA, we began to appreciate what a driving force the club members were in the overall growth of our brand."

That effect has been magnified by the rise of social media, but it predates that phenomenon by decades, Russell said. "Club members were 'influencers' before modern influencers were even born: They're the experts in their communities when it comes to car shopping, the ones approached for advice when 'non-car people' or 'near-car people' are considering their next car. Club members almost always recommend

a BMW car or SAV, and no other luxury carmaker has a club like the BMW CCA or a relationship with the club like BMW NA does. When you're competing with Lexus or Mercedes-Benz, or working hard to maintain your sales lead over Audi as we were, an advantage like the magic of the BMW CCA cannot be overestimated."

Today, the club liaison post is handled enthusiastically by Plucinsky, now Head of BMW Classic USA. Like his predecessors, Plucinsky has provided strong support for the club's activities, as well as those of the BMW CCA Foundation. That support has been financial, of course, but it has also included material support: loaning cars from the BMW Classic USA collection to exhibits at the Foundation Museum, and previewing new models at club events like Legends of the Bahn in Monterey, which helps to make those events more alluring.



Crucially, Plucinsky helped the club survive the Covid pandemic by enhancing the new-car rebate program at a crucial time.

However, despite those inducements, the pandemic accelerated trends that have affected clubs of all types in the 21st century. Volunteerism has declined, leading to cutbacks in BMW CCA activities. “We used to have a driving school on any given weekend in California, for instance,” Patek said. “This year, there will be one driving school in the entire state. As we move forward, we’re going to have to rely less on volunteers and more on staff or contractors to organize events. Where driving schools are concerned, we have to figure out whether to morph away from having an instructor in every car or holding the line on what we’ve always believed in.”

The club’s print magazines have been hit by rising costs for paper and postage, forcing a reduction of issues from monthly to bi-monthly while the remainder of content is provided online. The club’s weeklong Oktoberfest—now O’Fest Forever—has become a biannual event, supplemented by weekend events that give members a chance to connect with their friends in the club without needing to take an entire week off work, or to travel such long distances to do so.

Those connections represent the club’s true value in 2025, as they have since 1969. “We like to say that the brand brought us together, but the friends we make within the club are what keep us here,” Patek said. “The people in this club are really kindhearted and generous of spirit, and that remains a constant.”

For BMW of North America, having a large and active club has been a

consistent factor in its own success. BMW CCA members remain its most loyal customers, as well as the strongest ambassadors a brand could hope for. "BMW CCA members are wonderful people, they love the brand and they purchase many vehicles each year. For all of that, we at BMW NA, thank you!" Plucinsky said.

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