Feature
All About Tech Days

by Moshe K. Levy

Wally Whiting of Iron Cycles in Jamesburg, NJ, teaches carburetor troubleshooting to a client during a Tech Day hosted by the shop. Having a knowledgeable mechanic present at a Tech Day is imperative.

ONE OF THE most positive offshoots of the internet on the motorcycling community is the ability of like-minded riders to connect with each other instantly. Riding partners, route trip planners, shadetree mechanics, and fellow brand enthusiasts are often just a mouse click away. An outgrowth of this explosive networking is Tech Days, which are simply organized gatherings of motorcyclists with the express purpose of · learning DIY maintenance and service.

So What's Involved in a Tech Day?

Like planning a menu for a dinner party, a Tech Day can run the gamut from a fast food chowdown to a black tie gourmet affair. Some Tech Days are loosely planned meetings of a few people who are there to teach, learn, or provide support for very basic maintenance procedures. Others are multi-day congregations complete with detailed step-by-step demonstration materials, in-depth Powerpoint presentations, and intricate models which clarify complex issues. Often there is a theme to a Tech Day, where an expert teaches the attendees a specific task, such as how to service a clutch properly. Sometimes, it's more casual, where everybody does their own thing, comforted by the presence of others performing similar tasks nearby. To ensure things go well, both the hosts and participants need to align their expectations and work together for mutual benefit, so here is a short list of general suggestions to help.

Hosting a Tech Day

The most accomplished Tech Day host I know is Mr. Todd Byrum, who is in charge of the BMW Airhead Beemer Club's Pennsylvania Chapter. His first Tech Day 10 years ago was comprised of a few BMW Airhead riders getting together in a small barn, and has since mushroomed into an annual 3-day affair called Pennsylvania Airheads Supertech.

At Supertech, hundreds of "students" vie for the 60 available spaces to attend multiple classes, taught by some of the preeminent experts in the field of classic BMWs. Noted BMW authorities like Paul Glaves and Tom Cutter are brought in to demonstrate various maintenance and repair techniques, and students ride and fly in from far and wide for a chance to learn from them. Professionally produced mechanical cutaways and models are in abundance, so the inner workings of various mechanical parts can be demystified. There is even a formal dinner and awards ceremony at the end, and that it all transpires without a hitch is a testament to many hours of careful planning. The most important aspect of hosting a Tech Day Above all, Mr. Byrum explained, is to foster a positive learning environment which is both entertaining and informative.

The Supertech example demonstrates what a thriving Tech Day can transform into, but an event like this grows slowly over time, through the tireless efforts of its hosts and attendees. Likely, the new Tech Day host will find a much smaller, more informal group to entertain, and as a result will have to be very hands-on in the planning and running of the event. Here is some good advice handed down from some successful Tech Day hosts we interviewed:

Create a General Plan

The host should conceptualize what the purpose of the Tech Day will be. Is there a special task everyone is gathering to learn about, or is more of an open forum? Is it a one-day event, or a weekend? What are the starting and ending times? Are specialized tools available, or should people bring their own?

Decide on a Venue

Most Tech Days are held at the host's house, though larger ones can take place at shops, garages, or even rented spaces. The host should decide up front how many people his / her space can accommodate, and invite people accordingly. Obviously, open spaces with a good selection of tools and lifts are preferable to a one-bay garage in the middle of a crowded apartment complex. Are there dealers locally if parts are required? Are hotels or camping spaces nearby for overnighters?

Manage Expectations, Pt. 1

The host must manage his own expectations, since he may be so busy running the Tech Day that any work he had planned for his own motorcycle may not fit in. The host must also firmly manage the expectations of Tech Day participants in terms of what is and what is not allowed in his space and the neighborhood at large. Finally, the host has a responsibility where applicable to manage his neighbors' expectations as well. As musical as some enthusiasts may find it, certain neighbors may not appreciate the sound of a dozen open-piped bikes storming into the development early Saturday morning, and the last thing the host needs is to field complaints from his own community. The host should notify his neighbors of the big day ahead of time, invite them if possible, and inform the attendees as to what standards of behavior are expected.

Generate Interest

The host can advertise his plans online, in print, club newsletters, word of mouth, or by any other means he chooses. The information should be detailed in terms of overall plan, venue, some expectation guidelines and any other pertinent information. The host can decide how much effort to put into the marketing of the event based on the amount of people he wants to attend.

Bing Carburetor and BMW Airhead Engine cutaways at Airhead Supertech 2009. Props like these can be invaluable for educating Tech Day participants on DIY service issues.

Hank Vogel lectures about BSA primary drives. Tech Days focused on one specific subject like this can illuminate complex issues in depth.

Be Prepared

The host's space needs to have the basics readily available for any mechanical work that is going to be performed: Commonly used tools, plenty of rags, some rubber floor mats or cardboard to place under bikes during fluid changes, paper towels and degreasing soap in the washroom, some snacks and drinks, and some extra chairs where people can rest or watch the proceedings are the bare minimum items required.

Solicit Experts

In every chat room or riding group, there are some experienced hands who are eager to selflessly dispense advice and teach others. Some of these experts are professional, others self taught—but these people are very useful to have around during a Tech Day. The host should prepare the event in part based upon the expertise available.

Attending a Tech Day

You're in your favorite motorcycle forum and are thrilled to see that someone is planning a Tech Day near you. As the host prepares for the event, the attendee also needs to be aware of his own responsibilities to make it successful. Most of this is common sense but, nevertheless, bears repeating.

Me Casa Es Su Casa

The host is opening his home to you, and perhaps his tool chest as well. Show your appreciation by treating the premises with respect, working neatly and not permanently "borrowing" that fancy wrench you see lying around on the tool bench. In general, lend a hand where you see it's needed. Whenever possible, be self sufficient—bring your own tools and your own maintenance items (fluids, parts, etc.) so that you can work with a minimum of interruption to yourself and others around you. If you arrive early, always help set up, and before you leave, always help clean up. Consider taking up a donation from the group for the host to cover his expenses. Be courteous to any neighbors who stop in, and don't disturb the peace of the neighborhood with boorish behavior. In other words, treat the place as if it were your own or better, and you'll probably be welcome to return.

Manage Expectations, Pt. 2

The attendees' expectations are as important as the host's. Arrive ready to learn how to work on your own machine, or to help others do the same. The event is not an excuse to limp your poorly running machine to the group for free service, nor should you expect your motorcycle's problems to be the center of the universe. By the same token, be honest with yourself and others about your own mechanical ability. People are more likely to help if they have an accurate assessment of what's involved with both the motorcycle and the rider before beginning a project. If the host is planning an eight-hour Tech Day, don't start a two-day project. Take good notes for future reference if classes are being held. Most of all, force yourself to learn at least one new DIY task, even if it's a simple one. That is the very point of attending a Tech Day.

In conclusion, the reasons for both hosting and attending Tech Days are as numerous and varied as the individuals who participate in them. Whether for camaraderie, a serious desire to learn, a need to teach, or even just to hang out and put faces to screen names, Tech Days are fast sprouting up within the motorcycling community and bringing us all closer together as a result. In this uncertain economic climate, learning how to work on your own bike can save hundreds or even thousands of dollars per year. Scan your favorite forums for a Tech Day near you, and if there are none planned, consider hosting one yourself. The new friends and new skills you acquire will be well worth the effort.
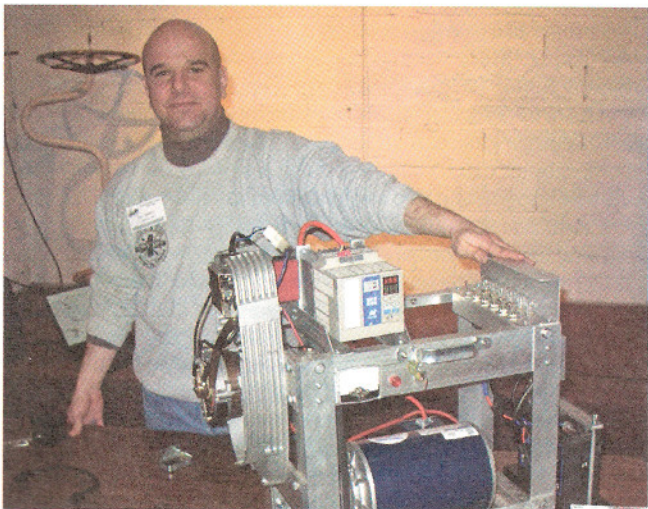
Shocking revelations? Eric Heilveil uses this purpose-built Charging System Demonstrator to explain BMW electrics at Airhead Supertech 2009.