

ATV

Sportsman ACE launched after heavy research

Latest Polaris product aimed at bringing in new participants

BY DAVE McMAHON

■ EDITOR IN CHIEF

The launch of the Sportsman ACE by Polaris in January was unique in a variety of ways. Foremost, the vehicle, best described as a single-seat side-by-side and geared at new entrants to the marketplace, set itself apart in terms of consumer insight during its run from paper to production.

“We probably did as much or more focus group research — understanding what we were trying to do with it — than probably any product we’ve ever developed,” Dave Longren, vice president of Off-Road Vehicles and chief technical officer at Polaris Industries, told *Powersports Business* shortly after the product’s launch. “You had the idea and concept that there might be something there. What we’re trying to do is listen to what people like or don’t like — why aren’t you riding? There are a lot of people in side-by-sides that if they had the opportunity, they don’t want to be riding as a passenger all the time — they want to drive. So you’re trying to figure all that out and you get a big headache putting together the puzzle that has all the things they want. We have to ask lots and lots of questions to get a grasp of it.”

Polaris launched the Sportsman ACE during its annual North American company-wide sales meeting, this year held in Austin, Texas. The event also included a webinar on the product to the dealer network, followed an hour later by a public unveil.

“It was a surprise to everyone that we had something coming,” Longren said.

The ACE was kept under wraps until its appropriate reveal.

“This one was maybe a little different because we had patents that were issued on the product about two years ago that showed the architecture,” Longren said. “They were issued sooner than we thought they would, but what was going



The launch of the Sportsman ACE was global in stature, with vehicles on site at dealerships and events throughout the world on launch day in January. North American dealers first learned of the product via a webinar at the OEM’s sales meeting in Austin, Texas.

on internally with the development never leaked at all. It’s challenging when you have to do all the development work, the testing and marketing, and in this case we were building production and getting ready for immediate ship. The risk was there but luckily it didn’t get out.”

With the global market also getting a simultaneous reveal of the ACE, interest and feedback were immediate upon the launch. Dealers were able to place orders as fast as they could get them in after the launch, and the ACE was expected to ship to dealers within a week. The launch of the RZR XP 1000 last year also featured nearly immediate product shipments to dealers.

“We’ve gotten into a cadence on the off-road side where when we introduce something, we want to have it available,” Longren said. “We like to have the product available and ready to go, just to meet the customer expectations on it.”

Polaris had the ACE on display around the world on launch day, at either trade shows or other events. The vehicle could be seen at Dakar Rally events in South America, and at key dealerships in Australia.

“It’s the first time we’ve been able to coordi-

nate something like that and pull it off,” Longren said. “The ability to introduce the product globally is becoming more and more important to us, particularly with products that have more global reach as opposed to a regional niche reach.”

Longren never gets tired of launch day events for new products such as the Sportsman ACE.

“You have your own perception of what the market is, or the opportunity or the problem that you’re trying to solve, but you never know until you start to go broader with it whether you really got it right and whether or not people really get it,” Longren said. “The part to me that is the best is that we’re trying to create a new category of bringing new entrants in to allow them to enjoy off-road riding — either elderly people who can’t or people who want to do something different, or they want a smaller vehicle. The response we’ve gotten globally has exceeded my thoughts — they get it immediately. That’s been the cool part.”

Designers and engineers were met with the task of appeasing consumers who liked the size of the footprint of an ATV, the steering and foot controls of a car application of a side-by-side

from a controllability and predictability standpoint, and the comfort of bucket seats vs. sit-on. The ease of ingress/egress, a key attribute for the older set, is one of the hallmarks of the ACE.

“Dealers view it very favorably in terms of getting people who currently aren’t buying into the market,” Longren said. “Maybe they go with this product and then later want to step up to a side-by-side. Guys that are die-hard ATV riders, that want to be rider active, they probably aren’t going to want this machine.”

The 32 horsepower ProStar engine and \$7,499 pricetag are the two most important numbers that accompany the ACE.

“The power to weight ratio — we didn’t set it up to be super aggressive in acceleration. It’s very controllable, yet it has good power and decent speed. The engine is right for it. The right balance or combination of a vehicle that we’ve gotten really good at in the RZR world, the power-suspension-agility package — we’ve brought that back into this product. The opportunity is there and real. Putting a good vehicle that performs appropriately into that spot is going to grow the industry, which is good for everybody.” **PSB**

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ACE creates new market, and its new buyers

Part rec, part utility, early signs are it's a hit

Roger Hapka, director of product planning for Off-Road Vehicles, and Ben Dieter, ATV product manager, shared their insights on the launch of the Sportsman ACE with Dave McMahon, editor in chief of *Powersports Business*.

PSB: *Wow, first of all what a great launch. The best we could come up with as a description is part ATV/part UTV. How did you determine the ACE would be a viable product for the market?*

RH: We do spend a significant amount of time and effort studying market trends and consumer trends. The observations were telling us that there was a potential opportunity here, so we put together some concepts and went out and shopped them with prospective consumers. We had some targets in mind. It gave us some good direction on what people were looking for, so we did build some prototypes and looked at variety of possibilities and did some consumer testing, and that really led us to the configuration of the product that we launched this week.

PSB: *As you're meeting with these focus groups, how many twists and turns were there before the final product was formed?*

RH: Some of the things that we were trying to read as we were going through the research were should we be looking at a product that's more recreational in nature, or should we be looking at a product that's more utility in nature. As we were going through the research, we realized it needed to be something that captured a good combination of both [and] was going to add more value to the prospective consumer base.

PSB: *What sort of reaction did you get from some of the first riders?*

RH: The reactions we got from anybody who wanted to ride it this week were very, very positive. Two of the things that come to mind were people who saw it for the first time, when they had a chance to ride it, they thought, 'I won't fit in that machine. It's going to be too small.'

One individual was 6-foot-3, 275 pounds and he was convinced he wouldn't fit in it. He was totally surprised how well he fit in the machine. There were some comments about people saying they were more comfortable in that than they are in a RZR. They didn't think a vehicle that small and compact would offer that much space. Second is the performance of the machine. We positioned it as a 32 horsepower ProStar engine, and it sets expectations. After they had a chance to ride it, they were pleasantly surprised at how well it performed.

BD: We had some female riders who didn't want to get out of it. They felt at home in it. That was encouraging. They felt it was a perfect blend of power, performance and capability. It wasn't too much; it wasn't too little; it was perfect.

PSB: *Looking at some of the early designs, does the final product look similar to what you had set out with?*

RH: Initially when we looked at the designs, there were some more sporty designs vs. utilitarian designs, and like I said, we ended up in the middle. The most important thing was following up on the feedback we were getting on our research. There were three themes that kept coming back to us: comfort, confidence and fun. For comfort, you think of ease of operation and accessing new customer groups, the things that were important were that it have a seat and steering wheel, and familiar foot pedals — a throttle pedal and brake pedal. Also, ease of ingress/egress was important as well for a broad prospective customer group. I think it's fair to say that this vehicle is easier to get in and out of than any vehicle in our off-road lineup. You can actually plant yourself in the seat while your feet are still on the ground, and likewise getting out, you can place your feet on the ground before you get off the seat. You can't do that with any of our other vehicles today, so that was a big plus as well.

PSB: *It looks cool as anything and is priced nice at \$7,499. How much of an attraction do you think it will be for the "non-non" market, or those with no powersports vehicles previously?*

RH: We're looking at that in two ways. With

new entrants to the sport, and the second one where you have families and not everybody participates. We're considering those new entrants as well, but not necessarily a group that has no familiarity. It might be a family that has ATVs but maybe mom doesn't ride them. That could open up some things. We think this vehicle will be attractive because it comes in at a lower price point, and it also fits very easily in a pickup truck so you don't need to invest in a trailer right off the bat. A lot of our feedback has been that they wanted something smaller. What we've been able to determine is that for prospective buyers it's not necessarily that they want something smaller, they want something that they're comfortable riding.

PSB: *I imagine that since it's so easy to get into and out of, the older demo could be a match?*

RH: We think about the population of people who brought us to the peak of the ATV market in 2004-05 timeframe, they're getting older. We've all heard the saying 'With age comes the cage.' For people with less mobility, the fact that this is one of the easiest vehicles to get in and out of — there's some opportunity there. We don't position it as a high performance vehicle, but more of an entry-level vehicle when it comes to performance. We're expecting that this product will allow us to grow the category and not just substitute our products or competitive products. It's one of the best opportunities we've had in recent history to be able to do that.

PSB: *I'd like to take that thing for a ride on the closest trail around, but with the storage capacity, it appears to be more than capable for work also.*

BD: We talked about it being the perfect blend of recreation and utility. We didn't sacrifice one for the other. You mentioned the fact that



The all-new 2014 Polaris Sportsman ACE blends power, performance and capability in what can be best described as a single-seat side-by-side.

it has storage capacity, with the rack up front that you can strap things to and almost three gallons of storage underneath. It also has a big box in the back for hauling spraying or securing tools, mending fences. The storage capacity is significant, and it pulls 1,500 pounds. It's four-wheel drive, sure-footed. I'll hit it again how big it is the ingress/egress. You think about the farmer or rancher, they're often not driving long distances, but rather checking fences or looking after livestock. They can get in and out easily. There may be other situations where you have a farmhand. You might be the owner, but you'd be more comfortable putting a farmhand in this.

PSB: *There are more than 20 accessories available for it already? Sounds like a good way to put the personal touch on the unit.*

BD: It's a huge benefit for the consumer to make it into the vehicle they want it to be. On an ATV, there's a limited amount you can do to be protected from the elements. This opens a new set of possibilities with the accessory integration. **PSB**



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