

# 2012 PSB Executive of the Year: Rob Dingman

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April 30, 2012

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## Advocating for the future

Rob Dingman spent years on Capitol Hill working in government relations for both the American Motorcyclist Association and the Motorcycle Industry Council.

So when Congress passed the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act (CPSIA) in 2008, Dingman was already more than two years into his current position as president and CEO of the AMA. No sale of motorcycles or ATVs for kids under 12 beginning Jan. 1, 2012, due to sweeping language in the law? Not under Dingman's watch. His experience on the Hill paid off, as Dingman's guidance of the AMA's grassroots effort to get the "lead law" overturned eventually led to President Obama signing legislation that repealed the ban on Aug. 12, 2011. For his efforts, Dingman has been named the 2012 Powersports Business Executive of the Year.

Dingman's leadership during the three-year battle was impressive on a variety of fronts, but most importantly to the industry's future riders. The AMA's grassroots efforts to put a face to those affected by the CPSIA showed legislators the importance of riding age-appropriate vehicles. The positive, healthy environment in which young riders thrive on their vehicles, and with their families, also helped to get the point across. For OEMs, aftermarket companies and track promoters, the lead law ban had obvious economic impacts.

Dingman, who turns 46 in May, is a self-described off-road and street motorcyclist. He lives with his wife and three children near the AMA's Ohio headquarters. Dingman, a native of Glens Falls, N.Y., provides *Powersports Business* readers with insight on the AMA's role in the overturning of the lead law.

## ***How did you get started in the industry?***

I started here at the AMA as president in 2006, and in 2007 I became president and CEO. I worked for the AMA as our Washington, D.C., representative back from about 1994-98. I had also worked for the MIC out of their government relations office in Virginia prior to that, from about 1990-94. I moved back to my home state of New York ran the Highway Safety office for the governor until I came back to the AMA in 2006.

## ***You've got two weekends to ride. Where are you going?***

Off-road, it's Colorado or Moab. On-road, it's the Adirondacks, around the mountain lakes.

## ***Tell us about the AMA's success in 2011 and how you contributed to that.***

Certainly getting the fix for the lead law was something that we had worked a few years on to get corrected. It was a wrong-headed law and we were able to bring the resources of the AMA to bear, and by that I mean primarily our membership — because what really carried the day on that issue was legislators hearing from their constituencies and voters. We were able to get tens of thousands of motorcyclists and parents of young motorcyclists to write their members of Congress and let them know that this needed to be changed.

It was about having the right infrastructure, the right people and the right technology in place to be able to do this. I



don't know that we would have been able to accomplish what we did — not just the AMA, but the motorcycling community in general — even just a few short years ago. We made some changes here at the AMA to become more effective in being able to get the message out and generate the cards and letters.

***Was the bulk of that related to technology?***

A lot of it has to do with that, yes. That's one of the challenges I faced when I came here, to bring the AMA into this millennium. We had some pretty antiquated computer systems. Our infrastructure didn't lend itself to us being the type of organization we needed to be. We didn't have the capability to generate the kinds of correspondence to elected officials that we were able to do with the lead law. We were able to target certain legislative districts.

***How did the AMA's personnel in D.C. provide the strength you needed?***

Part of what we did also was to grow our Washington, D.C., staff. When I worked for the AMA before, I was the lone Washington representative there. I grew the office to two people before I left and now we're up to four. Not only to have the people there, but also our grassroots person is there now, and that job used to be here in Ohio. When that position became vacant, I made the decision to fill it in D.C., just because of the access to a great talent pool there. You're closer to where the action is. A lot of that really made a difference in being to accomplish what was accomplished. That's a significant part of why we were successful, both from a technology standpoint and personnel standpoint, and having the infrastructure in place to be able to do it.

***With your previous positions with the AMA, MIC or state government, had you ever taken on anything of this magnitude?***

Absolutely. With the MIC I was one of the primary advocates behind the recreational trails program back in 1991. One of the other major things I was involved with was the repeal of penalties on states that didn't have helmet laws when I was with the AMA. I would put this right up there with those as being the most significant type of things that the AMA or the motorcycling community has ever accomplished. I was really happy that I could be part of each of those things. This one, however, had the potential to have a tremendous impact on the industry.

***What is the biggest opportunity for the powersports industry, and how can the industry take advantage of it?***

To help grow the AMA is the greatest opportunity for the powersports industry. The lead issue was perhaps one of the most visible examples of the kind of work the AMA does, but that's just one of many things we're involved with that have the potential to really be detrimental to the industry. The AMA is that entity that can speak with one voice on behalf of motorcyclists, so helping to grow the AMA is the biggest opportunity for the powersports industry.

***What has been the biggest challenge in your current position and how have you dealt with it?***

One of the biggest challenges I face here is to be all things to all people. Motorcycling is a very diverse endeavor. It's difficult to accommodate the needs and desires of every one of those segments, because no matter what you do, somebody out there thinks you're not doing enough for their particular interest. It's a balancing act to be all things to all people. Having said that, that's also our strength — the diversity in our membership. Our community is our strength, because we are a disparate group of people who can help bring out opinions to elected officials and others. It's both a strength and a challenge at the same time.

***What's the best advice you can give to others in the industry?***

Things are never as good as they seem, nor are they as bad as they seem.

***When did you first see the lead law as being something that could be detrimental?***

Shortly after it was passed. There were some things that were part of that CPSIA that were actually positives, that

were touted by the industry at the time. People have forgotten that there was an element of that CPSIA law that was pretty positive. It codified some of the provisions of the consent decree that the manufacturers had entered into with the Consumer Products Safety Commission years ago regarding ATVs and providing free training and not selling three-wheelers and things like that.

***Why was it important for the AMA to take a lead role in providing grassroots support of the charge against overturning the ban?***

It was a joint effort, and there were lots of groups involved. Certainly the MIC was truly instrumental in doing this. The AMA was the one organization that could bring the grassroots to bear in the equation. The thing that drives this home for me is that there were a lot of groups that were affected by this law. There were toymakers that were looking for exclusions, there were zipper manufacturers that were looking for exclusions, and we were the only group that got a categorical exclusion from the law. The reason that we got the categorical exclusion from the law was that we were the only group that had a constituency of voters that we could bring to bear that would write letters and let their elected officials know that this thing needed to be changed. We were the only group that had that resource, and that's why we're the only group that got the categorical exclusion.

You had these groups that were spending ridiculous amounts of money on lobbyists, and they weren't as successful as we were because we had the grassroots support. There were a lot of groups that were trying to piggyback onto our support, trying to get their particular issue taken care of, and in the end, we were the only group that got the categorical exclusion.

***So the riders themselves who were writing to their lawmakers helped seal the law's fate?***

A lot of people don't understand how the AMA goes about our government relations business. We have always relied on our members and grassroots is how we're effective. We don't have an army of lobbyists waiting to swoop into the Capitol and fix a problem. That's not how it works. We are doing the behind-the-scenes work, informing our members and others in the motorcycle community about a particular issue and encouraging them to write their elected officials to make that change. That's way more effective than a lobbyist that comes in from K Street and tries to plead the case of its client.

The real strength of the AMA is our grassroots efforts. It's the one thing other groups don't have the success with. You couldn't have accomplished what we did on this without the grassroots.

***What type of leadership qualities did you turn to during the duration of the ban?***

In this particular instance, it's perseverance. You can never give up. If you get shut down on one avenue, then you've got to go another route. Our staff was very much in that mode and they persevered through any kind of adversity that came up through this thing. It was also establishing a vision and saying 'This is what we need to do. This is what the AMA needs to be in to be able to fend off these kinds of attacks from the non-motorcycling world through our elected officials or government.' We need to create an infrastructure that enables us to be able to effect change and we need to keep our eyes on that goal.

***With your familiarity with how things operate in D.C., you must have been in your element.***

I made a number of trips to D.C. myself to have personal meetings with elected officials, and with the Consumer Products Safety Commission. One of the most significant things we did during the process was to host the AMA Family Capitol Hill Climb in May. It was really impressive to me. I had been involved with government relations and lobbying work for years; I had never seen anything like what we were able to put together there. Congressman Denny Rehberg from Montana was our bill sponsor in the House and when he came into the hearing room where we were holding this rally, we had all these kids dressed in motocross gear — boots and jerseys. He comes into the room and says 'I want you guys to stand up on the table behind me.' I'm sitting there thinking 'Can you imagine if a congressman came in and had all these paid lobbyists in skirts and suits and said 'Go ahead and stand up on the

table?' It just struck me, this image — this is in the only group that would be invited to do that, and certainly the only group that would be able to get away with doing that. It was really an impressive image in my mind that drove home that we're a different group here asking for something than they're used to seeing on Capitol Hill.

***Describe some of the meetings you had in D.C.***

We met with the senator [West Virginia Dem. John Rockefeller] and the senators' staff who wrote the original language. They confided to us at one point that they had thought about banning these vehicles outright, and we said 'We'll go this route instead.' A lot of people talk about this being a poorly crafted law. I don't think it was. I think it was intentional. When you realize that's what you're up against, you realize how uphill it is. But then you realize the depth and breadth of grassroots support that you've been able to generate, and that spurs you on. Even though they have the power, you've got a certain amount of power through the grassroots. It's just a matter of making sure those voices get heard.

There were other legislators frankly who were trying to steer us into something less than what we wanted. We were always advocating for the categorical exclusion. There were some legislators that said 'Don't you think you should compromise and let's just lower the age limit.' We said 'No, that's not what we want — that's still a ban on the sale of product.'

***The AMA played a momentous role in bringing the faces of the fan to the forefront, with events like the Capitol Hill rally. What were some of the ways the AMA helped bring those faces to lawmakers?***

The key thing there was the Family Capitol Hill Climb, which was really effective in helping legislators see that this is effecting individuals, it's effecting families. This is not just 'Let's stick it to these people who are making toys in China.' We had a video contest as part of the Rally, where kids made videos talking about the importance of motorcycles and ATVs to them.

***Overturing the lead law ban was not a solo effort by any one person or entity. On the other hand, your position allowed you to guide the various facets of the AMA that helped get the law overturned. How were you able to bring all those segments — OEMs, riders, aftermarket companies — together to reach your goal?***

The role of the AMA is to bring all those integers together. You've got divergent interests there. The promoters might have different interests than the rider, and the rider might have a different interest than the manufacturer. At the end of the day, it's in nobody's interest to have a ban on the sale of youth model products. You have to focus on those things that you do have in common and recognize that we're all up against the same issue.

***How much collaboration was there with other parts of the industry that helped the law get overturned?***

Our government relations staff in D.C. was in regular contact with the MIC staff. For a guy like Sean Hilbert, the CEO of Cobra Moto, this law was about to put him out of business. All they make is product for that age group. It was right in the wheelhouse. It wasn't just being able to eliminate lead content from the product. It was being able to undertake the testing that was required to prove it, which was onerous. One of the things Sean told me was that he was pretty confident he could get the lead to the quantity that's allowable, but the onerous part is proving it and getting the testing laboratory.

***How much of a feeling of accomplishment did you have when you learned that President Obama had signed the bill into law?***

It was a long process, but every one of these things is a long process. It's rare that you can affect change quickly or overnight. In this case, the success was great, but this is just one of many issues that we're working on. Certainly it was highly visible, but we're always working on some issues that have the potential to be extremely detrimental to motorcycling and the motorcycle industry. Everything from land use issues, access issues, E15, motorcycle

checkpoints. There's such a laundry list of issues that we're working on day in and day out. Yeah, it's great to get a win, particularly a highly visible one, but we can't rest on our laurels, because there's always another battle, which is why the AMA is so vitally important to motorcycling.

***How has the AMA grown under your leadership? What are some things about the organization that give you satisfaction?***

I'd like to think that we're a much more efficient organization. We have, I think, a greater focus on our mission to promote the motorcycle lifestyle and protect the future of motorcycling. I've tried to focus the organization on that mission and not allow it to be distracted by some of the other issues that we have found ourselves getting involved in. The AMA, because we've been all things to all people, over the years we lost focus on that mission of promoting the motorcycle lifestyle and protecting the future of motorcycling. If you can't keep a focus on that, you do get distracted and you get involved in areas you shouldn't be involved with, or areas that you might like to be involved in, but they detract from that mission. I've tried to bring that focus back. The infrastructure and technology and having the right people in the right jobs — those are the key things. As I mentioned earlier, I don't think five years ago we would have been situated to do the things we were able to do with respect to the lead law specifically. We've undergone a dramatic culture change here in the organization that I believe is now paying dividends.



***How has membership grown or declined in recent years?***

We have experienced the same thing everyone else has in the industry. We took a bit of a decline in membership, but we have definitely stayed ahead of the downturn in the industry. We would have been well below where we are now had we had the same percentage decline that we've seen industry-wide. Frankly we've held our own through this and recently in the last couple of months we've started to see an uptick again. We're right around 225,000 members. We've tried to improve the value proposition of the AMA membership. I want people to join the AMA for our advocacy efforts. I recognize for a lot of people that's not enough, so we've tried to provide more and better benefits to be an AMA member so that you more than get your money back. One of those things is roadside assistance. That's a great value add for a dealer who's selling a new bike. It's one more thing for the dealers to deal with, but in the long run it's in the dealers' best interest to have a strong AMA.

***What advice would you give to dealers in terms of promoting the AMA?***

That's a great question. At point of sale, the dealer's first objective is to sell that product. Point of sale is where people should be introduced to the AMA. The AMA is the entity that's out there that's looking out for the interests of the rider and the industry. It's in the dealers' best interest for there to be a strong AMA. I always say that if the AMA didn't exist, it would have to be invented. There's no other entity that exists whose sole purpose for existence is to promote the motorcycle lifestyle and protect the future of motorcycling. That's something we can all benefit from. If there's no AMA, we could see lots of things happen that are bad for the industry and that leads to more dealerships going out business. It's hard to see because there's rarely that instant gratification of 'I'll sell you an AMA membership and we'll solve your problem tomorrow.' The AMA is something you need when you don't realize you need it.

***What do you think riders think of when they think of the AMA?***

What I'd like the riders to think is that the AMA is the premier advocate for motorcycling and that the AMA gets me and my passion for motorcycling, whatever the variety -- street, dirt, racing, whatever. There's something in the AMA

for me as a motorcyclist and the AMA is looking out for the future of me as a motorcyclist and the future of motorcycling.