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## Year-End Strategies to Rev Up Your Marketing Machine

A fast lane to success for the present and beyond

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For those in the marketing driver's seat, the past two years have yielded a wild ride with lots of unexpected bumps and turns. At the outset of the pandemic, our collective marketing budgets were frozen as we hovered like deer in the headlights to see how this unexpected and unprecedented pandemic would play out.

And then ... *bam!* Boating emerged as a great antidote to the coronavirus shutdowns. As the rush for boating products and services was unleashed, marketing budgets downshifted quickly from traditional spends to more limited brand and customer-retention efforts; that is, if those budgets were spent at all. Many marine companies simply pocketed marketing funds to fatten bulging bottom lines.

We were in the fast lane, powering ahead with abandon until we turned the corner in early fall of this year, when we skidded to an abrupt halt.

Today, new-boat deliveries are waning, with some manufacturers in sold-out positions through 2022. Preowned inventory is scarce, with customers holding on to their current boats longer, unable to trade or upgrade. We've pushed the boundaries from feast to near famine as inventory and production shortages, shipping delays and continued supply-chain issues choke retail sales. And while inventory shortages often drive up profit margins, this stall could make for a very complicated course ahead.

What's a smart marketer to do?

If your company put the brakes on marketing in 2021, it's time to restart and rev up the engines in this final sprint of the year. While there's little need to advertise inventory, I propose four marketing strategies to get those motors running.

# The Art of the Presale

In a previous column, I recommended an industrywide paradigm shift, moving from traditional inventory to preselling strategies. If you haven't initiated a presold program at retail, then you're behind the curve. It's time to accelerate and navigate accordingly.

Give customers reasons to order their dream machines now. Make the process easy, fun, exciting and advantageous. Spell out the features and benefits of a smart prepurchase program to keep retail momentum rolling, even when inventory isn't. Create power-packed preorder incentives. Educate customers about the benefits, instill urgency and start to stockpile the sales pipeline.

Brand your prepurchase program to give it sizzle and credibility. Produce downloadable flyers and videos to explain and promote the program. Pump up point-of-sale in the showroom and at the boat show display. Prominently position the campaign on your website, via e-blasts and on social media channels.

# Address Service Woes

I'd wager that your customer service took a hit amid the fervor of 2021 sales activities and the unprecedented demand. Here's a direct question, and I challenge you to answer honestly: If you were a customer of your business, how would you describe your experience during the past year?

No matter your audience composition, you need to engage your customers. Send a personal letter from the owner or general manager, sincerely thanking customers for their business, loyalty and patience. Consider pairing the letter with an online survey link, inviting them to share insights about their experiences with your organization. This transparency will open the door to dialogue and allow you to address brewing issues.

# Curated Events

Did you host any fun customer events in 2021? Covid-19 mandates precluded gatherings in the first half of the year, but many organizations rolled out events in the second half, including B2B and B2C boat shows. One retail dealership strategically offered only smaller group activities instead of the traditional, larger crowd-pleasers. The mix included seasonal boating safety classes, fishing seminars, women's events, smaller group raft-ups and a grand finale with a fun drive-in outdoor movie night for private vessels, with a 30-foot jumbo screen.

I appreciate that Covid concerns and circumstances vary, but whenever you can safely gather the clan, it's great to do so.

# Up Your Marketing Game

My fourth and final recommendation is to pop the clutch and gear up to improve content marketing initiatives. During most of last year and into this season, most of us were fueled daily from content streamed by trusted sources. Likewise, we need to become the trusted content provider of choice among our targeted communities. Content marketing not only positions us front and center among our most valued groups, but also extends a lifeline to entice newbies into our fold, all the while boosting search- engine optimization.

Consider key customer communications to be a critical component of your business. Candidly analyze how well you've converted, customized and digitized those key communication deliverables. Have you taken the time to analyze customer data to determine what type of content best resonates with each audience segment? Have you responded accordingly?

My favorite go-to source on content marketing is author and expert Marcus Sheridan, a respected speaker at many industry conferences. He says: "The marine industry needs to understand the basics, like focusing on the big five: cost, problems/negative, comparisons, reviews and best, as those are the most researched phrases/subjects online. This is what consumers want to know. Businesses must be willing to step up and give this to them."

Are you strategically selecting targeted keywords to elicit top search results and engagement? Does your content address and answer the top questions that customers and prospects have about your product or service offerings? Does your content solve problems?

More considerations: Does your content position your brand and team as the experts within the segments you serve? Do you include great visuals to complement your messaging? Have you established a content delivery schedule with sufficient frequency?

In terms of what's hot and on the horizon for 2022, Sheridan says the "next big thing" will be self-service.

"Essentially, self-service on a website allows users to do or learn things that previously required them to talk to the business," he says. "Things like pricing calculators, comparison and assessment tools, etc., are going to be huge and especially critical in the marine industry.

"If those in the marine space haven't gone all-in on video yet," he adds, "that's where I'd start. ... It's too important, and the train has left the station."

## Think Like the Customer

What are you doing to continually hone your craft? I take a fun approach, like a treasure hunt. I try to think like the customer and search a topic. I plug in keywords, and instantly my hunt uncovers content gold, which for me includes the top five search results. I carefully review and benchmark them so I can take those lessons to the bank.

Here's the real revelation in this content search game: Where does your content land? What tools and technology are you integrating to better optimize, automate and measure your content marketing efforts? Are you testing artificial intelligence? Leveraging the rapid growth in voice search with evolving strategies? How successfully are you converting content voyeurs to bona fide leads in your sales funnel?

Regarding social media, are you operating on cruise control, doing the same things on the same platforms? While I absolutely recommend focusing resources on the channels or platforms that best align with your demographic, I'm all for testing new areas. A retail colleague asked if I thought TikTok was a worthy investment. His product offering skews to a younger demographic, and since TikTok is exploding in that segment, my suggestion was to study it for best practices, have some fun on the creative front and throw out some breadcrumbs to see how well it performs.

I hope these tips help you jumpstart your marketing so you're ready to roll on all cylinders as we cruise into 2022.

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