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Best Marine Marketing and Top Trends of the Year

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The film industry has the Oscars; the music industry has the Grammys. In the marine industry, the best marketers win Neptune Awards.

This year's Neptune competition, hosted by Marine Marketers of America, drew a record 172 entries in 20 categories, which were judged by 50 marketing professionals from different segments of the industry. Entrants submitted their best work with a detailed summary that included goals, objectives and ROI achieved.

I know what you're thinking, but I'm not going to tell you only about the winners. Equally interesting are the marketing trends we can spot through a review of this year's entries. Judging by the number of entries per category, the top two areas of marine industry focus — just one entry apart — are video and integrated marketing campaigns. Together, these two categories comprised 49 of the 172 entries.

Video as kingpin should come as no surprise. I've written multiple columns about the dominance and growth of video. It is projected that by next year, 80 percent of all content consumed online will be video. Today, video generates more shares than all text and image posts combined. If your business isn't investing in video and actively using it, you're missing the boat. Nationwide and in our industry, video is today's most important and top-ranked marketing trend.

Malibu Boats earned Neptunes in the video and innovation categories for its Axis Wake 2019 T Series and its use of animation technology. Malibu evoked the imagination of the viewer and created an emotional connection using stunning visuals and storytelling. On the innovation front, the company integrated cutting-edge animated graphics to educate and explain its engineering technology and how it creates "the perfect wake."

The integrated marketing campaign category — which demonstrates how a company orchestrates and executes a mix of marketing components through multiple platforms to reach, influence and engage a target audience — drew 24 submissions. The winner was Hatteras Yachts, for its Hatteras Cup campaign.

I'll admit I was stunned that the product literature and print advertising categories generated 21 and 20 entries, respectively. If you thought print was dead, think again. Both categories claim major investment from marine companies large and small. The best product brochure went to Regulator Marine, and the print ad category included three winners: Volvo Penta for ad series, Regal Boats for best ad spread and Paul Mann Custom Boats for single-page advertisement.

The category with the next number of entries was websites, won by Sportsman Boats from a field of 17 entries. The company was lauded for its design, organization and content-rich site, along with its build-a-boat widget. Its excellent model descriptions and transparent approach to pricing also were noted.

Quite a few top marketing companies showed that they are making major investments in their websites and emphasizing improvements. Entrants addressed everything from mobile integration to the inclusion of blogs; more sophisticated personalization and customization, including the addition of artificial intelligence; enhanced site design and smoother navigation; and improved deployment of strategies for search engine optimization, including a much deeper dive into analytics and reporting.

Based on the entries, top marine marketers do not take a plug-and-play approach to their online presence. Rather, continual improvement and refinement in the user experience, along with technological advancements, represent top trends.

BRP U.S. won a Neptune in the special event category, along with bragging rights for the most coveted prize: the King Neptune Award, a best of show honor.

The Evinrude Edge Demo Tour was a special event and marketing campaign designed to attract and build awareness of brand and product enhancements. The campaign's targeted audiences included dealers, prospects and consumers.

The campaign encompassed quantifiable goals, objectives, strategies and tactics, including key performance indicators.

Every aspect of the event and campaign was well defined, from each of the marketing components to the budgets to the detailed seven-month timeline with triggers for execution.

I've championed special events for years, especially events that are thoughtfully conceived, highly targeted and well executed. Absolutely nothing beats the excitement and thrill of getting prospects on the water so they can experience our products and services.

This tour was composed of six stops of three days each. Website integration had landing pages for online registration and more. There were custom invitations, dealer point-of-purchase kits, the tapping and development of targeted influencers, inclusion and participation of event ambassadors, a series of product displays and video modules, guest gift bags, local-based advertising, promotions and public relations.

Event attendees also had an opportunity to participate in on-water demonstrations. Immediately following each demo, guests took surveys, received a complimentary cap and received on-site rebates from \$500 to \$1,000. A post-tour email campaign followed, as did a review of overall event results and analytics (which exceeded goals).

In other categories, several winning submissions laser-targeted a specific audience. Two of our favorites: the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation and Yamaha Watercraft. RBFF won the diversity Neptune for its initiative targeting women, moms, female minority groups and single anglers. Yamaha Watercraft won the newsletter category for its content, humor and edgy design strategically directed toward a younger demographic.

While the social media category that Sea Ray won for its #SeaRaySummer campaign fostered a strong emotional connection to the brand, the judges observed that many social media entries were actually part of a bigger marketing campaign, as opposed to a standalone component. This finding gives credence to a more holistic trend where social media is integrated into the overall marketing strategy.

Judges also noted a second social media trend among marine companies: rock-solid use of Facebook, including advertising, plus a significant boost of Instagram activity.

Two categories yielded no entries. The first was mobile apps — a surprise, as the category has generated many quality entries in the past. The other no-show was regional-local marketing. I'm stumped as to why the people working in these areas didn't enter.

It's rewarding to look within the industry and recognize the best work of our top marketers, as well as to spot trends. For a list of all the 2019 Neptune Award winners, go to marinemarketersofamerica.org.

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