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Diversity marketing must become the norm

Posted on April 12th, 2013 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



Over the past 15 years (often in marketing columns appearing here) I've tried desperately to convince industry brass that we must focus on diversity markets outside our traditional white demographic.

I've cited impressive statistics about the economic horsepower and financial clout of the women's market, the African-American, Hispanic and Asian markets, the gay and lesbian markets — heck, even the gazillion-dollar kids' market. Often I have felt like a voice in the wilderness — that too few others were sensing the seismic population shift happening right under our feet.

And now, after all these years, I'm smiling. Finally, finally, finally: Industry leadership has seen the light. And guess what. It's not white. It's brown. It's black. It's yellow. The U.S. melting pot is no longer the lily-white market we have been pursuing so vigorously.

I read the signs years ago, proclaimed by demographers much wiser than I. It seemed clear that the day of demographic upheaval was coming. And now, revelation is quickly becoming reality.

Beware if you're still practicing the old-time religion that worships the 25- to 54-year-old white god. Although that demographic hasn't died, it is both aging and shrinking. Now is the time to embrace the truth and respond to the shifting demographics or take an early retirement before it is foisted on you.

At the recent Miami International Boat Show I sat in three meetings and heard a bevy of reports about the Grow Boating Summit outcomes and directives. Yes, there are a few very exciting initiatives, and all are needed and welcomed. But the fact that diversity marketing is one of them gives me immense personal satisfaction.

National Marine Manufacturers Association president Thom Dammrich shared some positive news about the numbers of Hispanic, African-American and Asian households with incomes over \$50,000, \$75,000 and \$100,000 that are well within our income targets. He said a Grow Boating diversity committee task force is in the works and will soon begin tackling this topic.

Because of my passion for the subject, I felt compelled to put my own skin in the game, so I've volunteered my help. It's one thing to talk the talk, but something entirely different to walk the walk. I'm

excited to get involved and to become an integral part of the team that develops a diversity-marketing plan for our industry.

Speaking of the future, just what is it you envision in your crystal ball? I hope you get the picture that half of our population will soon be Hispanics/Latinos, Asians and African-Americans. The minorities are quickly eclipsing the majority, with growth spurts that demand attention and deserve respect.

During the past year, IBEX and organizers of the Marine Dealer Conference & Expo hosted former U.S. Census Bureau director Steve H. Murdock. I applaud the organizers of both events for having the foresight to bring in an expert of that caliber to address diversity and demographic shifts.

I attended the MDCE seminar, and, honestly, you could have heard a pin drop as Murdock revealed the statistics and the trends. Many were hearing this for the first time, and appeared amazed — or perhaps they just realized the enormity of the ramifications for our businesses and our country.

For example, Murdock pointed out that the Hispanic population over the age of 18 grew 45 percent between 2005 and 2010, and now comprises 16 percent of our population. This notable demographic statistic was closely followed by growth of 17 percent in African-Americans over the age of 18, who now constitute 14 percent of our population.

In addition, the Asian-American population has surged 46 percent. Here's the bombshell: By the year 2050, non-Hispanic whites will be the minority in this country. Please reread that last sentence to make absolutely sure it sinks in.

If you accept these statistics, you have no choice but to conclude that it is no longer business as usual in the boating industry. If the economic shakeup of the past four years hasn't taught us that lesson, the fast-changing face and composition of the country surely will.

If you live in a multicultural community already or if yours is on the brink of becoming one, I suggest that you adopt a whole new positive mindset when it comes to your marketing and prepare yourself and your staff for an exciting new world of opportunity ahead. Truly, your future depends on it.

It's an understatement that we have much to learn. We're already trailing other discretionary and recreational industries that "got it" earlier and have poised themselves to capitalize on these shifts and opportunities. However, we can examine best-case studies and practices from other industries and retailers and extrapolate findings to help us.

When I was pioneering my early marine-marketing-to-women efforts, I studied the strategies and successes of the automotive and motorcycle industries. I consulted with women's market leaders, including marketing executives from Ford and Harley-Davidson, as well as authors and other experts in this niche. They willingly opened up and shared.

I took what I learned, interviewed hundreds of female boaters around the country and then shared my findings and strategies for developing the women's market via seminars, interviews and columns. I know we have a handful of savvy retailers in North America who have likewise recognized the changing demographic trends and are already addressing multicultural niches through their own sales and marketing programs. We need to identify those who are having success, tap into their programs and share findings and recommendations.

A few years ago, Boating Writers International hosted a diversity panel to speak to its audience of marine journalists. Moderator Michael Sciulla asked me to address the women's market. The president of the

Black Boaters of America served on the panel, as did the publisher of a Hispanic boating magazine based in South Florida. I acquired some really great insight from participating on that panel, as both of my counterparts had solid market data and information they were happy to share.

I recall Raymond Blue from the Black Boaters group explaining why some African-Americans aren't enthusiastic about boating. Many, he said, are not exposed to water and swimming at a young age, resulting in fear of the water.

He shared programs his group was promoting in the Lake Lanier and Atlanta markets to introduce youngsters to boating. The Hispanic publisher shared some eye-opening statistics about the wealth of Latinos in the South American markets and how this group was having a significant economic impact in the South Florida boating market.

Bottom line: There are existing pockets of expertise within our ranks. Let's find and develop it, learn, collaborate and build together.

According to a white paper by Loida Rosario, co-founder of the Multicultural Marketing Program at DePaul University, several industries have successfully implemented diversity marketing initiatives that are ultimately paying dividends. She reports that the largest three automobile companies in terms of growth are Toyota, General Motors and Ford Motor Co.

She also identified the top three consumer packaged-goods firms — Procter & Gamble, Johnson & Johnson and Unilever. She cited Samsung, LG and Toshiba as the electronics triumvirate. What do all of these industries and companies have in common? She concludes that each has successfully targeted and tapped the emerging multicultural markets of African Americans, Asians and Hispanics.

I wonder which marine businesses will seize this opportunity, invest the resources and ultimately claim the top positions in achieving significant multicultural sales in the future? What retailers will lead the charge and realize the benefit to their bottom lines? What geographic marine markets will prevail?

I'll assume a positive conclusion. I see myself, in the not so distant future, dedicating this column to a visionary group of marketers who saw the face of boating's future, understood the need for change and stepped up and out to fully embrace diversity. I want more than anything to tell this story, so please get started.

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