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Marine Marketing in a Coronavirus World

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What appeared to be a promising year based on early season boat show attendance, orders and consumer confidence came to a crashing slide in many parts of the world with the advent and rapid spread of Coronavirus.

In today's Coronavirus environment, we've all had to learn and adapt to new vernacular including "social distancing" and "shelter-in place" among others. Many of us have moved from daily commutes to the workplace to now operating within home-based epicenters. The art and science of communication has radically shifted gears and we're all struggling to navigate with new rules, boundaries and protocols.

From my perch, marketing in the season of Coronavirus has evidenced a flurry of both exciting new creative as well as some misguided mistakes. Some marketers have escaped the bounds of retail isolation with some cool concepts worthy of industry review and replication. Others have turned to hardcore sales messaging, which in my opinion falls flat and reflects a lack of sensitivity. And still others seem hopelessly anchored in place, bobbing just above the tide in hopes that this global epidemic will pass and return life to normal.

While no one can accurately predict the future or understand short or long-term implications, I submit we need to tighten our controls while gently pushing the throttle forward, allowing plenty of room ahead to adjust the course as needed.

One very important factor to consider: our customers have plenty of time on their hands right now and likely are glued to their smart phones and tablets, TVs and media sources. Marine marketers have a very unique opportunity to reach and deliver messaging to customers in the comfort of their homes, but should take care to strategically develop and deploy their communication.

Here are eight marketing tips to help your company not only survive, but to thrive in the days ahead.

1. Communication is Essential. Assign someone on your team responsibility for managing communications. A skilled marketer needs to focus attention on ALL messaging during this crisis period. Ensuring appropriate frequency and approving messaging should be a top priority for every organization. I promise this ... the failure to communicate – or to communicate inappropriately - is a prescription for disaster.

2. Internal Communications are Critical. Your internal team needs to be on the same page and working together. Leaders must be in sync and in the know. With most of us working remotely now, it's more important than ever to schedule regular meetings via ZOOM or other platforms to communicate, collaborate, share updates and brainstorm strategies. Keep your leadership team apprised in real time as to what is happening. This situation presents an opportunity to either strengthen or weaken your teamwork. Your communication strategies and tactics will be an integral factor on how well your team performs and fares in the short and long haul.

3. External Communications are Paramount. Now is absolutely NOT the time to go dark on your customers. Create a communication strategy for each targeted audience you serve. Who needs to hear from you? What do they need to know? How often do you need to communicate to them? Plan and execute accordingly.

In addition, offer and provide opportunities for two-way communications. Create formats that allow you to accept and answer questions, whether via a Facebook Group or a live chat widget on your website.

4. Marketing with Sensitivity. Over the past few weeks, I've had conversations with many marine marketers about what type of messaging is appropriate in today's environment. There has been consensus that hard-hitting, sales and/or price messaging is a turn-off. Not only does it have the potential to make the advertiser appear desperate, but it smacks of insensitivity. Think about it. While there may be a very small minority of folks who are willing to sign on the dotted line today, many more are flat worried sick about their families, their health, their jobs and their livelihoods. Many in my circle and in online communities have commented about the "insensitivity" of some advertisers in the wake of Coronavirus. While I'm not suggesting by any stretch that we curl up and die and not take advantage of all available opportunities to sell boats and related products and services, I believe there are better ways to do so than pushing out over-the-top price messaging. A few of these recommendations follow.

5. Advent of the Virtual Boat Show. While Coronavirus has caused cancellation of many boat shows and driven customers rightfully to the safe confines of their homes, it hasn't slowed the traffic one bit on the Information Superhighway. The internet remains THE great gateway to our passions and pursuits. Right now, there is plenty of free time for boat aficionados to search and research their lifestyle of choice. So, what are you offering new to get their attention and how are you trying to reach them?

I've been thrilled to see many industry marketers launch their own adaptations of the "virtual boat show." These digital platforms make it easy for boaters to preview available inventory from the comfort of their homes and in many cases, to chat online with members of the sales team about specific products of interest. I especially admire the messaging of offering available private VIP tours of product where savvy sales pros have either prepared a virtual walkaround or will customize one on client on request.

Packaging your product professionally in a boat show or stay-cation format and sharing event teasers and links through email and social media platforms is a great way to keep brand awareness high and to actively promote product, but in a more palatable editorial versus heavy-handed sales approach.

If you're not ready to go the full virtual turnkey boat show format yourself, there are a few options. Check out reputable online marine media partners who are hosting their own shows and consider joining their efforts. Alternatively, consider featuring and profiling a few products each week via Facebook Live or Instagram Live. Promote dates and times in advance when a team member will be live on the boat, ready to present it and take questions. Promote the event via email invites or via your website with a countdown clock embedded on your home page. Promote and showcase what is new and innovative.

6. Get Social! While we might be socially distanced, that certainly doesn't mean we shouldn't be highly social online! Marine marketers have an awesome opportunity like never before to connect and engage with their customers in a variety of ways that promote positive brand messaging and awareness.

In Florida, where recreational boating was allowed prior to the statewide shutdown, the dealership I work with responded with custom memes that communicated *Boating is Open*, coupled with other tasteful, powerful messages. Planting positive messaging on a regular basis about boating along with great imagery and videos helps to keep the passion alive!

No doubt you've seen lots of Facebook posts where people invite you to share your favorite landscape photos, vacation pix or sunsets. Let's capture our share of voice by inviting friends and followers to post their favorite fishing shots ... family boating shots ... pets and boating shots ... and more!

Video views and live stories are definitely all the rage, so be sure to feature action-oriented and lifestyle boating clips from your YouTube library or from manufacturer or the Grow Boating arsenals. Quick clips of the hottest new 2020 models underway, how-to tips, lifestyle stories and the like will help quench the desire for boating content.

Host online polls. Ask fun questions, like: When Coronavirus is over and you can go boating, what's top on your agenda? Or ... If you could go boating (or fishing or sailing, etc.) anywhere in the world once Coronavirus is over, where would you go and why?

Bob Bitchin, publisher of Latitudes and Attitudes Magazine, opened up his editorial treasure chest for free during Coronavirus so sailors could feast on all the exotic ports of call that the magazine has covered and dream about a future boating destination. What a great way to attract new readers and keep the boating dream alive!

7. Community Contributions. Is there anything your organization can do to positively contribute to your community? If you have masks, cleansers or other products in demand which can be donated to local organizations like hospitals or nursing homes, this is a prime opportunity to make a difference where you live and build positive goodwill. Is your facility one that can be used or repurposed for other essential activities? Know this: people like to do business with companies who do good things.

8. Advertising Opportunities. It is wise and prudent to guard the marketing spend. However, don't make the colossal mistake and stop your marketing altogether as that can and will have negative short and long-term effects.

Like the rest of us, media and advertising companies are also feeling the heat and many are offering very special packages and incentives to keep business moving. Boating media have the unique opportunity to laser-focus and reach your targeted audience and to help you craft creative and messaging. Consider them as collaborators and discuss how you can work together right now to mutual benefit. I have always greatly valued having strong media relations in the boating industry as these professionals share your goals and are deeply vested in your success like none other.

On the local or regional media level, talk with your ad reps and brainstorm new opportunities. What media provides the best access to your audience? What unique opportunities might you develop?

Consider boosting and promoting your posts and targeting some messaging to keep your brand directly in front of the boating faithful. This is a very inexpensive proposition and you can turn it off on a dime.

In closing, we don't know if the Coronavirus is going to be a sprint or a marathon, but we do know that once we've pushed through this, we should experience a burst of pent-up demand.

Our ability to keep our brand awareness alive and to stay closely connected to our customers will no doubt allow us to best leverage the rebound when it comes.