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[TradeOnlyToday](#) > [Columns & Blogs](#) > [Marketing Insight](#) > Sponsored events get boaters out spending

Sponsored events get boaters out spending

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



If you followed my blog on Soundings Trade Only Today, you know I organized a group of boating-oriented people to ride across this great country of ours on motorcycles.

We combined three boating stops along the way so that our “Boaterz ‘n Bikerz Across America: A Hull of a Tour” participants would experience the best of motorcycle touring, coupled with a taste of boating. I’m writing this column a few days before the actual departure day, so as you read it my band of boaters and bikers hopefully are all happy, healthy and safely home after nearly 3,000 miles in the saddle.

Our adventure serves as a microcosm for our industry marketers to study.

Of the 20 folks committed to my ride, three bought new motorcycles: a Honda Gold Wing and two Harley Street Glides. Others invested in gear, such as new GPS units, saddlebags, boots, motor clothes and leathers. Still others had service work performed to ensure their machines were in top running condition.

A few had their bikes professionally detailed. Others with limited vacation time paid to fly out and rent bikes from a local dealership. Me? Brand-new custom-painted helmet to match my CVO (Custom Vehicle Operation) Screaming Eagle Fat Boy — the paint job cost more than the helmet!

I also splurged and custom-ordered fabric from Keyston Bros. for that smoking-hot purple crocodile seat I’ve been talking about for years. I added a set of Bright Ass Lights (yes, that’s the brand name), new front and back tires, a purple rain suit, clear goggles for nighttime vision and a 10,000-mile service. Although I needed the 10,000-mile service and eventually would have had to replace my tires, none of those other purchases were previously planned or necessary.

Here’s the point: I created an event and the event inspired people like me to further invest in the lifestyle. Once my biker buddies caught the fever, a flurry of new and unplanned investments was made. Collectively, my little tour group helped boost the economy with our spending.

Fast-forward to the boating industry: As an independent marketing practitioner, I handle marketing for a handful of clients, including Legendary Marine, the No. 1-ranked boat dealer in North America (Top 100 Boating Industry rankings). It’s a dealership that welcomes fresh thinking, thanks to Fred Pace, the founder and managing partner. He’s a savvy marketer whose out-of-the-box thinking and marketing ideas

are refreshing and stimulating.

As we were brainstorming and planning the extensive 2013 special events calendar (more than 40 events a season), we were belaboring the fact that we needed to discover ways to get Legendary Marine's customers to use their boats more often. Our discussion centered on finding ways to nudge our customers out of the dry storage barn and onto the water, where they belong.

Legendary Marine has operated a Destinations Cruising Club for years, with the goal of building camaraderie among customers and getting them comfortable and more confident about using their boats. Besides hosting day trips throughout the season, the club's curriculum includes educational initiatives — a new boater's class, Ladies at the Helm, etc., taught by a popular captain.

With the number of boats in the barn and the proliferation of boating in the community, the cruising club's potential is huge. The desire is to involve more folks in these sponsored activities and build participation.

Fred came up with a good idea to address this concern. Instead of the marketing team planning the special events agenda and assigning the sales team to make the calls and hook their customers into participation, why not encourage the sales team to plan some fun outings themselves? And, while we were at it, why not ask the respective service and marina teams to do the same?

The idea took hold and a meeting was called. Fred didn't simply dictate to the crew what they were expected to do. Instead, he wisely took the time to explain the challenge and share the rationale behind it. People got it. Assignments were made, goals were confirmed regarding customer and boat participation figures and the team had a few weeks to come back with a plan to present to the group.

I was totally blown away by the ideas that emerged. A Gumbo Grabber restaurant hop included partnering with waterfront restaurants for gumbo sampling. Two of the sales team members would lead customers in their boats to multiple restaurant locations, where they would sample gumbo and ultimately pick a winner.

Others included a Specter Island crawfish boil; a Cinco de Mayo service party with a party barge, hot dogs and hamburgers, music and fun for the whole family, with jet skis, paddleboards, kayaks and parasailing; an evening movie on boats and under the stars at the area's famous Crab Island; a Rocky Bayou water-ski party and picnic; a Norriego Fireworks raft-up and cookout; a take-your-dog-boating day at the beach (love that one); the Royall Red Snapper Rumble, a relaxed and fun family fishing tournament; a mini-poker run, with proceeds to benefit Fisher House, one of the dealership's two military beneficiaries; a scavenger hunt in the harbor; and two National Marina Day events.

The sales, service and marina teams all took ownership of planning and steering these special events. Instead of a top-down marketing mandate, members of the team had skin in the game. Creating ideas produced a much higher level of enthusiasm than we've seen in the past.

The teams planned and executed their events (some still under way) and we supported the efforts through integrated marketing activities. The events are promoted in the weekly e-newsletter and through custom invitations or e-blasts, web blog rolls, social media posts and tweets (before during and after), electronic signs and outdoor banners, digital rotators/billboards, PR promotions and more. Of course, the proven strategy to engage customers is the personal call and the sales consultant's invitation to the event.

So what happens when programs such as these are successfully planned and executed?

- Boat owners get out and use their boats.
- Boat owners enjoy time with their friends and family and are reminded of the reason they bought the boat in the first place.
- Those friends and family are introduced to the boating lifestyle, creating new prospects.
- Boat owners meet other boat owners who share the same passion for the boating lifestyle.
- Boat owners are exposed to other boats, equipment and gear, stimulating future sales.
- Boat owners enjoy a more casual relationship with their sales consultant in a relaxed and fun atmosphere. Traditional barriers are broken down as a relationship of friendship develops.
- Boat owners visit the dealership property and are exposed to all of the new products and gear on site.
- The dealership staff has the opportunity to warmly welcome and re-engage with customers.
- Boat owners use the marina facilities.
- Boat owners buy fuel.
- Boat owners provision their boats for trips, visiting the ship's store.
- If their boat has been sitting in storage, boat owners may need to service their boat to prepare it for the season and upcoming activity.

Coming full circle, I hope the main message for this column is compelling. As an industry we must always focus attention and energy on growing boating and bringing new people into the lifestyle. However, we must not forget the incredibly powerful economic machine that has already invested in our products, our services and our dealerships.

By staying connected with our customers and planning and promoting activities that motivate them to use and enjoy their boats, we will ultimately fuel new sales that positively affect the entire industry. Best of all, by creating fun, adventure and experiences we ignite the passion of our industry's best ambassadors — the boaters themselves.

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