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Start of a makeover for a biased industry

Posted on June 12th, 2014 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



“Ours is a prejudiced industry.”

That bold statement by Bob Pappajohn, of M&P Mercury, shocked participants at the inaugural meeting in Miami of the Recreational Boating Leadership Council’s Diversity Task Force.

Bob’s words hit home. Like it or not, I believe he is absolutely correct. It’s an ugly truth we must own. We are a prejudiced industry.

I’m not one to make excuses, but I don’t believe the boating industry collectively woke up one day and made a conscious decision to be prejudiced. We just sold most of our boats to white males of a particular demographic profile, and in earlier days there were plenty of them. We didn’t reach out to anyone else because — well, we didn’t have to. And frankly, that demographic represented wealth, so we blissfully ignored others.

In the meantime, however, the U.S. population was changing. That great white shark we’ve chased forever — the 35-54-plus male Caucasian — has grown more elusive. He’s aging and his numbers are rapidly shrinking. Meanwhile, there are other more robust fish in the sea. Demographics tell us the fastest-growing ethnic niches in our country are the Hispanic, Asian and African American segments.

So what does this mean? Well, for one, it’s time to come down from our ivory towers and take off the blinders. It’s time to admit our closeted truths. It’s past time for a wake-up call. If we don’t embrace the truth of our prejudice and if we fail to welcome a more diverse audience into our boating fraternity we will suffer the consequences.

Maybe you think I’m harsh. That’s OK. It’s a harsh reality. As an industry we need to be slapped out of our slumber and face the facts. Too many of us are still in denial. Many refuse to accept the truth. But let me assure you, it’s real. And it’s time for change.

Frank Peterson, of the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation, has led the charge for the industry on the Hispanic marketing front. His organization gets it. They understand that the Hispanic niche is the largest ethnic minority and the fastest-growing U.S. demographic, representing 17 percent of our current population. Projections suggest that by the year 2060 the Latino population will reach 128 million, or 31 percent of our total population.

Lopez Negrete, the respected Hispanic advertising agency hired by RBFF, is honing targeted messaging to the Hispanic community. Those efforts are under way in a test-marketing program in Texas and Florida, with special events and activities to introduce fishing to this community. The marketers have developed a well-rounded arsenal of events, tools and tactics, including a bilingual website with content messaging and imagery — <http://vamosapescar.org/>.

However, it was another of the RBFF's recent activities that commanded my attention. Unfortunately, it also validated my deepest fears.

Houston is one of the largest Hispanic markets in the country. The RBFF decided to mystery-shop the major boat show there. As Frank tells it, the Lopez Negrete account team was tasked to peruse the exhibits in the role of prospective boat buyers. One was distinguishably Latino in appearance; the other was lighter-skinned and more Anglo-looking. They went their separate ways and visited multiple dealerships throughout the show.

The findings of the experiment were conclusive. The Hispanic shopper was treated very differently from the All-American Joe. The Anglo buyer was warmly greeted and asked traditional qualifying questions — how long have you been boating, what type of boating activities interest you, etc. The Hispanic prospect, however, was immediately shown entry-level product and peppered with low pricing options. In other words, assumptions were made about his buying power or perceived lack thereof.

The recounting of this experience brought me back to my marine marketing to women efforts of the late '80s and early '90s. I experienced many of the same prejudices and misperceptions then. Although I presented facts and figures documenting the growing influence of women in the boat-buying process and the meteoric rise in their personal income and interest in outdoor recreational activity, my efforts often fell on deaf ears. I even got hate mail and was accused of being a raging feminist and bra burner, when my mission was anything but.

I, too, did some boat show research. At the Fort Lauderdale show I interviewed dozens of women, and they shared their candid experiences at retail, most of which were very disappointing. A male co-worker served as my cameraman as these women made passionate pleas to simply be respected and taken seriously. Our hidden camera uncovered revealing body language expressed by many women during the sales process. When addressing a couple, the male salesperson typically spoke directly to the man and ignored the woman altogether. I remember one incident in which a woman, after several minutes of feeling invisible, shrugged her shoulders and walked away.

A colleague of mine attended one of the seminars I conducted. I had shared the edited video shot in Fort Lauderdale when a hush fell over the audience. My friend, who was the editor of one of the premier boating consumer magazines, broke the silence. He raised his hand and admitted, "I know you've been talking about this for a long time ... but I had to see it myself to really believe it. Now I get it."

Why do I share this story? I believe it has direct relevance to what we are experiencing today. Sometimes we have to see things ourselves to believe them.

The good news is that the RBFF right now is recruiting mystery shoppers to visit boat dealerships and get a broader perspective on the Hispanic buying experience. And although I'm disappointed that they won't have a video component (a picture is worth a thousand words), I'm hopeful that this grassroots research will provide invaluable insight for all of us.

We are in the early stages of our Diversity Task Force activity. We have 21 folks actively engaged in

committee work. The NMMA's Thom Dammrich asked me to chair it, and I readily accepted. I have been championing diversity since the late '80s and I'm thrilled to be part of this new effort.

It all starts with awareness and education, and that is one of three initial areas of focus for our task force. We believe we must quantify the profit opportunity that diversity represents — the bottom line. That might sound crass, but real change will come only when our industry recognizes the financial benefit of embracing new audiences. Money talks!

Longtime diversity advocate Lou Sandoval, of Karma Yacht Sales, is chairing this group, and we have other strong retail representatives, including Liz Walz, of the MRAA, and Josie Tucci, of MarineMax, along with Vanessa Kraus, of Sea Tow, and Dave Geoffrey, of the NMMA.

Our second area of focus involves partnering with the RBFF and supporting its outstanding efforts. Peterson chairs this subcommittee, joined by Dammrich, Margaret Podlich, of BoatUS, and Lisa Almeida, of Freedom Boat Club, along with Sandoval, who serves on the RBFF board.

Our third area is one that is near to my heart — one that I've volunteered to chair. The Industry Multicultural Influencer Groups involve three smaller subcommittees representing Hispanic, African American and Asian influencers. We've tapped 11 folks working in or associated with the marine industry who are either originally from these diverse groups or who have worked directly with them. We will survey and ask for their recommendations on everything from barriers to entry to suggested messaging and future research and marketing activities.

We also will seek to identify existing stakeholder groups so we can engage them throughout the process. (I am still seeking Asian participants, so please let me know if you have any referrals.)

Capt. Paul Mixon, of the Black Boaters Summit, is a veteran sailor and Caribbean cruise organizer who has introduced sailing to countless African Americans and youth. When I invited him to participate in our influencer group, he was initially skeptical. His response pierced me to the core.

"First, Wanda, we must agree that white folks in general do not want us in the industry or their yacht clubs," he said. "Once we are OK with that, we can move forward with identifying the good guys and bad guys. And we can direct our efforts in recruiting the good guys."

Ouch. Talk about the pain of prejudice. Paul and his wife, Marvelle Manga, herself an active sailor, business owner and executive, have experienced it firsthand. After lengthy conversation and plenty of begging on my part, both agreed to participate. Like me, they are hopeful that real change is coming.

I'm counting on it. And I'm going to do everything in my power to help dispel the pathetic prejudice that has existed in our industry far too long.

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