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Fresh ideas to grow your business: Sail conference was rich in creative marketing thought

Posted on June 19th, 2017

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I'm saying it again: I'm all in when it comes to professional development. The minute you stop learning is the minute you start down the path to obsolescence. Change cracks the whip at lightning speed.

Every so often I get to attend a conference where I can totally immerse myself in new thought and ideas. A recent example is the International Sailing Industry Conference in Milwaukee, presented by Sail America.

The sailing industry is near and dear to my heart. It's a small, tight-knit community of dedicated leaders who love their lifestyle and sport. Back in my ad agency years I called many in this segment my clients, and those clients have since turned into long-term friends. Returning to this conference was a homecoming of sorts — a chance to catch up with many of the movers and shakers who continue to work together to promote the growth of sailing.

I was all revved up for the keynote session, presented by Heather Malenshek, Harley-Davidson's vice president of global marketing and brand. The hour-long session focused on how H-D is further building its global brand and developing the next generation of customers.

Besides my love affair with boating, I'm a die-hard Harley fan, and if I'm totally honest, a borderline addict. I live to ride. So as you might imagine, I was looking forward to hearing from the woman at the helm of the motorcycle giant's marketing machine.

Malenshek didn't disappoint. I left with more than 20-plus pages of copious notes.

For starters, a few facts:

Harley is smaller than you might think. The brand itself is actually much bigger than the actual business behind it. Malenshek explained that the company sells to 1 percent of the population in the United States, but commands a 50 percent market share of all motorcycles sold.

Interestingly, Harley's outreach initiatives to "new markets" have pushed it to the No. 1 sales position nationwide for nine consecutive years, including among Caucasian men 35-plus, young adults (18-34), women, Hispanics and African Americans.

One of the marketing initiatives I really love is the "Out of Many, One" campaign. This advertising succinctly smashes the long-standing misconception that old white guys with beer bellies and beards are the exclusive face of Harley. Although those souls still have their stamp, the video captured snippets of avid riding enthusiasts who represent a mix of ages, genders and ethnicities.

As you may know, I chair the Recreational Boating Leadership Council's task force on new markets, so this marketing campaign, coupled with rather staggering market share statistics, grabbed my attention. In a follow-up communication I learned that sales to Harley's "outreach" customers over a six-year period grew at a compound annual rate of 5 percent, representing 34 to 40 percent of the company's overall sales during the period.

In addition to the U.S. market, the company is focused on developing 150 to 200 new international dealerships and simultaneously engaging 2 million riders during the next 10 years from emerging markets that include India, China and Latin America.

I hope these facts threw on the brakes for you. If you've questioned the major economic impact opportunities in new markets that the RBLC's New Markets Task Force has been sharing, take a cue from H-D. Other recreational industries recognize the buying power of diverse markets, and it's paying off. We, too, must break free of stereotypes. We can't afford to miss this boat.

Harley also makes it a point to talk with its customers (as well as people with no interest in its product) to better understand the data it collects.

I found it interesting to learn, for example, that Harley has conducted research to better understand the psyche behind "sleeping license holders," or those who at one time were active riders but now are not. Hearing about this study prompted me to think about the great job the sailing industry does in attracting and nurturing kids and young people through sailing clubs and community sailing programs, only to lose them after high school and college. How can we re-engage these young people?

I was blown away when Malenshek shared Harley's goal of creating 100 "high-impact" new products during the next 10 years. Wow! That's a heckuva lot of R&D — a huge investment and a lot of marketing bucks required to back it. It's a major effort just to actually launch 100 products, but to mandate they all be "high-impact" — well, it speaks volumes about the Harley mindset.

What perhaps piqued my interest the most were the defined areas of marketing focus that serve as the cornerstone on which the H-D "customer journey" is built. These three major strategies are: (1) planting the seed; (2) activating the base; and (3) nurturing the intenders. Each strategy carries its own arsenal of tactics, but Harley has set out on a clear-cut path to reach its destinations.

I believe these three strategies are smart and should be applied to the boating marketplace.

Ask yourself these questions: Exactly how is my company planting the seed? In what ways is my company activating our base and engaging our most loyal customers? And what is my company doing today to nurture future buyers so that when the time is right, ours will be the brand of choice?

Great questions, all.

Next on the agenda was Thom Dammrich, who shared the latest industry stats and trends, followed by a presentation of the RBLC educational module on "Strategies for Engaging New Markets."

Truly we couldn't have planned it any better, nor did the sailing industry conference planning team likely have a clue just how perfectly this keynote followed the first.

Dammrich pointed out that Discover Boating has funneled 3.2 million leads annually to boating manufacturer websites, but noted how few have taken steps to actively nurture this business. Our industry, too, often focuses on the low-hanging fruit and fails to develop the longer-term nurturing opportunities.

In addition to presenting the educational module, including best practices videos of companies successfully engaging and selling to new markets, he also pointed out how the affluent new markets' demographic profiles are a bull's-eye for attracting the millennial generation our industry so highly covets.

On the heels of Dammrich's presentation came the results of a sailing study conducted by Bonnier Corp. and presented by Bonnier VP of research and consumer insight Heather Idema. The online survey netted 2,653 participants from email invitations issued by Sailing World, Cruising World and Boating magazines, along with Sail America.

One of the most interesting facts: 28 percent of respondents were introduced to sailing by family members, 24 percent by a friend and 19 percent were self-taught.

Here's a powerful punch: Some 97 percent of the participants said they had introduced someone else to sailing and 60 percent had introduced 10 or more people to the sport. High referral activity!

In terms of their engagement, 46 percent say their activity has remained the same during the past two years, 34 percent say it increased and 20 percent decreased their activity. In all categories of engagement, none are sailing as much as they would like.

Idema shared survey profiles, including activities, education and goals, ownership and intent, including the decision drivers in new- or used-boat purchases and opinions regarding the future of sailing.

Bravo to Bonnier for conducting this research and sharing the findings.

The afternoon breakouts were equally awesome. I attended a great solo presentation and panel, both moderated by Nick Hayes, on women in sailing and how they represent the next emerging market. The panel included former BoatUS president Margaret Podlich, Deneen Taylor of Mantus Anchors and Karen Hunt of the Milwaukee Community Sailing Center.

I thoroughly enjoyed a brief presentation by US Sailing's marketing manager, Josh Toso, with lifelong sailor and racer Betsy Alison, about their 2016 launch of First Sail (firstsail.org), an initiative designed to enlist sailing organizations nationwide to promote sailing and provide opportunities for newcomers to experience it.

The group has designated an impressive 127 First Sail locations throughout the country. Congrats to US Sailing for this smart marketing initiative, a concept I believe the broader boating industry should seriously consider.

I finished the conference with a concluding keynote presented by Marcus Sheridan, a man I first heard at the International Marina & Boatyard Conference in January and later wrote about in this column. This time around, however, I was invited to briefly share the results of what I had learned.

My marketing team's application of what we learned from Sheridan's book, "They Ask. You Answer," has led to more than 32,000 organic searches to our website in fewer than six weeks. (See why I get all hyped up about learning new things?)

I left the conference a bit smarter and more motivated. I learned several new things and gained insights, including these that I'm sharing with you.

I only hope this column might spark a fire for learning and that you, too, will come to understand that by growing your mind you can grow your business.

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This article originally appeared in the July 2017 issue.