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## An enlightening, transformative IMBC: Valuable insight into new markets and transparency

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Had I been content with traditional marketing practices, my career likely would have gone down the same path as the blurry Polaroid photograph, the typesetting machine or my trusty IBM Selectric III.

I'm chucking because I'll bet some readers have no clue about those crusty old bones long buried in the marketers' graveyard. As the professional tool kit and technology have evolved, so the mindset must follow. I submit that if you're not learning something new every day, you're falling behind the curve.

I have a healthy appetite for reading, and one of my favorite vehicles for professional development is the industry conference. Even when I'm presenting at these events I try to schedule as much time as possible to learn from other presenters on topics that interest me.

In January I had the opportunity to speak at the IMBC — the International Marina & Boatyard Conference. After many years, I was looking forward to returning, especially after viewing the robust agenda. I was impressed with the event's obvious growth and especially pumped about the mix of keynote, seminar and workshop programs.

For my role, I had assembled a panel of five marina experts to address my assigned topic — boat clubs and the revenue-generating opportunities they offer for marina owners/operators. Although I work in this footprint, my desire was to provide a panel that represented a variety of perspectives, ranging from marinas that lease space to clubs to those that operate their own. I also wanted a mix of larger and smaller operators.

I tapped Sam Lowrey, director of real estate for MarineMax; Sam Chavers, director of marina operations for SunTex on Florida's west coast; Travis Staats, real estate manager for Camachee Cove Marina in St. Augustine, Fla.; Jeremy Holcomb, VP of marina operations for Legendary Marina in Destin, Fla.; and my employer, Freedom Boat Club president and CEO John Giglio, who owns marinas and operates the oldest and largest boat club franchiser in North America.

The session covered a variety of moderated questions, the most important of which addressed the financial benefits that come from either owning and operating a club or leasing space to one.

We debated multiple topics, including insurance requirements and risks, the challenges associated with clubs on site, whether boat clubs negatively impact retail sales (all agreed they do not) plus the recommended dock logistics for success.

Because I felt this topic had much broader appeal than the IMBC audience, I had the session videotaped. If you're interested in learning firsthand about marina and boat club opportunities from the experts, email me and I'll be happy to share the link.

Truly, one of the things I most appreciate about working in this industry is the willingness of so many people to share best practices to benefit others. We all have skin in the game and a stake in industry growth. I believe the sharing of best practices is crucial to our collective long-term success and is one of the compelling reasons for attending professional conferences.

At the IMBC, NMMA president Thom Dammrich keynoted a live presentation of the recently launched educational module "Proven Strategies for Engaging New Markets." He shared the latest demographic and economic impacts of emerging new markets (minorities, women and millennials, among others) along with five video case studies of boating businesses that have invested in and are reaping the financial rewards and returns from their multicultural marketing initiatives.

I hope marina operators will recognize the important role they play in welcoming new markets to boating. Although all of the best-practice videos are relevant, certainly the interview with Carlton Phillips of Prince William Marina in Woodbridge, Va., should resonate.

Phillips' practice of inclusion for all people is a lesson worth reviewing for everyone in the industry. There's no doubt in my mind that this philosophy has been a major reason for his dealership's success over many decades in the multicultural Washington, D.C., area. Hearing a firsthand testimonial from one of his many well-educated and affluent African-American marina customers provides a glimpse into the type of welcoming attitude and focus on the customer that Prince William delivers — and that every marina owner and operator should strive to replicate.

As an FYI, there are tip sheets from each of the Recreational Boating Leadership Council's New Markets profiled best practices companies and there is an entire recorded Boating Industry webinar session, plus the five individual video sessions now available for download at <http://www.rblc.org/the-issues.html>. I encourage you to take this free opportunity to review these valuable materials and video segments with your team and discuss how your organization can apply them to your business.

Another valuable IMBC session was a presentation by Jackie Baumgartner of Boatsetter, who talked about how her company's boat-sharing model also can help boost marina revenue.

Boatsetter is one of the more successful peer-to-peer organizations that connect boat owners, captains, marinas and consumers in what she believes is a win-win formula for all involved. She provided an overview of how her organization works and answered many pointed questions, fully engaging her audience in the conversation.

I'm pleased that the IMBC has recognized these opportunities and included boat clubs and boat sharing on their agenda this year. Both models offer powerful new strategies for attracting newcomers and lapsed boaters alike while providing new sources of revenue for their marina constituents. Getting people on the water in new ways is a topic the entire industry should embrace. Boat clubs and boat sharing each are important sectors of the boating ecosystem and deserving of a seat at the table.

Know what I like best about attending a conference session or reading a great business book or even watching a marketing video? I love the moment when inspiration and knowledge collide to create an aha moment. For me, it's an almost magical epiphany.

I experienced one of those profound learning moments at IMBC during a session at which I least expected it.

I dragged myself out of bed at 6:30 so I'd be on time for the 8:15 Friday keynote. The topic was "Letting Go of the Way You've Always Done Things," and the speaker was Marcus Sheridan, a guy I'd never heard of but figured he must be worth his salt if the IMBC team positioned him as the Friday crowd opener.

Wow! Sheridan, a former swimming pool guy who totally transformed his company and then himself into a digital guru, rocked my world and knocked some of my former beliefs for a loop. I left with a wildly new perspective that has profoundly changed my beliefs about transparency.

Sure, I could share with you all he taught me in the hour and 15 minutes he commanded the stage and mesmerized the audience, but truthfully, I'd rather you invest in yourself. If you buy one really powerful book this year, buy his: "They Ask, You Answer — A Revolutionary Approach to Inbound Sales, Content Marketing and Today's Digital Consumer." It's available online at Amazon and Barnes & Noble. I've purchased a copy for every member of my marketing team, and it's our next course of group study.

Recent industry studies have revealed that some consumers believe we are less than forthcoming in communicating the pricing of our products and services. In some cases we've likely lost the trust of prospects who claim we don't share the full story of what it takes to buy or maintain a boat. In their search for pricing information, prospects may feel frustrated (Sheridan calls it the "F word" of the internet). Even worse, some who have purchased feel deceived because they were not made fully aware of all of the costs involved.

Warning: When people don't get a straight or full answer, we may lose not only their trust and respect, but also ultimately their business. How many have you lost? How many have we collectively lost from boating?

Sheridan described how the lessons he learned through the testing and refining of new marketing strategies totally changed his business. I walked away from his presentation with eyes wide open. His questions provoked such clarity and introspection that I found myself dumbfounded to realize that I, too, had fallen prey to tradition without questioning why. He caused me to stop cold and challenge some of my most basic strategies and enabled me to grasp and understand the enormous application of his message to specific business practices.

I returned to my business following that session with fire in my belly. Had I chosen to stay in bed that morning instead of embracing new opportunities for professional growth, I'd have missed a game-changing moment for my company.

What about you? What have you learned new today? This week? This month?

I challenge you to read a good business book or a white paper. Sign up for a conference in your industry niche. Call a colleague and discuss new strategies. Watch an instructional video on YouTube on a topic you want to better understand. Many top authors have free links on their websites — check them out. For info about Marcus Sheridan and the session that served as my most recent aha marketing moment, visit <https://www.thesalesion.com/>

Get out of the snooze zone. Don't sleepwalk through your business and do things as you've always done them because it's comfortable.

Wake up. Smell the opportunity. Embrace change. It's exhilarating and exciting to learn something new!

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