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The Downside of Surging Sales

Massive boater education needs to follow the unprecedented consumer demand of the Covid-19 pandemic

WANDA KENTON SMITH · SEP 30, 2020

Info-link's managing director, Jack Ellis, published a report in July noting that the number of first-time boat buyers had reversed the previous decade's staggering decline, climbing to 34 percent of purchases year-to-date. His analysis complemented a report from the National Marine Manufacturers Association that showed new boat sales were up 59 percent in May compared to April — the highest sales levels in a decade across all segments.

There's no doubt that retailers are enjoying big paydays as new boat buyers line up for socially distanced fun during the pandemic. And yet, while I'm pleased to toast the industry's unprecedented sales success, I also count myself among those who share a serious concern about the lack of boater education, which translates into boater safety.

Scores of new boaters have hit our waterways, totally unprepared to operate — much less navigate — successfully. Their lack of knowledge not only puts them and their passengers at risk, but also endangers every boater in their path.

Our dealerships — many of which were already understaffed prior to the pandemic — have been so slammed selling and servicing boats that we failed to prepare the onslaught of newbies for the boating experience. They headed for crowded local ramps and waterways, clueless about how to launch and operate their vessels. Some clicked online to have a boat delivered, without even making a socially distanced appointment at a dealership. That sales technique may be OK with an experienced boater, but it's a disaster in the making with a new boater.

Marine Retailers Association of the Americas president Matt Gruhn and his family watched in terror as a man and his girlfriend came close to going over a dam on the Mississippi River with their boat. The guy was trying desperately to pull-start the engine while the gal tried, without success, to paddle them upstream. They were saved thanks to quick action from a more experienced boater.

Another incident involved a new boater trying to back his trailer down a ramp after dark. He tried numerous attempts, to no avail. He asked for help from a fisherman, who backed the trailer into the water and then walked away. The new boat owner then called out to ask how he was supposed to get the boat back onto the trailer, all while his family watched helplessly from the dock.

The marine industry needs to take control of this situation quickly. We must connect the missing links between boat sales and boating education.

This kind of stuff is happening every day, all across the country. In October, Soundings published an article titled "The Chaos is Real: A Slew of New Boaters Seeking Fun During the Pandemic Are Turning Waterways Into Danger Zones." Writer Kim Kavin cited statistics and insights from boating law administrators, towboat operators and others nationwide, many of whom have witnessed frightful scenarios firsthand.

Sources in that article cited everything from an intense increase in boating activity to a notable spike in the number of distress calls, coupled with a rise in written violations. New boaters have failed to purchase required PFDs and basic safety equipment. They lack even a basic understanding of their surroundings, having no idea where they are on the water or how to return to their port of origin.

Perhaps most concerning, Soundings reported, is that newcomers don't even realize they're causing problems. The article quotes Lisa Dugan, Minnesota's boat and water communications coordinator: "They haven't taken classes, they haven't done any hands-on, they haven't come up in families where generational knowledge gets passed on. It's their first time on the water, their first time on a boat, and they don't know navigational things, even how to cut across a wake safely."

Chief of the Boating Safety Division at U.S. Coast Guard Headquarters Verne Gifford also expressed concern about this situation, citing his organization's projection of 26% increase in incidents and a 12% increase in deaths over 2019.

"We are concerned about the increased activity and the decreased education opportunities by some of the organizations (e.g. the Auxiliary) that would normally do this," he said. "We know the Auxiliary is at least less than 20% of the educational course offerings they normally give. They have adjusted and worked with the states to provide online classes where physical classroom attendance was once the only option. It has been difficult to get the same number of people educated."

As a marine marketer and public-relations practitioner of 40 years, I want to see more reporting of that nature. While I'm always thrilled to see coverage across media platforms about the fun of boating and how it brings families together, some mainstream writers have furthered safe boating misconceptions while writing about the industry's popularity this year.

The New York Times ran such a story just before the Fourth of July weekend. The writer provided an accurate overview of boating sales activity during the pandemic, but also wrote, "In comparison to other big-ticket items like planes or even cars, there is surprisingly little to learn when driving a boat."

Some 85 readers commented, many in response to this false and irresponsible statement. I and several colleagues wrote letters to the editor, but a correction was never published.

The marine industry needs to take control of this situation quickly. We must connect the missing links between boat sales and boating education. In my opinion, the intersection should be at the natural point of sales transaction: at retail.

"The MRAA is currently looking at options, and we recognize we need a solution," Gruhn says. "We agree with the fundamental premise that smart, educated boaters become lifetime boaters."

Savvy retailers already offer outstanding boating education programs. Some, like the National Boating Industry Safety Award winner MarineMax, provide in-house training for customers. Others outsource boating safety courses through the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, United States Power Squadrons or private providers.

As the former chief marketing officer of Freedom Boat Club, I must applaud its exemplary boat training and education program too. Every new member, no matter his boating experience or lack thereof, is required to take classroom and on-water training under the direction and hands-on guidance of a U.S. Coast Guard-licensed captain before reserving a boat. The training is free and unlimited.

We need to apply these kinds of best practices industrywide. Our industry is averse to publicly addressing boating safety; some people believe the term conveys that boating may be dangerous.

My response? Without proper education and training, boating is dangerous.

The time to act is now. We must collaborate for the long-term health of our industry, along with the safety and well-being of our customers. Without boater education, these enthusiastic new boaters will likely join the 40 percent of newbies who leave after five years (if not sooner), as research has shown.

Our failure to respond could turn one of the best seasons in our history into the worst. Just imagine if a majority of all those new boat buyers decide to exit and flood the brokerage market with boats during the next 12 to 18 months. Without immediate action on our part, that could happen.

The MRAA recently produced a blog and video series designed to help retailers learn how to keep customers boating. One of the key takeaways included the importance of telephone follow-up with a human being, to ask customers about their boating experiences.

With limited space at many dealerships and social distancing protocols in effect, dealers also can partner with a local service organization to host a series of free boating classes off-site. Better yet, have a seasoned skipper available to address customers' concerns and questions. If weather conditions preclude an in-water demonstration, show videos.

Another simple tactic that all marine businesses could easily deploy is providing boater education and safety messaging on social media platforms. Free content is available through multiple boating safety organizations on everything from safe boating tips to life jackets to sober skipper programs.

Our ability and commitment to educate, alleviate fears and address concerns will hopefully retain new boaters and help prepare them for successful future seasons.

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