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The future of boat shows: Let the dialogue continue

Posted on August 30th, 2010 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



I'm a boat show fan. I've worked them countless times in my 30-plus-year career – in booths and on boats as well as on the marketing, PR and promotions ends.

I fully understand that boat shows deliver a solid marketing platform for our products and services and are an important impetus in stimulating sales. That being said, I also believe the shows are in desperate need of re-engineering in order to remain relevant.

Soundings Trade Only writer Reagan Haynes authored a provocative cover story in the June issue titled, "Reinventing the Boat Show." My pal and fellow marketer Michael Sciulla, former editor and publisher of BoatU.S. Magazine, was so impassioned by the article that he jump-started an online debate entitled, 'The Fading Allure of Boat Shows.'

Mike's posts to three separate LinkedIn industry groups generated an impressive 125 comments. Couple this response with the demise of several shows and waning attendance (not only at our shows, but those of other industries), and you're in denial if you don't agree our shows are taking on water.

Let's face it: Boat shows are expensive. They're costly to produce, and they're costly for exhibitors who fork over big bucks for space and exhibit fees, travel and accommodations, shipping and logistics, literature, labor – you name it.

Marketing budgets, meanwhile, have been slashed to the bone. Now more than ever, the marketer must ask: What will yield the best return on investment?

Shows are under the magnifying glass like everything else. To show or not to show – it's a question many are asking.

I'd like to suggest a more important question: What must be done to breathe new blood and energy into boat shows, to give them renewed value for exhibitors and consumers alike?

I agree with many of those who posted to Sciulla's discussion.

David Hensel of Grand Banks, for example, noted that the look and feel of boat shows hasn't changed much since he was a kid. Grand Banks is analyzing its show investment and considering producing its own events that will deliver "customer experiences" that "bring something of value to the purchasing

process.”

This reminded me of Sea Ray’s AquaPalooza event that gives customers loads of activities and entertainment of the type that build brand loyalty and stimulate sales.

Hensel also advocates fewer cookie-cutter shows and more creativity among exhibitors and producers alike. “... Show organizers need to stop shackling us,” he wrote, “... and really need to bring more to the table than tents and barges and power; they need to bring ideas and inspiration – or at least give us room to bring our own.”

Two winning European promotions he’d like to see adopted here are evening entertainment on the docks and the opportunity to conduct sea trials. These are staples of the shows in Cannes, Singapore and Italy.

In a recent Waypoints cover story, I reported on the Southern California Marine Association VIP event that allowed exhibitors to invite special guests to an evening preshow opening party. It was a festive and successful affair.

Another example of show promoters creating a program to support sales is Discover Sailing at the Strictly Sail shows. Expert skippers give prospects free rides on sailboats provided by manufacturers or dealers. Last season, more than 500 people signed up to take these introductory cruises.

I like promotions that get prospects riding in boats. I believe the most effective selling of the boating lifestyle begins at the point of engagement. Static convention center booths or Internet boat shows and product-oriented websites, while serving a purpose, simply can’t deliver the emotional impact of a wind-in-your-hair boating experience.

Why not consider a national in-water show caravan with a top-flight entertainment and educational package, targeting key boating populations?

Another idea is cross marketing with other successful outdoor and recreation-based shows whose demographics parallel our own.

Sciulla suggests a National Boating Week powered by the industry and executed at the retail level through special events offering all the information and tools to engage anyone who has interest in boating. Reminds me of the Sailing Solstice, an initiative launched by Latitude 38’s John Arndt, which brings together sailors from around the globe for a giant sailing celebration. Harley-Davidson recently held a similar program, setting aside a specific Monday for a “million-mile ride,” cumulatively logged by riders everywhere.

“There has to be more to offer than booths, boat dealers, brokers, hot dogs, mops and slice and dice knives,” says poster Dick Graves. He also voiced the need for more entry-level production boats under \$10,000 at shows, a message that has been lobbed about for years, but bears repeating. NMMA’s Affordability Pavilion is a positive step, but deserves expansion, including free boat rides.

Despite the likelihood of objections from boat manufacturers, I’d suggest we add premium used boats to the show mix to drive home the affordability message and attract first-time buyers. The cost of admission to boating is pretty steep. We need to start knocking down the barriers and, for many, it starts with price.

Sabre’s Bentley Collins observes that most of his buyers continue to attend shows, but he’d like to see more entertainment, like live music, fashion shows and other special events. John Kettlewell points to European shows that place greater emphasis on hospitality and entertainment. He cites the Guinness

stand in London that is a huge magnet, along with enticing show food, like the jumbo shrimp cocktail he sampled. He compares this experience with “dingy venues, lousy show food that is expensive, few if any exciting events and nothing but salespeople in all the booths” at some U.S. shows. Likewise, he is a proponent of more entertainment-oriented events, including “fashion shows, big tent demonstrations and visits by the sports’ superstars.”

I’ve seen the celebrity connection drive traffic and media coverage in the wakeboard, sailing and fishing markets. Crowds usually turn out to watch top riders as they spin, flip and fly off specially designed boat show ramps, while fishing shows lure in the faithful with champion anglers and demos. On the sailing front, an appearance by the winning America’s Cup BMW Oracle team this year in Oakland, Calif., drew a packed house on the opening day of Strictly Sail Pacific – traditionally the slowest day of the show.

Boating education was another red-hot thread among the Sciulla responses. Seminars on all sorts of nautical topics attract enthusiasts who otherwise might skip the show.

Strictly Sail hired a seminar coordinator to manage the multishow events and, despite the flailing economy, last season’s program broke attendance records. Trawlerfest is another example of a well-organized, highly valued educational venue that combines targeted consumer seminars with a premier trawler showcase.

I’m involved in managing the design and development of exhibits for my clients. I’m currently working with two of the leading exhibit builders, so I asked their opinions about the future of shows. Besides the obvious – the reduction in the number of trade and consumer shows (not necessarily a bad thing, as we had too many) – both account reps independently noted a trend toward more manufacturer-sponsored events, such as a recent show launched by McDonald’s exclusively for its franchisees.

Because of the interest in this topic, Sciulla, who runs professional programming for Marine Marketers of America, is bringing two database marketing experts as keynote speakers during the association’s annual awards banquet in Fort Lauderdale. They will discuss techniques used to laser-target prospects. Next is an MMA-sponsored panel discussion in Miami on the future of boat shows, all in the spirit of engaging the industry in the discussion.

Sciulla and I both envision a stimulating dialogue in which parties from all sides can brainstorm ideas and share concerns and concepts. We’re not talking about a bitch session here, but rather an open forum with the goal of contributing strategies to save our shows.

The good news is that some of our industry’s most influential show promoters are paying attention – even encouraging feedback.

Show Management’s Skip Zimbalist, whose company produces the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show, among others, posted the following: “I agree that we can do a lot more to make shows more entertaining and educational.” He says Show Management will review and apply some of these initial suggestions to its shows.

Thanks, Skip, for encouraging this much-needed discussion. Let’s work to keep both the lines at the shows, and lines of communication, open.

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This article originally appeared in the September 2010 issue.