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To Show or not To Show: The Million-Dollar Question

Boat shows remain ground zero for showcasing new product, engaging with clients and setting the table for future sales

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Consumer boat shows are throttling forward with gusto into the fall and winter seasons. However, with supply-chain issues and widespread inventory shortages continuing to stymie retail, the big question in many minds is: to show or not to show?

Retailer Jeff Husby, general manager and owner of Regal Nautique of Orlando, Fla., is queued up to deploy a proven show strategy: presold orders. The dealership creates display boards featuring all future builds, including pricing and estimated delivery dates. These boards are coupled with interactive touch screens so customers can build a boat on the spot. As presold slots fill up, the board updates instantly, creating urgency.

Husby's team has taken an oath of "total transparency" regarding production timelines. They share manufacturer-estimated delivery dates and follow up regularly with customers, a strategy intended to build trust while earning coveted CSI ratings.

Husby said the Marine Industry Association of Central Florida's spring Orlando Boat Show broke attendance records. While most dealers reduced their exhibit size and showed fewer boats, they sold inventory, took orders and reconnected with customers.

"Having all dealers come together in one place to show products remains the focal point for future sales," Husby says. "While dealers need to do their own independent marketing, we can't forget that shows offer a one-stop shopping experience, which is how many of our long-term customer relationships began."

Danny Goldenberg, co-owner of Marine Connection and its seven South Florida locations, is equally bullish, noting that shows remain essential to maintaining his dealership's momentum. They serve as a "focal point to re-engage customers, make new connections, display product and interact with the marketplace," he says.

He reports a trend of fewer show sales transacted, but he remains satisfied with documented post-show closing ratios. He says extended closings deliver improved customer sales experiences.

"Supply will catch up with demand, and boat shows will be instrumental once again in stimulating that demand," he says. "I expect boat shows will be the No. 1 expense in the boat retailer's marketing budget for a long time to come. ... Failure to participate risks the integrity of your brand for both dealers and manufacturers alike."

Matt Gruhn, president of the Marine Retailers Association of the Americas, says show participation remains a hot debate among dealers. "It's important for dealers to know and understand both the short- and long-term opportunities and implications they'll face in choosing to display or not to display in a consumer show," Gruhn says. "Opportunity-wise, most dealers are flush with cash and can afford to go big with their exhibits this year. The right approach can help build that presold list even further out.

"The implications of not exhibiting could leave you out of a continued hot sales environment," he adds. "Your lot is empty. You're not at the show. Are you still in business? The confusion can hurt you in the short term; long term, it could take awhile to re-establish yourself."

Gruhn recommends that dealers fill exhibits with all available new inventory first, then consider sharing inventory with other dealers or manufacturers. Another suggestion: Incentivize customers so you can show their boats.

While shows create value by featuring the latest and greatest industry products, Gruhn says, the format and the exhibits need to become "more experiential" in nature.

Victor Gonzalez, director of marketing at Sportsman Boats, agrees. "Today's shows struggle to fully represent the lifestyle of being a boater," he says. "Convention centers are certainly not conducive to this. I can see the future of boat shows having a larger emphasis with on-water experiences that bring a piece of the lifestyle to a prospective buyer, even if just for a couple of hours."

From his perspective, shows are no longer a selling place, but more of a networking opportunity to meet customers and engage new prospects.

"Customers love to interact with the manufacturer directly at the show, so for us, it's a great time to meet new and existing customers," he says. "A lot of our new product has been ordered by customers sight unseen, so the boat show is a great place for us to complete that loop."

In response to dealer inventory shortages, Sportsman built a fleet of demo boats that includes six new 2022 models and three additional models introduced during the past 18 months. They're all set aside explicitly for shows, dealer open houses and on-water demo days.

Boat show producers continue to say that shows offer the ideal venue to build relationships that foster sales, along with facilitating industry connections. Andrew Doole, president of U.S. boat shows for Informa Markets, says the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show delivers more than an exhibition and consumer-facing event.

“The Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show is a crucial business-to-business platform for manufacturers, dealers, brokers and other industry stakeholders to meet face-to-face,” he says. “FLIBS serves as an opportunity for many to network and execute new deals and partnerships. In fact, several trade organizations and others with a national and international reach have previously hosted annual meetings at FLIBS, which underscores the importance of the show for the industry at large.”

On the consumer side, FLIBS — the world’s largest in-water show with global exhibitors and attendees — reportedly produces sales of more than \$143 million each day. Doole says these results alone confirm the show’s value for exhibitors, and should prompt continued participation despite short-term inventory challenges.

“In the last year that the industry has faced inventory shortages, attendance and demand has continued to grow, not to mention that sales have achieved new highs — even for those with limited inventory,” Doole says. “This underscores how vital having a presence at the boat show is for exhibitors. Participating in events is not about a snapshot in time, but an ongoing commitment to attaching your brand to the industry.”

National Marine Manufacturers Association boat and sport shows senior vice president Jennifer Thompson says that with consumer interest and demand for boating booming, builders need to engage the next generation of customers in-person when they are comparing models and ready to shop.

“While inventory in 2022 may not look like it did two years ago, this is the opportunity to focus on all the elements of the product on display and showcase yourself to consumers in a reimaged way,” she says.

Nancy Piffard, show director at the Newport Exhibition Group, agrees. “While currently there are shortages, this will not last, and it makes smart business sense to prepare by connecting with customers and filling the future pipeline with leads.”

Have a Plan

What strategies do the show pros recommend for exhibitors who may be strapped for inventory? Thompson says to start by “rewiring” how your team thinks about boat shows.

“Now is the time to invest in building long-term equity and reimagining your space for more of a preselling experience, with a focus on selling the dream/lifestyle, incorporating a design center, outlining customization options and providing order incentives,” she says. “Dedicate an open portion of your space to showcase the lifestyle, why people get into boating; display innovations or renderings of what’s coming down the line; create an inviting lounge environment that allows you to engage with attendees face-to-face and educate them on your brand and new products.”

Piffard says exhibitors also need to remember their legacy customers. “Think boater education, connecting or reconnecting with current customers on the product they own, updates on accessories or other advancements to their product that might be valuable in an accessory/add-on capacity,” she says. “A manufacturer may not have as many boats to show or may not have any at all, but keeping a presence with a staffed booth or a floating dock with a reception area is a way to stay top of mind in a competitive market. You can also use the opportunity to demonstrate any online resources, such as configurators or virtual walkthroughs.”

The NMMA also intends to focus less on the amount of product and more on engagement and retention through learning, experiences and ways to create all-around boating fun, Thompson says. Doole envisions a future show shift to “more immersive technology” that will allow consumers to experience the boating products on display through virtual-reality exhibits.

Based on my more than 35 years as an industry marketer representing multiple brands and segments, my advice is always to remember the importance of brand presence. It’s been a long time since customers and prospects have seen you. Retool your approach and sales strategy. Downsize as necessary, but get creative and make every inch count.

Likewise, I believe it’s time for a fresh new take on our overall show format encompassing a more compelling lifestyle experience. However, instead of individual show teams working solo, why not collaborate and invite the brightest young and veteran marketing minds to participate in a boat show think tank? Bringing that much horsepower, experience and passion into a common focus could produce a unifying boat show game-changer.

I’m revved up and ready to cruise the aisles, see what’s new, rub elbows with colleagues and engage customers. I’ll also be on the hunt to find and share the best breakthrough boat-show marketing initiatives. Hope to see you at the show.

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