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To TikTok, or Not?

Yes, the audience skews younger, but marine-industry leaders say the online platform has real value with future boaters

WANDA KENTON SMITH • APR 25, 2022

When TikTok exploded in use domestically, I launched preliminary research with plans to share recommendations about this emerging social network. However, when President Trump tried to ban TikTok in 2020 because of perceived security concerns related to its Chinese origin, I postponed the deep dive.

Today, TikTok is banned in five countries, but it has infiltrated American culture with a spectacular trajectory. It became the second-most popular global app in 2020, being downloaded 850 million times, including 89 million downloads in the United States. Today, TikTok claims more than 1.1 billion active monthly users — 138 million stateside — each of whom spends an average 52 minutes per day, or 1,612 minutes per month, on the platform.

TikTok has now bested the likes of Twitter, Snapchat and Pinterest. Facebook claims 2.8 billion monthly active users, followed by YouTube at 2 billion. TikTok is battling Instagram for third place. Not too shabby considering few of us even knew TikTok's name three years ago.

A handful of marine-industry marketers are actively testing the TikTok waters. This is a fast-moving, short-form video platform offering content categories that range from entertainment content (443.3 billion hashtag views) to dance contests, pranks, tricks, stunts and jokes. Videos run 15 seconds to 3 minutes. TikTok mega-influencers command a 35 percent engagement rate, and micro-influencers an 18 percent engagement rate, both leapfrogging Instagram and YouTube. Influencer marketing is a big deal on this platform: Top influencer and dancer Charli d'Amelio dominates with a staggering 138 million followers.

While the numbers demand respect, the million-dollar marketing question remains: Who's watching? This is the major disconnect for some top marine marketers I surveyed.

According to agency Omnicore, in a March 2022 report, 57 percent of all TikTok users were female, while 43 were percent male. Some 43 percent of the global audience is 18 to 24 years old, with 32 percent between 25 and 34, and 3.4 percent older than 55.

In the United States, female users account for 61 percent of viewership, with the two largest age groups including 25 percent between 10 and 19 years old, and 22 percent between 20 and 29.

Billy Pavlock, CEO of the Nautical Network, believes these are prospective boaters. He started using TikTok for marine clients in October 2019, with goals to reach a newer audience while increasing viewership and awareness of previously created content. Today, his agency has cultivated 1.5 million followers. Its content has achieved viral status, earning more than 20 million views. In the past 60 days, he's tracked 14 million content views.

Regarding viewer age, he's seen the full gamut, from 13-year-olds to folks 65 and older, including boat owners and kids whose parents own boats.

"The boating industry has to remember that there is new, young money being introduced to this market, and TikTok is a great place to start the conversation," he says.

Pavlock measures views and engagement, product sales, recruitment results, boat sale leads and the growth of other channels, since TikTok links directly to YouTube and Instagram. "The companies and people that said Instagram is for younger audiences are the same companies and people that are on Instagram today trying to win and be seen," he says. "TikTok is no different. Yes, it may come off as a younger generation of viewers, but surely it will form into a social media outlet as big as Instagram and Facebook. It's important to win at TikTok now rather than chase it later."

The Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation has been active on TikTok since summer 2021 to promote its Take Me Fishing consumer brand, *@takemefishing*. "Data shows that younger Americans were beginning to dip their toes in the world of fishing and boating. Simultaneously, TikTok — an extremely popular social media platform — was also being introduced to the world and growing participation at unprecedented rates," says RBFF marketing director Rachel Piacenza. "With 75.4 percent of TikTok users in the U.S. aged 20 to 50-plus, the platform without a doubt reached Take Me Fishing's target audience. It was the perfect platform to meet prospective anglers and boaters at a time when they were looking for something to do outdoors."

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RBFF targeted new anglers, serving up entry-level content to educate and inspire newcomers. Its initial goal was to reach 10,000 followers and earn 1 million hashtag views within six months. In 30 days, the foundation gained 5,000 followers and 2.3 million hashtag views. Less than a year later, it claims 21,600 followers, plus a whopping 4.3 million hashtag views.

Piacenza credits the strategy of representing and recruiting female anglers and new boaters. The RBFF created a "face" for its channel via popular female angler Allie D'Andrea (*@outdoors_allie*), who serves as spokesperson/educator. While the initial organic growth speaks for itself, D'Andrea no doubt added a powerful punch with her 250,000 followers across TikTok, Instagram and YouTube.

This year, Piacenza expects to allocate more resources to TikTok, including expanding the number of content creators, increasing post frequency and optimizing content. "Have a thoughtful, data-

first strategy in place before launching the channel," she says. "Based on TikTok trends and our content priorities, we identified themes for content creation to guarantee longevity and identity to the channel. We also worked on a hashtag strategy, identifying the most popular hashtags across the platform that are relevant to us, to support growth through viewership.

"Make sure you partner with reliable content creators," she adds. "Do your homework in checking previous types of content creation and how they engage with content on social media."

The NMMA and its Discover Boating outreach launched on TikTok at the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, also working with a handful of influencers and content creators to tell the boating story. The team is testing the platform to learn what works best, while monitoring engagement and engagement. "We're on TikTok for a number of reasons, including to stay current with pop culture trends and conversations, and to understand what our target audience is saying and feeling on certain topics," says NMMA chief brand officer Ellen Bradley. "Additionally, we're on the platform to help tell our industry's story while engaging the next generation of boaters.

"For Discover Boating, we have a responsibility to understand the boating consumer and the next-generation boating consumer, so we're helping position the industry to invite them on the water," she adds. "TikTok helps us spot conversations and trends, stay on top of the tone of those conversations, and better understand our audience, all while giving us a platform to communicate with them in a creative, meaningful way about the moments and fun that come with boating."

Bradley says TikTok's algorithm allows Discover Boating to deliver content to users who are actively seeking adventure, outdoor recreation and freedom. The marketing team can target and share the experiences boaters enjoy on, in and under the water.

"It's not as much about demographics as it is about interests and mindset," she says. "There's great potential to build a brand voice on TikTok. Like any social media platform, it requires strategy and thought.

Be willing to have fun with it, and commit to it each week, and be thoughtful about how to create and share content that's authentic to your business. Creativity is a must, and so is a little strategic risk-taking."

There's much more to unpack, including the whole business and advertising component that has racked up \$2.3 billion in consumer spending, not to mention opportunities to cash in on *gifting* (TikTok's virtual currency) and monetization through strategic brand partnerships, cross-promotions, merchandising and more.

But for now, the question for many marine-industry leaders is: To TikTok or not? As with most marketing decisions, there's no one-size-fits-all answer. What I do know is that TikTok is growing exponentially. Marine marketers should pay attention, invest time to explore, and self-educate sooner rather than later.

If your organization has the marketing horsepower, bandwidth and budget, along with interest in nurturing and cultivating an audience, it makes sense to throw out a line and see what bites. Also, if your product or service skews to or attracts a younger audience and you want to engage and begin a conversation, the numbers are compelling.

I believe this may be the perfect platform to direct a fun and enticing marine industry career recruitment campaign.

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