

# Expanding The Boating Universe

Long a bastion of white males, the boating world is slowly broadening

By Michael G. Sciulla

**L**ast summer's hike in fuel prices to upwards of \$5 per gallon put a crimp in recreational boating. A recent survey by the marine industry reveals that about 80 percent of boaters said they're taking their boats



Wanda Kenton Smith, Ray Blue, and Pedro Diaz

out less often. In addition, according to National Marine Manufacturers Association (NMMA) statistics, the sale of new recreational boats has been declining since 1989.

Some boat owners may cheer the fact that there are fewer boaters on our waterways than in years past, but the nation's boatbuilders are struggling. To reverse the trend, in 2004 they created a \$12 million fund to fuel a national "Grow Boating" public relations campaign, commissioned surveys to quantify consumer purchasing and participation behavior, then spent \$36 million over three years on TV commercials, magazine advertising, viral marketing, a public-relations campaign, mobile marketing bus tour, and a Discover Boating web site ([www.DiscoverBoating.com](http://www.DiscoverBoating.com)).

While the campaign can point to some success, including participation increases in 2006-07, the Wall Street and banking crash turned into a tsunami for the marine industry. Sales of new boats and engines dropped 25 percent in 2008. Even the higher end of the yachting business — which had been somewhat immune to the slowing economy — is feeling the pinch.

When the economic cycle eventually turns positive, will the marine industry

return to production and participation levels achieved before the current crisis, or will they have mined new opportunities to grow the boating market? The question of what can be done to broaden boating's appeal was the subject of a recent meeting of Boating Writers International (BWI) during the Ft. Lauderdale Boat Show last October. A panel discussion entitled "Growing The Boating Universe Beyond Middle-Age Males" concluded that appealing to African-Americans and Hispanics, who now constitute 27 percent of America's population — and who are projected to comprise 50 percent of all Americans by 2042 — may be one sure-fire way of getting more people involved in recreational boating. Currently only 17 percent of boating participants are non-Caucasian.

"There are quite a few minority boaters but you'd never know it looking at boating magazines, product catalogs, and boating ads," said Thom Dammrich, president of the National Marine Manufacturers Association. "If we want more minorities to get interested in boating then we have to make it inviting and have them see themselves in the magazines, the photography, and the advertising," he added.

Dammrich's appeal was echoed by Ray Blue, co-founder of the Black Boaters Club of America and one of the BWI panelists. Blue says one impediment to attracting African-Americans to boating is that 51 percent don't know how to swim. Also, most African-Americans don't identify with boating because they don't see others like themselves getting involved, as they have with sports such as tennis and golf.

"The marine industry is losing out on billions of dollars of discretionary spending controlled by African-Americans who can afford to go boating but don't," notes Dammrich. "Advertisers need to be aware of the size of this market."

Just how important a minority group can be to boating was driven home by another panelist, Pedro Diaz, publisher of *Mary Pesca*, the nation's only Hispanic boating and fishing magazine. According to Diaz, nearly one-third of the one million boats registered in Florida are owned by

Hispanic-Americans and by 2035 one-fifth of all Americans will be Hispanic.

"As a Cuban-American who grew up on an island, I have to go to the ocean at least once a month or I just won't feel right," he noted. Diaz, too, bemoaned the fact that there were few opportunities for Hispanic-Americans to see themselves between the covers of most boating and fishing magazines.

But, while African and Hispanic Americans represent substantial and growing untapped markets, the boating industry is neglecting what may be its most influential market — women. According to Wanda Kenton Smith of Kenton Smith Advertising and Public Relations, a 30-year veteran of the boating industry, while men may technically own the vast majority of boats in this country, women have a substantial say in 80 percent of the purchasing decisions.

"When you look at boating magazines and advertising, most of what you see are babes lounging in boats and not at the helm," Kenton Smith said. Women constituted 52.5 percent of boating participants in 2006. "Women don't want special attention, they just don't want to be disregarded by the boating industry," she added.

And while being overlooked may well be the common element that ties these three demographic groups together, one way to reverse the industry's sagging fortunes may be staring us in the face. Advertisers control the dollars that are the lifeblood of boating's publications, and should be aware of these untapped markets. Those who see this as an opportunity to grow their business will encourage magazine publishers and editors to include more women, Hispanics, and African-Americans in their pages.

America is a far different place than it was just 10 or 20 years ago. According to the Boating Writers International panel, those who recognize the fact that recreational boating will grow by expanding its appeal beyond one slice of the American pie will not only survive, but prosper.

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