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40 Years of Marketing Milestones

Here are 10 strategies that have moved the sales needle

WANDA KENTON SMITH · JUN 1, 2019

As *Soundings Trade Only* celebrates 40 years, I am enjoying my 40th year as an industry marketer. It's an ideal time for a look back at 10 of the biggest marketing milestones from those decades, as well as a look at where we're headed.

1. Product Packaging

In 1980, Slim Summerville and U.S. Marine launched a concept with a nationally advertised value package. The 19-foot Bayliner Capri came in one color with one engine at one broadly promoted price of (gasp!) \$6,995.

With a price 20 percent below the competition, sales exploded, luring scores of new boaters. Factory locations shot from three to 26. During one five-year period, George Sullivan, then vice president of marketing and communications, said annual sales grew by more than \$100 million each year over the preceding year. Sullivan also struck a deal with Ford Motor Co. to offer the Capri package with a Ranger pickup truck for \$17,795.

In 1990, Sullivan took packaging to Wellcraft with a directive to expand markets for inland and freshwater products. He launched five packaged prototypes in the new Excel line from 15 to 20 feet and picked up \$72 million in dealer orders at the International Marine Trades Exhibition and Conference.

Others, including Johnny Morris at Tracker Boats, have also used the packaging idea to great success.

2. Engine Dynamics

In 1982, Sylvan "Ham" Hamberger joined Yamaha Motor Corp. and launched the outboard division into the U.S. market. Through an integrated marketing strategy, the brand rapidly gained market share, moving from ground zero to sales of more than \$300 million under his leadership and marketing direction. During the '80s, Brunswick and Outboard Marine Corp. went on a spree of buying boatbuilders to ensure they had transoms for their engines.

More recently, Volvo Penta advanced joystick and self-docking technology, improving the boater experience while generating positive media buzz.

3. Boat Shows

Ben Wold, former executive vice president of the National Marine Manufacturers Association, recalls the height of boat show mania: producing 23 shows in a single year. The number of shows and their operating hours have constricted considerably over the past four decades. In addition, while producers originally focused on exhibitors, which generate 75 percent of show revenue, the NMMA shifted attention years ago to improve the consumer experience.

The latter effort includes Discover Boating centers, Boater Pass and more — all of which are designed to keep buyers engaged in person, in an era of online shopping and competing family demands.

According to NMMA president Thom Dammrich, dealers today generate about 50 percent of their annual sales at boat shows, including direct sales and leads.

4. Co-branded Partnerships

Marketing partnerships with major, non-boating national brands extend reach, build awareness and can move inventory. Genmar proved this with big-box retailer Sam's Club, staging parking lot boat shows at stores nationwide. Some 1,200 dealers with boats from 8 to 100 feet saw \$50 million in increased sales.

Marketer Gordon Houser took a similar approach, negotiating major product exposure for Wellcraft boats at Universal Studios in Florida. He placed product along the theme park's shoreline and staged live-action boat chases that millions of park guests watched each year.

When I headed marketing for Regal, we paired a sportboat in a multimillion dollar national television and print campaign with General Motors to launch its new GMC Safari van. We partnered with Coca-Cola and PepsiCo., resulting in the Regal brand and messaging being splashed on millions of soda cans and cartons. Additionally, our boats were featured grand prizes in dozens of consumer sweepstakes.

5. TV and Movie Exposure

The epic television exposure for boating was the series *Miami Vice*, which ran from 1984 to 1990 and featured the Wellcraft Scarab 38 KV. Senior vice president Bill Erickson catapulted the brand as television's sexiest cops, Crockett and Tubbs, chased bad guys aboard the hottest boat on the planet. Wellcraft milked its *Miami Vice* exposure and made millions.

On a smaller scale, Correct Craft, Wellcraft, Donzi, Hobie Cat and Regal maintained boats in Hollywood, showcasing product on game shows, television series and daytime dramas, along with occasional movies.

In 1989, Sullivan debuted the weekly national television adventure series *Bayliner's Water Sports World*. Marketing veteran Jack Aylsworth's *Anglin*, among the first TV shows to utilize a magazine-style format he created, earned a three-year top Nielsen ranking for fishing. Featured in the series, Lowe Boats had a 35 percent spike in sales. Talk about striking the marketing motherload.

Today's outgrowths of these early efforts include *Ship Shape TV*, *PowerBoat Television*, *Below Deck*, *Deadliest Catch* and *Wicked Tuna*, as well as *Sport Fishing Television* and *Florida Sport Fishing*.

Wellcraft milked the Miami Vice exposure with its Scarab line and made millions.

6. Celebrity Marketing

Paul Perry, once the national sales and marketing manager for Hunter Marine, pushed company founder Warren Luhrs into the media limelight when Luhrs became world champion in the Single-handed Trans-Atlantic Race. A somewhat reluctant sailing celebrity emerged, but with increased brand awareness and sales.

During my Regal heyday, actor Burt Reynolds took the helm of a customized 36-foot Commodore for a photo shoot and national press conference, resulting in media coverage that included prime-time television. Another celebrity partner was basketball player Shaquille O'Neal, then with the NBA's Orlando Magic. His endorsement stimulated major exposure for what was, at the time, the "biggest 27-foot bowrider."

A more recent celebrity promotion included a three-year partnership between Discover Boating and country music star Jake Owens, who shared video and media interviews, along with social media posts, about his love affair with boating and its influence on his music.

7. New Media and Publishing

For 30 of the past 40 years, marine magazines were the showcase for products, goods and services. Beginning in 2009, however, the Great Recession sucker-punched the publishing world. Many advertisers slashed media budgets to survive.

Simultaneously, the virtual explosion of the Internet began to corner limited marketing dollars. Publishers have expanded their scope of coverage to compete, while marine marketers scramble to stretch budgets and keep abreast with fast-changing digital technology and new platforms.

8. P.R. Overdrive

Tools of the public-relations trade used to include the IBM Selectric typewriter (with white-out ribbon), a copier, envelopes, stamps and the trusty telephone. "We sent out press releases by mail with black-and-white glossy photos stapled to them," says Jim Rhodes of Rhodes Communications, whose industry career began in 1983. "My 2-year-old daughter would sometimes sit on my lap and help me lick the envelopes and attach the stamps."

Best lead time for turning press releases to print? Two to three months. Today's platforms have radically improved efficiencies. Media database research can be customized with a stroke of targeted keywords. With a 24-hour news cycle, releases can be distributed worldwide with the click of a mouse and go live in minutes.

9. Marketing Events

Boating is an activity that must be experienced. Companies that get people on the water win. Houser, when he wasn't winning exposure for Wellcraft, created high-performance boot camps and fishing schools. Betty Bauman teaches a lot of women how to fish with her "Ladies, Let's go Fishing" seminar series. The water sports and sailing industries run camps and operate schools to provide hands-on education for adults and kids.

Freedom Boat Club conducts monthly open houses to introduce new people to boating. More than 170 clubs and 20,000 members later, the club concept and event marketing are proven winners.

10. New Markets

I've been preaching since the 1990s that the industry must market to more than the 35- to 64-year-old Caucasian male. John Tuzee, who propelled the Johnson Motors name change to Johnson Outboards, recalls being the first in his organization to feature African Americans in company catalogs and ad campaigns, and to invest media dollars in women's magazines.

I likewise positioned women at the helm in brochures and advertisements beginning in the late '80s, and casted people of color in photo and video shoots. Few have followed — a trend that must change to keep pace with America's changing demographics and to grow boating.

The Future

We must continually embrace all the nuances of the digital age. Our marketing strategies need to integrate the latest technology. At the same time, we must look to history and spot missed opportunities.

Who's working on co-branded promotions today? Celebrity partnerships? Getting more butts on boats? Product placement? What are we doing to generate a buzz, and to establish relationships with editors and influencers within and outside the industry? How are we pricing our boats to make them attractive and more affordable? How are we engaging and inviting new markets to come boating with us?

There are invaluable lessons to be learned by studying the greatest successes of our past.

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