

Winning Strategies

This year's Neptune Award winners exemplify seven top marketing trends in the marine industry.

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I fondly remember the inaugural meeting of Marine Marketers of America at the Miami International Boat Show in February 2007. I had organized a small group of colleagues to create an organization to help marketers connect, collaborate and have a collective voice. A primary goal was to launch a national awards program to champion and celebrate the best work of marketers throughout the marine industry. In 2011, the Neptune Awards began. They are now arguably the most coveted recognition for marine marketers in North America.

This year's Neptune Awards included 155 submissions judged by 80 marketing professionals. There were winners in 25 categories, eight of which were new: Best Use of AI; Use of Data, Analytics and Insights; Brand Engagement Campaign; Lead Generation Campaign; New Launch Campaign; Marketing Partnerships; Industry Rising Star; and the Integrated Marketing Campaign, split into Boat Brands and Non-Boat Brands.

The winners all provide insights into the following seven key marine marketing trends.

Video is King. The King Neptune Award, which represents the best in overall competition, was won by BD Outdoors for its West Coast Film Series, which included three "captivating stories and their characters" in a Go Boldly campaign for Mercury. The paramount importance of great storytelling and video engagement is evident in marketing strategies used by most all the top marine marketing companies. Not only are marketers capturing and producing content, but many are using a bevy of smart editing tools to enhance quality. There were 33 entries in the Video Series, Single Long Video and Single Short Video categories alone, while videos served as major components in 16 additional categories.

I've long said, and will say it again: If your company isn't heavily investing in video — including personnel (internal or outsourced), training, and the latest tools and tech — then you're missing the boat. Are your content capture and reproduction at a truly professional level? Do the tone and style authentically convey the essence of your brand?

Partnerships Are More Powerful. This year's winner in the Marketing Partnership category was Mercury, which built a strong coalition with two independent event organizers and a host community for a Mercury Racing P1 and F1 event in Sheboygan, Wis. "Brands that share common goals are recognizing the power of collaboration, teaming up to amplify their reach and impact," Neptune Awards co-chair Alisdair Martin says. "By joining forces, brands are able to leverage their collective strengths to gain a distinct competitive advantage in the market," he adds.

Influencers Are Making Waves. For the past few years, marine organizations of all sizes have been working with social influencers to build goodwill, enhance brand awareness, and increase product and service sales. With five of the 25 winning entries featuring an influencer in their campaigns, there's little doubt this swell will continue to rise.

Greater Campaign Integration. There's an increasing emphasis on integrating multiple marketing channels for campaign deployment. Unlike previous years, a significant majority of entries showcased multichannel strategies and platforms, including video, website, social and email marketing, directed by marketing strategists with quantifiable results.

Marketing Innovation Is Rising. As an industry, our marketing focus and deliverables over the years might have been considered safe or even old school. However, numerous Neptune entries this year reflected a credible shift toward enhanced innovation, embracing experiential strategies and assumptive risk-taking. The winner in the Marine Innovation category was Marine Connection, a retail powerhouse with multiple locations that used data to deliver prospect messaging at the exact right time in the funnel, while offering integrated payment and discount options to spur sales.

Focus on Customer Experience. Many of the Neptune Awards participants focused on improving customer touchpoints. According to Martin, several of the highest-scoring entries mobilized modern technology to provide customers with efficient and convenient solutions. Case in point: the win by the Marine Retailers Association of the Americas for its creation and use of AI in the launch of AIMIE, a tool that makes it easier for dealers to access the association's extensive resources.

Uptick in Outsourcing. Marine marketing organizations are collaborating with outside experts to help achieve a vision. Entries show an increase in the use of specialized consultants, agencies and production companies.

In addition to exemplifying these seven key trends, the Neptune Awards inspired excellence and triggered motivation. Analyze your marketing activities against these emerging benchmarks. What areas might you focus on to improve your marketing performance?

Marine Marketers of America is planning an online seminar with a panel of Neptune winners who will share insights and advice. In addition, the association is considering hosting similar in-person panels at upcoming industry events. If you're not a member of the organization, get involved so you can access

these professional development programs.

“Overall, it is a fascinating time to be involved with marketing in the marine industry,” Martin says. “In my 25 years of working in this industry, I have witnessed many changes and developments, but none have been as transformative or exhilarating as the period of rapid growth we are experiencing right now. It’s a golden era for innovation.”

This article was originally published in the May 2024 issue.
