

MRAA'S GUIDE TO BOAT SHOW SUCCESS

How to navigate
show season,
whether your show is
in-person or online.

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**Boat show health and
safety guidelines**

**Key strategies for a
successful virtual show**

**How to plan your
virtual show**

**Lessons from real
virtual shows in 2020**

**Marketing in a post-pandemic,
pro-digital era**

**Free marketing tools
you can use**





DURING MRAA'S DEALER WEEK PREVIEW EVENT, held on Oct. 29, 2020, Nicole French, owner of Demasdon's Boatworks in Pointe Au Baril, Canada, entered a question into the chat that reflects the minds of most every boat dealer out there: "Our boat show is a big exposure for our dealership to find new customers and for existing customers to visit us. Now, with its cancellation, do you have any tips to keep up our virtual presence or to host an in-house, virtual boat show?"

Welcome to MRAA's Guide to Boat Show Success brought to you by Discover Boating.

The genesis of this publication took place through numerous dealer conversations that explored the same question as Nicole's. The reality is, however, that this question is just one of many on the minds of our dealers and manufacturers on how to navigate this show season.

This guide seeks to answer those questions for you. In it, we'll walk you through high-level business advice from our industry's top experts; how to approach your show if it does take place in-person; how to make the most of a partner-produced virtual boat show; considerations you should make if exploring your own virtual boat show; and how to ensure your digital marketing efforts lead you to success no matter what happens with shows.

Through the craziness of the 2020 season, it's become evident that the one certainty for the year ahead is continued, consistent uncertainty. You need to be prepared no matter what 2021 brings, and this guide is the perfect place to get started.

Have a great show season!

Matt Gruhn
MRAA President



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THE BOAT SHOW OUTLOOK

If 2020 has taught us anything, it's to prepare for the unexpected. To call 2020 unpredictable is probably the understatement of the year. That uncertainty will continue for the industry as we head into boat show season.

Across the country, many boat shows have been cancelled while others continue. The Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show, one of the industry's largest, took place in October. The show appears to have been safe and successful, with many vendors reporting better traffic than expected. At the same time, it was certainly a different experience, with masks, hand sanitizer and social distancing rules in place to ensure a safe experience.

"FLIBS 2020 will be one show that none of us in the marine industry will ever forget - and not just because of the masks and the hand sanitizer - but also the busy docks, the contracts that came in when nobody expected it, and an overwhelming sense of community," said Bob Denison, Denison Yachting. "Our brokers, marketing team, and support staff all had a fun and safe boat show. We sold more boats and yachts than we expected."

With COVID cases expected to surge during the fall and winter, many other boat shows have been cancelled, including Miami, Atlanta, New York and Minneapolis. NMMA, which produces many of the industry's major shows, is working to balance the needs of safety and growing the industry.

"These decisions are in the best interest of our consumers, staff, members, and industry and are the result of months-long conversations with exhibitors, health officials, venue operators, and other stakeholders on producing safe, successful, and high-quality consumer experiences," said Frank Hugelmeyer, NMMA president. "We understand the vital role boat shows play in showcasing new products and generating sales for the recreational boating industry, and we plan to resume our full show schedule starting in September 2021."

This all points to the importance of planning for any possibility. Shows may be delayed, rescheduled or go on as planned. Safety concerns may cause lower attendance at those that do occur. Or developments could mean a milder winter than we expect.

So a smart dealer is going to be ready for whatever comes, by building out digital marketing, preparing for digital and in-person shows and planning for surprises.

Read on for expert advice from some of the leading companies in the boating industry. ★

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BOAT SHOW WOES

By Sam Dantzler, Garage Composites

It only takes one quick Google search to see how many boat shows have been cancelled this year. While many thought the shows would go off as planned, a resurgence of COVID cases this fall saw most shows pull the plug, save Ft. Lauderdale. Cancelled in Miami?!?!?! If you can't have an event with swimsuits, cocktails, and new boats in Miami, don't expect much elsewhere. So initially, that decision was made for the dealer... for better or for worse.

But even pre-COVID, discussions were already afoot earlier this year and last as to the effectiveness of the boat show model in our digital, instant gratification world. Could you, the dealer, put those resources to better use within your own dealership? What if you ran your own, neighborhood boat show? What if you did a virtual boat show? Granted, there is certainly a vibe at the live shows ... an energy that cannot be replaced virtually or crowds that cannot be generated with just your own store(s). But if you have to go to a Plan B, you need to have one cued up!



Virtual boat show

The aspect of this I love the most is getting the entire team utilizing videos, and comfortable on camera. A successful virtual event needs a mix of live talking (consider an emcee), staff comments/feedback on camera, and a bank of video walk-arounds, etc. With a little help and practice with screen navigation, most platforms to push out a virtual boat show can be mastered by the average dealership employee. Make sure to record it to use snippets for social marketing pieces.



Live, neighborhood boat show

This is definitely a vision of dealers with multi-point operations, who can combine together to pull off an event. Or if you're not afraid of your competition, you can pull this off like an automotive "row" of dealers. My favorite version of this is the dealer who is heavy in used product. Consider contracting a live "auctioneer," set price minimums on all pieces, and have at it. Much like the closing offices at time-share operations, customers get caught up in the excitement of the auction, and you will flush out considerable product, often times at higher margins than you typically run. Consignment boats can dovetail nicely into this event.



Targeted marketing

The average dealer spent about half the money in marketing/advertising this year than in 2019. Why worry about advertising when you are selling everything you get your hands on? Well for one, you need to stay "in front of" the buyers with your logo, your community involvement, and your interest in



your customers. But the real gem is the targeted marketing that can be done. Finding your “ideal demographic” is something every marketing firm can do for dealers these days. Mirroring the demographic of your _____ customer (pontoon, jetboat, etc.), then directly targeting those customers through Geo-Fencing, OTT campaigns, etc. has never been easier. Essentially you are driving the exact style of buyer into your store, targeted on what inventory pieces you may actually be heavy on. Put simply, that doesn't happen at boat shows, and is a far better use of funds.

But Here's the Real Question

The average dealer nets 30 to 50 percent of its annual leads from the boat show. What will you do to replace that “bucket” full of hot leads? Ever consider what a windfall that is, relative to other industries? You should know the powersports dealers find it hilarious that marine dealers wait until the annual “Boat Show Santa Claus” comes along to drop off the annual basket of gifts (leads) for each dealer. What about industries which have no boat show? How do they get their leads every year? Two words: lead management. Combing through your CRM is the easiest, self-managed, ongoing way to speed up your own customer's turn cycles. It keeps your salespeople busy during the down season, and primes the pump for the winter anticipation sales, traditionally activated at your boat shows. But why? Why can't we capture those sales and create our own lead bucket, especially in a year when we can expect to have to do so without such a grand event? ★

MAKE NEXT YEAR AS GOOD AS THIS YEAR

By David Parker, Parker Business Planning

COVID or not, it remains important to have some version of a boat show in the year ahead.

This year, preparing for various boat show scenarios offers a few challenges. Will there be traditional, in-person shows, or will we have to go to an in-house or virtual show?

No matter what happens, the impact of COVID will persist. Typical boat shows will require added social distancing measures. In-house boat shows probably make a lot of sense this year in light of the current health environment, but must be conducted carefully. And virtual events, either produced in-house or using a partner's platform, will rise in popularity — and quality — throughout show season.

While the bulk of this publication will provide advice to help you adjust to the approach your dealership faces or chooses, your major consideration, in my view, will be the availability of boats you could display, as inventories are expected to remain slim as manufacturers work feverishly to keep up. Since the mission of boat shows is to help you drive sales volume, I would like to provide some guidance for your sales and inventory perspective, which you will need to address no matter which approach you use for shows in the year ahead.



The two most important issues, in my opinion, are: How will we maintain our sales volume next year? And what should you do about lower inventory availability?

To begin, get the inventory you need. If you have not ordered your 2021 new boat inventory, please do so ASAP. I just had a Virtual 20 Group meeting and seven of the eight brands mentioned were sold out for the year.

It has been extremely exciting for me to see so many dealers who are literally having the best year EVER in terms of sales, gross margins and net profit. This is the first time in my life that a “recession” has been actually good ... great for our industry. Awesome!

Now let's get into how to make next year as good as it was this year.

To start with, as far as new boat sales are concerned, we will have to move our sales positioning to selling build slots vs actual inventory. Many of our dealers have been using some variation on the “smart buyer” program announced about five years ago. This is where a dealer shows how it is to the customer's advantage to buy their new boat in the fall vs. waiting until boat show season or even spring time. Basically, they were selling slots of next year's production. If you haven't started this approach, you should do so now.

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Since inventories are so low, many dealers are having to work out arrangements with customers to show a previously sold boat in order to get a new build slot sold. One dealer suggested offering to the customer an expensive wakeboard or a complimentary service, such as free storage or winterization, for the availability of showing their boat. This also leads to that customer feeling extra special in regard to your dealership.

Hopefully, you will raise your gross margins a few points on the boats you do have to sell as the ones you have on order are likely the only ones you will get this year.

Now, how are we going to make up for sales volume that likely will be missed in 2021 due to product shortages? The answer, I believe, for every dealer will be an increased emphasis on used boats and possibly brokerage.

Right now, is the best time of the year to go after consignment boats and attempt to buy boats for next spring sales. The process goes something like this:

- ▶ Run ads that you consign and buy boats for cash.
- ▶ When the customer comes in, start with a consignment approach and use a Net Purchase Option. The Net Purchase Option allows dealers to make 20 percent (or better) margins by agreeing on a net price for the “Option to Purchase” the consignor’s boat, and anything over that amount will be your commission. Document this arrangement.
- ▶ This approach works well with boats under \$100,000. Over that amount, you may want to revert to the traditional brokerage approach of 10 percent of the selling price.
- ▶ Some dealers also add up to a \$499 check-out and marketing fee, paid up front when taking the boat on consignment. Explain this as your method for helping the boat sell faster at a higher dollar amount because the buyer will know it has been thoroughly checked out. Then make sure your service department evaluates the boat, including a compression check. It is proven that buyers will pay more for a boat if they have a better understanding of its actual condition. The marketing fee portion allows you to promote the boat on multiple websites to get the most visibility. You could also add on a detailing package to help it sell faster as well.
- ▶ Often, there is some push back from the sales department in getting this fee. What I have found is that if you agree to pay the consigning salesperson \$150 from the fee, they usually find a way to ask for it with confidence.
- ▶ It is important to note the \$150 consignment incentive should be paid to the salesperson when the dealership is paid. I am amazed at how easily sales objections go away with that stipulation.
- ▶ Sometimes the customer will ask for the fee to be taken out of the sales proceeds. That is fine so long as they agree to pay the fee, in the event they decide not to sell the boat.

After getting to a point of agreement on the net purchase price, offer to buy the boat for cash. This time of year, there is a very strong argument to the customer's advantage (and the dealers) to just sell the boat out-right at this time.

It goes something like this:

- ▶ Walk the customer through this scenario: "We have agreed to net you \$50,000 (for example). We would be willing to just buy your boat right now for (say) \$42,000." Telling the customer to keep in mind the boat will probably sit here until next spring before it sells. In that time, you would have had to pay boat and insurance payments, winterization and maintenance fees of several thousands of dollars and it would be another year older, making it worth 5 to 10 percent less.
- ▶ If they do not accept your offer at that time, typically in a few weeks they will contact you and either take your offer or try to negotiate a little better one.
- ▶ Otherwise, if the consignment continues, and you have an offer on the consigned boat, you could contact the customer and say something like: "Mr/Ms. Customer, we have an offer on your boat and if you could take \$2,000 (or \$3,000) less for your boat I think we can get it sold." This is especially effective if the boat has "seasoned" on your lot for 60, 90 or more days.
- ▶ I also would suggest having a Used Boat Manager in charge of the whole department. Most dealers who do this will do a much better job at buying/trading boats and increasing the used sales volume.

Selling build slots and developing an effective used boat strategy like this are a good idea, even when we're not faced with a pandemic. But it will be especially necessary while we are. ★





WHAT ARE YOUR BOAT SHOW GOALS?

By Mark J. Sheffield, Spader Business Management

One question for you: What is the end goal you hope to achieve when you participate in your local boat show(s)?

For many dealers, boat shows have become an annual tradition. Some spend more than half of their annual advertising budget on these shows, and that does not account for lost productivity in the dealership (as many technicians are turned into very expensive carpenters and porters).

What are the key drivers for boat show participation?

- ▶ Starting the season off by getting in front of motivated buyers
- ▶ For many dealers (especially northern ones) keeping the team busy during a time when there might not be much business otherwise
- ▶ Gathering customer contacts to use in future marketing efforts
- ▶ Selling through non-current inventory
- ▶ Ability to pre-order custom builds for spring delivery (during normal and non-pandemic times)
- ▶ Determining where customer interest is for the current model year
- ▶ Setting the year up for success

What are the cons of participating in boat shows?

- ▶ The hard costs
- ▶ Competing in close quarters with other dealers for low-margin deals
- ▶ Lost productivity in the dealership
- ▶ Good employees being identified and then poached by the competition
- ▶ Employee burnout

COVID has upended the calculations that dealers would typically employ (as it has to almost every other aspect of how we operate our businesses) to determine which boat shows to participate in, and at what level. While many dealers would rather wait to see how the earliest shows for 2021 play out, for most that would put them past the participation cutoff dates. The big questions on most dealers' minds:

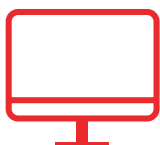
- ▶ At what level will consumers choose to gather in crowds of people they do not know?
- ▶ Will there be any liability on the dealer if a customer picks up an infection?
- ▶ What measures should the dealer take to keep the staff safe?
- ▶ With limited inventory, what is available to display/sell at a show?
- ▶ Is it worth getting into a price war when the majority of today's good inventory can be sold at solid margins?
- ▶ If the dealership skips a year and loses its earned placement in the show, what does that do in future years?

My discussions with many dealers lead me to believe that many dealers will seek out a middle ground, mixing some level of participation with regional shows along with in-house virtual shows and expanded digital-marketing efforts. For the dealers who are choosing this middle-of-the-road approach, here are some of the tools you need to sharpen prior to the start of show season. None of these are new, but for many dealers, good business breeds bad habits, and the slow season is the best time to prepare for the busy one.



Customer Relationship Management system

If you cannot sell that customer a new boat, all is not lost. The secondary goal of every customer contact is to collect that consumer's contact information. The Customer Relationship Management system (CRM) is the place where all that information is collected, hopefully with bonus information about the consumer. His/her trade details, the make/model of the boat they are searching for, his favorite hobby, etc. All that extra information can be useful down the road, and with most CRMs every piece of it can be quickly and easily searched.



Website

When is the last time you updated your website? With many consumers working hard to limit personal contacts, your website is more important than ever before. Fresh content that works on multiple platforms (computers, tablets, smart phones) is an imperative. Have you identified the most used portions of your website and made sure these areas are easy for customers to access?



Digital advertising

These days it seems like everyone is in the AdWords game. Are you partnered with a company that understands the marine industry, and that also understands your business model? Many of the AdWords resellers have a template for the industry that is dropped on your account, meaning that your ads (and ultimately your business) look just like everyone else's.



Many people have not realized that Google is now using AI to develop dynamic ads. They analyze your website and customer interests/behaviors and then automatically build ads for your business. Their systems fine tune these ads to maximize click throughs while reducing bounces. If more than 10 percent of your AdWords account is being spent on “active management” then it’s probably time to go shopping for a new partner.



Email

I am constantly surprised by the number of dealers who utilize the email systems provided by their website providers. This made sense in the 20th century, but not today. Most website providers offer email as a convenience, it is not what they are good at. Most of these default accounts do not have much storage allocated to them and the user interfaces are clunky at best. Modern communication providers (Google or Microsoft) also offer integrated suites of business productivity products that can dramatically improve the efficiency and productivity of your employees.

Recently, I worked with a powersports dealer to transition from his vendor-provided website over to Google’s own G-Suite. He now has full access to add and remove users, he can create contact groups, and he no longer wastes time getting his employees to empty their online trash. However, the thing he likes most about G-Suite is that a significantly higher percentage of the emails that his employees send to customers are getting through (there is a technical reason for this, but that’s a different article).



Texting

SMS and texting are just the next evolution of how we communicate with our customers. Have you ever conducted training with your employees letting them know what your expectations are for communicating with your customers over mobile devices? Do you have any control over these communications, or are you just letting your employees use their personal devices for sending and receiving messages? What happens when someone gets sick, is out on vacation, or leaves you to go work for the competition?



Lead management

Many dealers did not have the capacity to deal with the quantity of leads they have received over the last 6 months. Some customers waited days to hear back, and many never received a response. If you are overwhelmed, then do your best to find the middle-ground between quality and response time. Speed matters, but it is still important that the customer’s questions are answered. I do not care how you do it but find a way to follow up on EVERY internet lead, and make sure those customers are logged in your CRM. This is probably the point where many of you want to ask about a Business Development Center (BDC), but that is also a topic for another article. Most dealers who set up a BDC fail miserably and then just go back to how they did things prior to the BDC. Let us fix some other things first.

For a multitude of reasons, 2020 is going to go down in the record books. The downside to business being great is that many dealers have developed bad habits, and we need to correct these problems before the new year arrives. Regardless of how you plan to participate in next year’s boat shows, fine tuning the above listed skills will make sure you are ready for a banner 2021. ★

We fuel dealer education. Our partners make it possible.

STRATEGIC PARTNERS



The MRAA's Strategic Partners are the strategic and financial backbone of the association. They believe in, support and contribute significantly to the strategic direction of MRAA's work to fuel the success of your business. Today, more than ever, MRAA's Strategic Partner support enables MRAA's creation of the critical tools, resources and educational programs — like this comprehensive publication — you need in order to survive and thrive now and into the future.



BOAT SHOW HEALTH & SAFETY GUIDELINES

For those boat shows that do occur in-person this year, they are going to look different than in the past.

The guidelines vary by location and show producer, and of course you should be sure to follow whatever local rules exist for your show. These policies from major show producers, though, give us an idea of show conditions for the upcoming winter shows.

Informa

Producer of Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show, Palm Beach International Boat Show and others.

All Informa events will follow the **GBAC (Global Biorisk Advisory Council) standards for enhanced cleaning**, including undergoing deep cleaning before, during, and after each day's events, to ensure the highest standards of hygiene and cleanliness. This includes complete overnight disinfection, electrostatic sprayers with EPA biodegradable disinfectants, and continuous sanitation throughout the course of the boat show, with a focus on high-touch areas such as door handles, restrooms, and food and beverage areas.



The policies emphasize enhanced cleaning and hygiene with designated hygiene hosts, additional handwashing facilities and hand sanitizing stations throughout the event space, encouraging the use of digital materials distribution instead of printed materials; and, physical distancing protocols that include non-contact ticketing and registration, on-site signage and floor markings, social distance ambassadors, and multiple points of entrance and exit, among other measures.

Additionally, pursuant to local laws, all staff and participants will be required to wear a face mask, and participate in screening measures such as thermal scanned temperature checks or other screening processes upon entry. Exhibitor booth space will comply with all requirements outlined for retail establishments in local guidelines, including floor markers within each exhibitor booth to allow for social distancing, increased sanitation of all items throughout the day, encouraging adoption of contactless payment mechanisms, and eliminating interactive exhibits. All seating in cafes, VIP lounges, concession areas, and cocktail barges will be set up in accordance with social distancing guidelines.

Annapolis Boat Shows

- ▶ Daily attendance to the shows will be regulated through pre-sold tickets. Each day will have a strict maximum capacity level.
- ▶ Everyone entering showgrounds is required to wear a face mask at all times.
- ▶ Everyone entering showgrounds will be temperature screened.

- ▶ Tent configurations altered to include one-way only walkways through all tents and air handling systems purifying and moving air.
- ▶ Touchless hand sanitizing and washing stations, as well as face mask dispensers, accessible throughout the show.
- ▶ Showgrounds will close each day at 6:30pm (5:00 p.m. on the final day of each show). Exhibitors and attendees will have 30 minutes to make their way to the exits. After this, cleaning and disinfection of the show premises will begin.
- ▶ All meetings, classrooms, workshops, and VIP areas will be limited to 50% capacity, allowing for proper physical distancing.
- ▶ No after-hours events will be allowed on the show grounds.

The National Marine Manufacturers Association, which produces the Miami International Boat Show, Atlanta Boat Show and others, has cancelled many of its shows for the upcoming season. The association is currently developing its guidelines for those shows that are currently planned for the spring, including the Atlantic City Boat Show and New England Boat Show.

NMMA offers advice on safety and health considerations on the following pages. ★



BOAT SHOW HEALTH AND SAFETY CONSIDERATIONS AMID THE PANDEMIC

By Discover Boating

To maintain continuity with customers and generating boat sales, nothing beats face-to-face meetings. That said, COVID-19 has upended operations and created a “new normal” for producing in-person boat shows and events worldwide. While boat show organizers are developing plans to help maintain social-distancing guidelines and make boat shows as touchless as possible, there are some key health and safety considerations you can adopt as you plan for any in-person events.

Here are a few recommendations for in-person events and boat shows to help keep your employees and customers safe.

PERSONAL PROTECTIVE EQUIPMENT

Wear face masks, especially when interacting with customers and when in close contact with staff. Consider providing branded face masks to your customers – a functional and timely marketing giveaway. Determine if additional personal protective equipment, such as gloves, eye screens or face shields would benefit your staff.

INCREASED SANITATION

Sanitize highly touched areas in your exhibit space regularly, including products and displays. Provide hand sanitizer to attendees.

REIMAGINED FLOORPLANS

Design your booth and display with social distancing top of mind. This may include plexiglass dividers, wider space between boats, and a reconfiguration of product to encourage one-way navigation while shopping, entering and exiting.

REGULAR COMMUNICATION AND INFORMATION SHARING

Now more than ever, communication with staff and with your customers is imperative. Regular e-mails outlining boat show plans and the safety protocol you're putting into place will give everyone more peace of mind and confidence in attending the boat show and visiting your booth.

PHYSICAL DISTANCING

While it's not in our nature and atypical in the sales world, avoid physical contact, such as handshakes and embraces, and practice alternative ways to greet customers and colleagues.

DIGITAL SALES MATERIALS

The exchange of printed materials, such as business cards and sales brochures, is no longer the norm and discouraged at events. Now is the time to explore digital alternatives, such as QR codes to access materials and contact info.

STAGGERING APPOINTMENTS AND STAFF

To help manage booth traffic and social distancing requirements, come up with a plan to schedule customer appointments in advance of the show, as well as a schedule for your staff to manage capacity requirements. ★

MARKETING IN A POST-PANDEMIC & PRO-DIGITAL ERA

By ARI Network Services

The Internet has played a major role in the customer's path to purchase for quite some time. Several years ago, consumers gravitated toward a ROBO (research online, buy offline) approach to making purchases, often browsing multiple websites over a period of time before buying the product in-store.

Even before Internet usage skyrocketed across the country as a result of COVID-19 and stay-at-home orders, 88 percent of consumers began the shopping process online. Previously online sales were increasing at a rate of 1 percent a year, but the global pandemic has accelerated that growth, creating a decade's worth of change in just a few short months.

During the pandemic shutdown, a higher-than-ever volume of marine customers embraced online shopping, and many began ordering boats and parts online without seeing them in person first. Marine dealers have seen a sharp increase in website visitors and leads as customers demonstrated a strong interest in purchasing their inventory online versus at the dealership. COVID-19 has permanently altered the consumer landscape—even as stores reopen and shoppers feel comfortable browsing in close quarters to one another, the Internet will continue to play a prominent role in how customers shop for boats and parts, and we will not see a return to pre-COVID shopping habits.

Marine dealers who have recognized the shift to e-commerce are taking the time to optimize their marketing strategies to accommodate the shoppers who will continue to browse and purchase online. The most notable change has been a transition to virtual shows, with tools such as digital customer communication and online showrooms to help attendees immerse themselves in the experience. As a long-time website and digital marketing partner of dealerships in the marine industry, ARI is pleased to offer critical insight into how these strategies can impact your dealership so that you can cater to the best interest of your business and your customers.

Attending & hosting virtual shows

For many dealers and customers, it will no doubt be some time before we can once again gather in large groups within a venue hall, and that means traditional in-person shows may need to be replaced with virtual events. Virtual shows embody the core aspects of a traditional show—browsing new products and networking with businesses and sales leads—but from a digital platform. Due to the lack of physical engagement, attending or hosting a virtual show involves some notable benefits and limitations.

Benefits of virtual shows



Budget Friendly

Virtual shows are less costly, as there's no requirement to rent a venue, purchase venue supplies or bother with travel, hotel and meal expenses. Additionally, because virtual shows can extend for days, even weeks, hosts, vendors and attendees typically don't need to take time off from work. If you plan to host a virtual show, keep in mind you will need to contract with a hosting platform and invest in digitally promoting the event.

Time Saving

For many of the reasons listed above, virtual shows require much less time to prepare, execute and attend. Because vendors only need to create a digital booth, this can be done in advance, and there is no tear-down process afterward. Attendees can visit the show during downtime at work, in the evenings or on weekends—and from the comfort of home, if they choose!

More Exposure

Virtual show attendance is not restricted to the number of people who are physically in the room, meaning attendees can sign in from all over the world. If the show lasts for a few weeks to a month, there is even more potential for the event to go viral and attract a large number of attendees.

Better Lead Tracking

Remembering names and faces and scrambling to exchange business cards can cause sales leads to fall through the cracks at traditional shows. Virtual shows allow interested parties to submit an online lead form with their email and phone number to receive more information. Some virtual show platforms will even track which products your attendees interacted with while visiting your booth so that you know which sectors of your dealership are attracting the most interest.

Limitations of virtual shows



Risk of Distractions

Attending a show from a computer or phone screen means that attendees will most likely be multitasking during the event, either checking emails, answering work calls, surfing social media or running errands.

Less Engagement

With a virtual booth, you are dependent on attendees clicking into your booth in order to form a connection. Booth attendees also can't physically interact with your product, so it is up to you as the vendor to ensure your booth materials drive interest and capture sales leads so that you can schedule future demos.

Not as Personal

Communicating through a chat feature can't replace the experience of putting faces to a brand name, and the ability to connect one-on-one with a sales lead is not as impactful. Vendors must make an extra effort to make attendees feel welcome at the booth. Following up quickly with all sales leads is also critical, as it shows you valued their attendance at the trade show.

Potential for Technology Issues

Virtual shows are technology-based, which means there is the potential for technical setbacks and disruptions during the event, such as system crashes and connectivity issues. It's important to prepare in advance and be ready to address these issues if they arise.

Key takeaway on shows

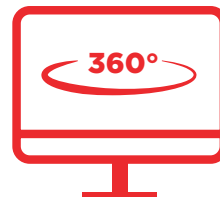
If you make the decision to attend or host a virtual show, be mindful of the digital tools available to you to help your sales leads feel as though they are in the room with you, browsing your inventory. Even if you have the capacity to move ahead with



previously scheduled traditional trade shows, digital tools that drive customer engagement and product interaction are still well worth the investment to help you connect with online customers. After all, e-commerce will continue on long past this pandemic era, and so will the need for innovative digital marketing.

Investing in a virtual showroom

Marine dealers can still engage a high volume of buyers by setting up virtual showrooms that offer a similar experience to browsing their inventory lots. The first step to providing your online leads with a virtual tour of your inventory is to ensure that your website accurately reflects the units and parts that you offer, with each listing accompanied by multiple authentic images.



This latter part is key—good-quality custom photos contribute to a greater ROI for dealers. More than half of online browsers immediately interact with product images, and studies have shown that custom photos receive 349 percent more page views than stock photos because they prove the unit is real and boost the dealership's credibility. Multiple photos also mean you can really show off a boat's custom paint job, as well as any exciting features that you know will appeal to your audience.

You can take your virtual showroom to a whole new level by going beyond static images and instead using 360-degree imagery. This is imagery that's created with a walkaround photography tool, capturing a full swivel of the unit and allowing online browsers to spin the image around to view from all angles.

Images featuring 360-degree spins have really caused a stir among consumers, and 56 percent of online shoppers say that they would purchase a unit just from viewing a 360-degree image—without needing to see the unit in person first.

While virtual trade shows don't quite encompass the experience of standing in a full venue surrounded by exciting booths and products, they still capture the essence of interacting with eager marine customers. More importantly, whether or not you plan to engage in a virtual trade show (either as a vendor or host), it's crucial to invest in digital tools that get your dealership in front of the high number of marine customers that will continue to browse and buy online.

While we all hope to see a swift return to normal social interactions, we already know the consumer buying cycle has been permanently altered. Dealers who take this time to familiarize themselves with virtual customer engagement tools and platforms are setting up their business for long-term success by offering their online leads quick, easy and genuine methods to interact with inventory from wherever they may be browsing.

SEE
THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION CHANNELS
ON NEXT PAGE

THE IMPORTANCE OF DIGITAL COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Gone are the days when customers would start their buying journey by driving straight to the dealership to look at boats. In-person lot shopping has been replaced with online browsing, where shoppers have nearly unlimited access to different brands and models. In fact, 45 percent of online shoppers will browse seven to 10 websites over a period of weeks or months before making a buying decision. As a result, these customers will communicate with multiple dealerships along the way, and the dealers who invest in best practices for virtual communication will have a much higher chance of making the sale.

If you are not already offering methods for quick, hassle-free contact to your online customers, we encourage you to do so, whether you are engaging in a virtual show or conducting business as usual. Customers anticipate that businesses will have multiple communication options for both online and offline contact. While in the past, customer communication channels consisted of in-person visits, direct mailings and phone calls, consumer behavior has shifted toward a preference for virtual channels that deliver real-time results, such as texting, live chat, social media, direct messaging apps and even video chats. When ARI surveyed a pool of dealership customers on the factors that influenced their purchase, 90 percent reported that multiple communication channels are a “must-have” quality for a dealership.

Innovation among digital communication has enabled businesses to mimic in-person response time by implementing live chat channels. Live chat is increasing in popularity among dealerships and consumers alike, with 79 percent of consumers reporting that they appreciate live chat because it offers a low-pressure yet instantaneous connection to the dealer. Live chat presents an opportunity for dealers to increase their ROI, as consumers who engage in live chat are 85 percent more likely to make a purchase from that business.

If you are in the early stages of establishing a multi-channel communication strategy, a good general rule of thumb is to incorporate the most mainstream channels, such as text, live chat, email and social media platforms (Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, to name a few) and track which channels receive the most traffic and which channels your customers are requesting. You don't have to manage all channels equally, as you may find that your customers have specific preferences and their priorities shift over time. ★

THE “1’S AND 0’S” OF BOAT SHOW SEASON

By Mike Adams, Rollick Inc.

Virtual Boat Shows have become the latest marketing buzz in the boating industry. The idea is broad and can be confusing for your dealership and team.

The fact is, though, you run a virtual boat show daily through your website, social activities, and other digital strategies.

The fun and excitement of a live boat show is the compression of the experience into a time period where, in many of our markets, boating is not feasible. You can provide that same aspirational respite whether the physical show takes place in your market this year or not.

Deploying new digital sales tactics this winter to capture the opportunities typically gathered during show season will naturally elevate the dealer’s sales capabilities and effectiveness year-round. Implementing some of these ideas will also help you improve your margins, rise above the “level playing field” of shows and reduce your overall expenses likely earning a higher rate of return on your marketing investments.

Combined with the fundamentals of good planning, effective and transparent consumer tools, consolidated data collection, and consistent follow-up you’ll be ready for the year-round results that follow.

Organizer shows in your local market

Local rules, perceptions, and test results will force local shows to make decisions at the last minute. It is critical that you start now preparing for all alternatives.

Flexibility will be critical during the upcoming show season. It could be that the traditional show is planned but is cancelled or that the date for the show is moved to later in the year; the organizer may try to move the experience online with the effectiveness and tools available to you from the organizer varying greatly by show; there may be a combination of a physical show and a virtual component; or the show could be cancelled altogether.

Regardless of the scenario that plays out in your market, your dealership will have to be creative in replacing the reduced traffic likely to be seen during this show season. Have a strategy for each of these scenarios.

Traditional Live Show

The scenario that we all would like to see is that the “show goes on.” If the show does go on, prepare for the potential for fewer booth visitors by being proactive ahead of the show. Market to your current list of owners and prospects outlining your safety protocols



RAMP UP DIGITAL MARKETING



for the show and set appointments with your customers to promote social distancing. Not only will this make the show more effective, but it will allow you to meet with shoppers in a safe, comfortable environment increasing the likelihood they visit. If you can save costs at the physical show due to a smaller footprint, divert these dollars into more aggressive digital and social marketing to targeted customers. At the show, collect information in a way you can easily insert into your lead follow-up systems for post-show marketing and sales activities.

Hybrid Show / Virtual Show

The season will likely see many “hybrid shows” where there is a smaller physical presence with a virtual show as well. Understand ahead of time, the types of virtual tools a show producer will use. There have already been many creative, effective technologies deployed for shows that can increase your success with less effort and cost. The three components to research are:

1. Inventory – will they display your inventory or boat models you sell on the virtual show site? If so, how will you get your inventory to them so that it is updated automatically each day to reflect show inventories. Can you market a “Boat Show” price through the tool? A note about low or no inventories: Many exhibitors have very little inventory to bring to a show or display online. Don't let that stop you from displaying the new boat models you sell and generating interest in your product. Remember, your competitors are facing the same dilemma and the dealers that engage with customers continuously during this period will be the most successful when inventories start to normalize.

2. Leads – How will the prospects communicate with you during the virtual show, i.e. chat, video calls, text/phone, leads, etc.? Start now to understand the answers to these questions so that you can equip your team with a plan to respond to these inquiries. Require the organizer to send these inquiries to you in a way that will automatically integrate with your CRM system.

3. Events – Many organizers are finding creative ways to provide shoppers with the education and infotainment boat show visitors enjoy at the live shows. Get plugged into these opportunities as another source of driving traffic back to your website.

No Live Show

Don't let the no-show scenario create no shows in your sales pipeline! Ramp up your digital marketing strategy and dominate your local market with information about your dealership.

Next we'll explore ideas for creating buzz around your already existing virtual boat show to replicate the live show excitement.

Your Own Virtual Show

Your website and social marketing activities are the core to any virtual boat show initiative and exist all year round. By harnessing the power of these tools and shifting

investment dollars into these properties, there is a strong possibility that not only will your show season be strong but that the results you see year-round will grow. The question this winter or next fall is how to use these tools to drive the concentration of sales typically needed ahead of the season.

Virtual Show Platforms

Already this show season, we've seen many ways to organize online content to replicate the show experience from systems showing "shopper avatars" in a virtual reality approach to website navigation organized around typical show events. Virtual show platforms can be effective, but the investment can be out of reach for most dealers. If this is a priority for your dealership, you may consider teaming up with your brands or non-competitive dealers in your market to make the investment. The best systems to explore are those that focus less on the "wow" factor of the technology and more on delivering: 1.) content focused on fun, exciting videos 2.) streaming "expert" content from athletes, pro fishermen, captains, or local resource experts 3.) your product and 4.) connecting the customer in real time with your team.



Product

Regardless of inventory levels, get your products onto your website, especially during your show event. For your new boats, show at least one of each model you sell online. At this moment, most dealer websites are showing sparse new and used inventories online. Use this time to create those sample units in your system to show off the products you sell and drive interest for the future.

BUZZ

While your website is your year-round boat show, you can use your existing site for a defined time period to create urgency and drive increased traffic during the traditional show times. Offer "gated" content, special show offers, and live communication with your team. Create excitement with aspirational videos, giveaways, and guest appearances. In most cases, this can be done with the existing tools you have or with little effort/costs working with your web provider. Name it, own it and market it as heavily as your local show has been marketed in the past. Be sure to have all hands-on deck so you can communicate with customers live during the "show hours." Communicate the days and times your show will be open to create FOMO with your customers.

Live Tools

Customers come to boat shows to escape winter, see product firsthand and to talk to the experts ... YOU. Make sure they can do the same thing during your show. Any traditional leads submitted during this time period should be responded to immediately. Integrate tools into your site to facilitate web/video chats (i.e. Zoom, Join Me, Teams, GoToMeeting, WebEx, Facetime, etc.) with your team and conduct boat walk arounds, as well as click-to-call, text or chat solutions.

Clear Navigation

Since you likely will be using your existing website to facilitate the online boat show, make sure your “show map” is clear. Create hero imagery and top navigation notices guiding customers to show content and provide updates during show hours. Create a special top navigation entry for the show that only appears during your show days. Once in the show section of your site, walk your customer through the exhibits such as product/inventory display, expert education and content, talk live to an expert, giveaways or gamification, and other show features. Once the customer enters one of these areas, be sure the navigation of your site easily allows them to transition to other areas or get back to the main exhibit area; don’t let your customers get lost. Most importantly, provide ample opportunity to communicate with you in every exhibit. If your show is closed when they visit, provide a welcoming message describing show hours, the show experience and the ability to communicate with your team.

While circumstances have presented many decisions to navigate, the current excitement for boating is reminiscent of the 80s and 90s. Use this opportunity to upgrade your websites, social presence, and dealership tools/processes. Doing so will create year-round success equipping you to run boat shows multiple times a year. The show will go on and, regardless of traditional show schedules and inventory challenges, the interest in boating we are seeing now can radically shift the market and each dealer’s success for years to come. ★



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HOW VIRTUAL BOAT SHOWS CAN SCORE BIG IN THE PANDEMIC

By BoatChat

With the pandemic threatening the heart of the American boat industry, boat buyers, savvy dealers and show organizers are finding alternatives to traditional boat shows.

With traditional gatherings banned or severely restricted, virtual boat shows will update the regularly occurring physical shows to an online format complete with sales and marketing strategies that make a strong outreach to the dedicated boat buying audience!

Virtual boat shows enable the customers to have a walkthrough and take virtual tours of the boats and yachts they are planning to buy. Given the new normal, boat dealers and manufacturers are eager to step up their digital and marketing experience in the face of the boat sales scenario in the U.S.

“Attending” a virtual boat show can be a learning experience for all stakeholders in the boat business. These boat shows allow you to make use of one digital hub to navigate between many boats, accessories and gear in a matter of few minutes rather than the hours to shortlist boats in offline shows.

After virtually attending some early shows we have found some eye-opening takeaways. The first was the lead data collected in place of the ticket price. This data is a huge target audience for sales efforts after the show and for future events when in-person shows return.

As a chat provider focused on the boat industry, we have a unique insight to what makes for an effective engagement with a prospect through chatting. Naturally, we were quick to engage with the chat feature at a dealer’s virtual display to experience the technology. While the chatting features were easy to locate and easy to use in most cases, the engagement was not so. The responses from the dealers could be measured in minutes, hours, and in a couple of instances, days!

At BoatChat, we not only provide the chat and SMS technology, we also allow actual chatting for dealers and manufacturers who can’t afford to dedicate staff to live chatting because they are too busy or the investment too large to add to their headcount. We have greeted around 15 million website visitors, chatted with around 100,000 prospects, and generated around 40,000 leads in 2020 alone.

Before we jump into what's needed to engage more prospects through chat there are a couple of pointed reminders that need to be looked after so you have visitors to chat with:

1. You need a boatload of traffic!

Yes, pun was intended to make the point. Dealers go to boat shows for one reason: to take advantage of the traffic that the show producers generate in one place at the same time. However, don't rely solely on their traffic. Create your own traffic from all the leads, chats, texts, and showroom visitors you have sitting in your CRM. Chances are they've heard about the upcoming virtual boat show. Now it's time to let them know you will be at the show and incentivize them to find your display and say hi. Incentives might be sought after giveaways when they say hi via chat at the booth and picked up at the showroom after the show.

2. Get ready ... to show off your boats.

Gather all the video content for your boats at the show. Here is another advantage of a virtual show over an in-person show: unlimited space. You can bring ALL your boats to the show, new and used. For the boats you do not have video walkthroughs for, produce them before the show so they are ready to share with those who engage through chat. As you would for a physical show make sure all the boats at your dealership are show ready for live video calls. What's better than a video walkthrough of a boat? A live video call with the prospect directly answering questions and overcoming objections. These calls won't be possible for boats not ready to show.

Chatting with prospects

Boat dealers get it, they already know the importance of being out front of their displays and immediately acknowledging anyone showing interest in their products. The same is true at a virtual show.

We have learned at BoatChat that an opportunity can be lost if chats aren't responded to in less than 10 seconds! In fact, we use system-generated greetings to ensure the visitors know that a live person is typing their welcome. Dealers need to do the same and have dedicated staff scheduled to welcome a new guest in seconds, determine their needs, and further engage with the visitor or allow for a better-suited staff member to take over.

Look for opportunities to move the chat to a phone conversation. We know so much more is learned when speaking with a customer and picking up on the tone of the conversation rather than relying only on the words they chose. The key to moving the chat to a phone conversation is, as we mentioned prior, being prepared to offer additional value with your chats and with video walkthroughs, such as links to more information, or prepared docs ready to share.



Important tip: When asking for a phone number, lead with the benefit before requesting the phone number.

For instance, “So that I can help with all your questions, it will be easier to talk on the phone, may I please know your phone number?” In addition, “To better serve you, let me have the appropriate person call or text you with more information. May I please know your phone number?” One more, “I can show you the feature live on a video call. What video app do you like best: FaceTime, Facebook IM, or Google Hangouts?” For the finer details to prepare for a video call, Bob McCann at the MRAA wrote a great blog on 6 Key Steps to Making Video Sales.

You might have picked up by now to copy down your common texts and have them ready to copy and paste to speed up your chatting and reduce the errors.

Don't forget to continue with including the option of chatting on your dealership's website. During the show you will learn how powerful and popular this feature is to your customers and it will be missed by those who follow-up at our website after the show.

Although virtual boat shows cannot replicate the excitement and joy of walking down the docks and convention centers surrounded by gleaming boats, these can well be the new selling mantra in the boat business for the years to come! With live chat and video consultations, the new age boat selling has finally arrived. ★



PLANNING YOUR VIRTUAL BOAT SHOW

By Jonathan Sweet

Producing a virtual boat show for your dealership can be a daunting task. It combines the stress and planning needs of an in-person event with the uncertainty of digital marketing and the need to learn new technologies.

The good news is you're not on your own. In this section of the guide, you'll find tips and tools from industry experts on pulling off your own show. We've also talked to leading dealers about how they have combined the virtual with the in-person to drive their success in 2020 and beyond. (Also be sure to check out the MarineMax case study that follows this article.)

Need drives innovation

For many dealers, it was virtual or nothing in spring 2020. That was the case for Vermont's Woodard Marine. The dealer participated in the in-person Vermont Boat Show March 6-8. That was essentially the last live event for the dealership as the state shut down most businesses within days of the show ending, says Vice President Lauren Woodard-Splatt.

That was especially problematic for Woodard Marine, which had been planning a large 60th Anniversary boat show at the dealership less than two weeks later. The Woodard team decided not to cancel the show but instead take it online, using a combination of pre-recorded and live content.

"It was a big deal that we had already organized and then we got shut down, and we had 13 days to revamp and figure out what the heck we were going to do," Woodard-Splatt says.

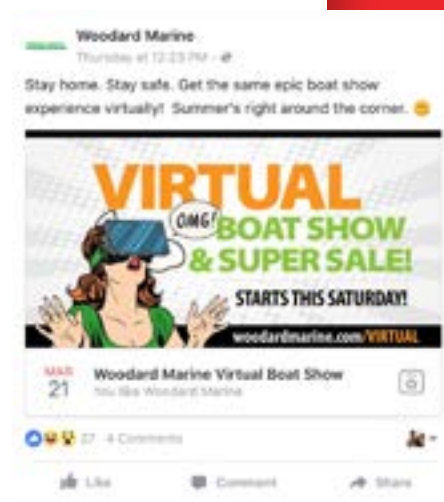
What made that possible, says Sales & Finance Operations Manager Greg Woodard, was that Woodard had already built a robust website. With a customer base made up in large part of the local cottage community, Woodard has relied on the website to sell for years.

"We already had that mindset, but we're always trying to improve that," Woodard said.

Southern Florida-based FB Marine Group had made it through the spring 2020 boat show season without losing its shows but is now preparing for a virtual 2021. The dealership did exhibit at the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show, but is already planning a virtual event to replace the cancelled Miami International Boat Show and other live events.

"If you look at why we're doing it, November and December make up about 20 percent of our sales at the dealership," says Managing Partner Kim Sweers. "It's a direct result from boat shows. People come in. They get to touch the product, talk about performance, look at it, feel it, meet the owners, meet everyone that they need to. Then they take that information

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home, and a lot of people decide after the show. So, without that, we just want to protect that revenue that we gain from a boat show.”

For Woodard, the virtual show was one of its most successful boat shows ever, driving sales during the event and in the months afterward. The show experience continued throughout the spring and summer with “Woodard Live,” a series of videos on the Woodard website. Virtual shows will also be a part of the company’s plans going forward, even after COVID-related restrictions have passed, Woodard-Splatt says.

Educating, not selling

Woodard focused its virtual show content on engaging the customers by promoting the lifestyle, not just the boats. It was also important to project a sense of normalcy, as much as possible.

“I think the biggest thing for us what I noticed was that we acted like business as normal,” Woodard-Splatt says. “Even though our doors were locked, we were still having a boat show.”

Woodard used a mix of live videos and pre-recorded content, designed to move seamlessly between the two. Boat walkthroughs were recorded ahead of time, while question and answer sessions and other broadcasts, like a pontoon happy hour, were live from the showroom.

New content was fed through the Woodard Facebook page from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. every day of the three-day show. Anyone who visited after hours could see the archived videos, as well as send messages to the Woodard team. Another feature Woodard added to its website to drive engagement was the ability to make an offer on every boat it had in inventory, new and used.

“They can obviously contact us, email us, but they can also make an offer. We saw some really increased activity with that,” Woodard says. “Even though some of the offers obviously came in not where we needed them to be, some of them were great.”

Woodard’s success in driving sales came because the show wasn’t about a hard sell. Instead, it was about showing boating was fun and a great way to spend time with your family in an era of social distancing.

“I think that’s how we engaged new people, because it wasn’t just boats,” Woodard-Splatt says. “It was how to use the boats, why we have these boats.”

For example, Eric Splatt, Lauren’s husband, broadcast a live feed from the middle of a lake, showing that the water was ice-free in mid-March. Another salesman, in Colorado at the time, delivered information on the Supra/Moomba surf systems in a live feed from a snowy mountain.

“We kind of made it almost that we were so realistic that we were their buddy more than a sales pitch,” she said. “I think that they realized that we’re just normal people like everybody else is, but we really played off from that.”



Sweers agrees, likening it to the changes many companies had to make in their marketing and social media in the age of COVID-19.

“We took the approach to be subject-matter experts and decided just to put fun things and make people enjoy just being alive, and say, ‘When this is over, maybe I’ll buy a boat.’ That was the main purpose of what we did,” Sweers says. “So, if you relate it to what we’re going to do now, it’s the same thing. Boat shows were taken away from us, and that’s a good time. It makes people happy. So, we’re just going to give them some sort of show, if you will, that they can at least live talk to people. Maybe we’ll get some sales, and if not, then we’ll influence a decision, hopefully, after this is over.”

While FB Marine is still finalizing the content for its upcoming show, the company plans to take a similar approach to Woodard’s, mixing fun and information content, both recorded and live.

Marketing a virtual show

In many ways, marketing for a virtual event is similar to that of an in-person event.

Woodard quickly pivoted to switch out its promotion of the live 60th anniversary show to a virtual show in its print and online efforts. The company’s enewsletter and social media heavily promoted the show and the “Woodard Live” follow-up, combining that with information on the current state of COVID and restrictions in the state.

“We had a very minimal budget, I’ll be honest, because I thought that we were going to be shut down,” Woodard-Splatt says. “We attacked it just using as much freebie stuff that we had, so Mail Chimp and Facebook were the two biggest things.”

The dealership also benefited from the fact that it had been promoting the planned in-person show at the Vermont Boat Show earlier that month. Still, the event attracted a large group of new customers – 70 percent of those who attended the virtual event were new to Woodard.

Using tools like targeted keywords for SEO and geotagging helped get some of those new customers, Woodard says. For example, the company targeted people searching for information on boat shows or asking if “XYZ boat show” was still happening. As people stayed home during lockdowns in Vermont and other states, the company saw increased engagement with its website, social media and enewsletter. Geotagging – which is the targeting of consumers in a specific geographic area – allowed Woodard to send those customers specific messages about the show.

“We still advertised as normal, just advertised it as ... a virtual version of it,” Woodard-Splatt says. “We really still spent the same budget for marketing. We didn’t dial back on normal marketing. We would take over a page the local newspaper, if they had a virtual or digital version of it. All of our normal marketing stuff that we would do to get them to our in-house boat show, we still did.”

There may have also been a curiosity factor at play, Woodard says, as consumers wondered, what does a virtual show look like?



“Even if they just happened to the site just for that curiosity, we think that’s a win,” he said.

Recognizing that many consumers have been inundated with “virtual” events since March, Woodard will even be dropping the word from its upcoming events, instead just branding them as shows, sales or whatever they feel the appropriate title would be, such as a “Thanksgiving Leftovers” event in November to move aged inventory.

“We’re not going to wait for a boat show season, because there really isn’t one anymore,” Woodard-Splatt says. Let’s be honest. Boat show season’s been canceled. We’re trying to get the general public, so we’re going to do multiple virtual shows.”

For its upcoming virtual show, FB Marine plans to leverage its large social media following and service customer base to promote the event. Two members of the FB Marine team are dedicated specifically to customer retention and they will be targeting past customers to engage them as well. The company will also be offering promotions and incentives as it typically would for the in-person Miami show.

“It’s just capturing them, engaging them, and giving them some sort of motivation to make a decision now versus waiting,” Sweers says.

Engagement

One of the most significant challenges with a virtual show is keeping customers engaged while they are checking email, looking at Instagram or doing a dozen other things while sorta-kind-a-watching the boat show.

That is one of the reasons both FB Marine and Woodard are offering live sessions along with recorded content. It’s a chance to ask customers for questions and shape the content on the fly to what those attending want to see.

During the March 2020 show, Woodard’s marketing team was also watching the Facebook page to see who was coming in and out of videos so they could engage them as well.

“While a salesperson was actively selling the boat on a live video, the marketing team was behind the scenes, engaging with them and saying, ‘Hey ... I noticed you were looking at this video. Our next video’s coming up at blah blah blah. In the meantime, can we set up a private chat with our team to go over the boat that you just looked at?’ We were really watching who was active on our site at the time, on Facebook at the time,” Woodard-Splatt says. “That’s how we were grabbing them. Instead of at a boat show where somebody walks by your aisle and you’re like, ‘Hey, come on in and look at the new Bayliner.’ It was that same process, but we were just doing it virtually to try to get more engagement.”

Using Facebook for the virtual show also helped with gathering leads.

“We were able to after the boat show actually follow up better because we had all their information, almost more than they would give you in person,” Woodard-Splatt says. “In person they’d say, ‘My name’s Joe,’ but really their name might be Seth. You don’t know. We had their Facebook page, we had their email address, we had how many times they came, what boats they looked at, who engaged. We have reports on reports from our marketing team.” ★

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CASE STUDY: BE THE RESOURCE FOR NEW BOATERS

Special Page Dedicated to New Buyers a Huge Success

By Jerrod Kelley, MRAA Content Manager

The strategy for MarineMax has always been to get people on the water. And in 2020, that mantra rings truer than ever as thousands of new customers have purchased boats or sought to join the global boating family. Early in 2020, MarineMax decided to speed up its boater education efforts by recommitting to a section on its website that is dedicated to consumers who are new to the industry. Dubbed, “New to Boating,” the page resulted in a 461 percent year-over-year increase in pageviews in the 90 days covering May through July, according to Lisa Harrison, MarineMax PR and Content Manager.

That substantial traffic increase is a direct result of a well-coordinated plan from MarineMax and also an enormous flow of new customers flocking to dealerships to discover new methods of social distancing, one that includes exploring waterways by boat. Abbey Heimensen, Director of Marketing, and Harrison recently shared how MarineMax refocused its marketing and educational efforts to target the new boater segment and recent industry growth.

“For MarineMax, we’re always trying to bring in more people to our ecosystem and into our family,” Heimensen said. “Statistics from the MRAA and NMMA tell us that approximately 3 percent of the U.S. population boats, which is a very small percentage. We spend a lot of time supporting MRAA, Discover Boating and things like that to help move that gauge. We know that we personally may not help move that gauge to 4 percent or 5 percent, but we know we want to get a larger piece of the pie of the people who boat.”

“How can we help support the effort to get more people in?” Heimensen said. “Once they get to our website, we found that one of the things they were searching for was ‘new to boating.’ We had been relying on other sources for that, and we felt that we were not doing our customers justice by not having that information on our website.”

Heimensen says their marketing strategy was catapulted forward with what has happened with COVID-19. “That made us move more quickly and get this ‘New to Boating’ site out there, for not only the customers who come to our website but also in general for the boating industry. As much traffic as we are able to generate to our website, it really made sense to help the industry as a whole have that information there.”

Heimensen explained that some growth was expected, but they are pleased that it has also become a traffic driver to the MarineMax website. “It has become sticky content,”



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she explained. "It has kept people on the site longer. They are doing more research; they are reading the documents, and they are going through the channels we're asking them to go through. For us, that's actually a bigger win. To be perfectly honest, everybody, including us, is seeing awesome traffic on our websites. Right now, it's been exponential growth. But what we really wanted to see is would they stay on our website longer and do more research? They are spending almost twice as much time rather than bouncing off."

Heimensen said reach has grown for both the MarineMax database and for new users. "But we've also seen a 40 percent growth in new users on our site. We are tracking that through IP addresses and new leads being put in."

MarineMax was then able to attribute those analytics and information back to the sales that have happened, and they've turned into sales-qualified leads that are completely new to the MarineMax ecosystem.

"We have a 22-year-old database, so we can tell if you've been in our system or not at one time or another," she added. "We are seeing exponential growth in 'new' to our website and that's to our entire point of doing this project; to bring new people into our atmosphere who were not aware of MarineMax and what we do."

Heimensen also attributes the technology that MarineMax invested in as delivering more clarity to the insights. "We've invested in technology, like HubSpot and things like it, that are helping us take the data that we have known we had all these years and not have to guess," she stated. "Data is one thing, and you can do a thousand things with data. But, to be able to glean insights from that data is where we are winning."

Educating boaters

MarineMax designed the landing page to be educational, a resource to learn from prior to making a purchase. "This is helping you make a decision before you make a large investment," explained Heimensen. "It doesn't matter if it's an aluminum bass boat or a \$6 million yacht. It's an investment of your time, your family; it's a very serious investment ... one that is different than purchasing a car. Purchasing a boat is purchasing a lifestyle for your family. You're making a commitment that we're going to be on the water; we're going to do this on the weekends — everybody's in!"

For the marketing team, and sales team for that matter, the site ensures customers are well-informed and can select proper choices prior to making such a huge commitment.



It's designed to enhance the customer's comfort level with researching, buying and owning a boat, as well as improve their entire shopping experience.

"Not only are these documents and landing pages there to help do that, but also they are there for our sales consultants to make the good purchase decision for their family," said Heimensen. "There's nothing worse than getting in the wrong boat. Not only is it important for them to know what they are getting into when they purchase the boat, but also where are they going to keep it? Does it have to be licensed? Do they trailer the boat?"

In-house design and editorial team

While not all dealerships will have the size or enough employees with the skills or time to formulate an entirely new page, MarineMax is large and was capable of this ground-up page creation. It used its sizeable and self-described in-house agency consisting of graphic designers, Content Management Specialist Jason Killingsworth, management and the PR and marketing teams to do all the necessary legwork. This included the backend page creation, design and all the readable and visual content, from graphics and images to headers and storylines.

"This was Jason's project that he spearheaded for us," said Heimensen. "We know that not everybody can create the things that we get to do. We take a lot of responsibility on our shoulders like creating an item like this New To Boating campaign, so people can use it and get it out there in front of the industry. Our No. 1 goal is to get people boating – our absolute No. 1 goal."

Heimensen said the real project effort was the website creation time. "There are so many layers as to what happens when you're able to see this," she explained. "I would say by the time the creation of this piece of website was done, it was probably 40 hours, because we had to create what we call profile cards." The cards essentially work like an if-and-then book, where the user chooses their own path. "What that means on the backend of the website, is if you go to our website, and you do these five things, we'll show you this. Jason had to do this to have it seemingly organically appear to the consumer when, in fact, it was very meticulously planned to have it show up when it shows up. Other dealerships would probably need to engage their website company to put the content on their website ... where they could maybe have a freelancer or maybe another third-party to create the content."

DETERMINING CONTENT

"We took and looked at information that what was already out there," said Heimensen. "Our friends at Discover Boating, and different places like that, over the years have done a great job of helping with what segments are already out there. We didn't reinvent the segment. Do you want to fish? Do you want to cruise? Do you want to do tow sports? We knew those were things we didn't have to reinvent."

MarineMax also featured products that its stores carry — 29 different brands at its 59 locations. Heimensen said if the content was going to be on their website, they felt it was very important to reflect the brands they carry because those brands were chosen very specifically in their portfolio to make the customers' choices that much easier.

MarineMax used statistics from its own website and the information visitors were searching for during site visits to create a content flow for customers. “We used a heat map on our website,” said Heimensen. “We worked through that for the steps we were looking for, where they needed to see this piece of content.”

She said if a customer visited the site and couldn’t decide between a cruiser or a fishing boat, then a certain piece of content would pop up. She described this background process extensive because of all the potential processes and options. But in the end, it’s about getting them to the correct path or funnel to find an accurate fit for which they seek.

Your content, your voice

For MarineMax, it was important that all the content came from their team and was in their voice. “Other resources do a fabulous job, but they have to be very neutral,” explained Heimensen. “They have to talk about everything as a whole. For us, we can talk about the brands we carry and about why this boat is right for you if you’re a fisherman or a cruiser.”

She also said the content voice matters because it matches some of the other things her team is doing already with other forms of customer interaction and content. “In each one of our stores, we have something called a delivery captain,” added Heimensen, “When you take delivery of your boat, he will spend delivery time with you. He will take the time to go through the details of your vessel.

“But beyond that, we want it in our voice because we have Women on Water classes, Kids in Boating, intro to boating, advanced boating, charting, navigating your local water, fishing ... our classes are for anyone who is interested, and most of them are free,” she said. “We want them to be able to say, ‘I have a question about my boat, I better contact Captain Keith,’ not worry about logging on and Googling it and digging for resources elsewhere.”

Your team, your voice and your messages delivered also means you can continue to reach out to customers to aid your branding and sales efforts by helping move the leads through the funnel. Heimensen said because MarineMax is publicly traded, its privacy policy is very strict and most customers need to double agree to be in their system based on General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) laws. “We give them ample opportunities on our site to sign up for our national newsletter, events and giveaways information and, of course, once they’re a little further down the funnel ... quotes, financing ... we don’t share our data with third parties; it’s only with MarineMax.”

Adapting to a pandemic

Prior to COVID-19, shutdowns and mask restrictions, MarineMax held in-person classes both in classrooms and on the water. They’ve since had to adapt by going virtual to connect.

Along with its New to Boating page and classes, MarineMax has also invested in two other projects that focus on educating boaters, called “From the Helm Boating Broadcast,” a weekly



podcast-style show, and “Boating Tips LIVE,” its Facebook live-streaming show featuring a moderator and interactive experts, called captains.

“With COVID, obviously, that has changed a little bit,” said Harrison. “With our classroom portion, we took to Zoom. We were able to involve more people than our in-person class settings. We were still able to connect with people. It’s amazing how many new boaters are out there.”

Heimensen explained that the MarineMax virtual classes have also extended their voice and reach a bit. “One of the things we found with the virtual classes was that our store out of Charleston ended up with a couple of people from New York,” she explained. “It didn’t matter if it was in their backyard or not, our customers and others were able to join online and were able to learn. That’s a win for us.”

The new podcast is another way to interact with its customers. She explained it as live Q-and-A sessions with customers where MarineMax provides as much accessible information to as many people as possible. “They basically go back-and-forth and talk about different topics, for example, courtesy on the waterway or how to shore anchor. It’s a live forum on Facebook,” added Harrison.

The New To Boating page has proven itself as a popular landing spot for new boaters and those with more intermediate experience on the water because it’s a purpose-built educational landing spot designed by a team of experts. MarineMax had the foresight to create the New To Boating page even when no one could predict how the economy and consumer mindset would react to global pandemic and economic shutdowns. MarineMax became the essential resource for its customers in a time of need. ★



CASE STUDY: 3-D CAMERA TECHNOLOGY ALLOWS NEW OPTIONS

By Jonathan Sweet

Even before COVID wreaked havoc this year, Big Thunder Marine had been rethinking their boat show strategy.

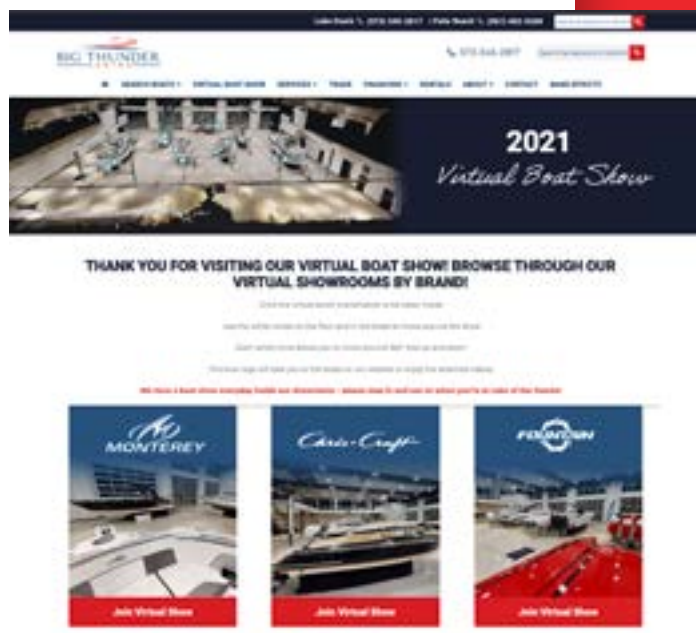
With two large showrooms on Lake of the Ozarks, the young but quickly growing company wanted to drive customers to its locations instead of just focusing all efforts on boat shows. That strategy has become even more important this year with the uncertainty surrounding in-person shows, says General Manager Jeremy Anderson.

“We came out of the Fort Lauderdale boat show, and we had a decent show, but I could see all the NMMA shows getting canceled,” Anderson says. “We have two dealer association shows that we host and produce from Lake of the Ozarks. ... As of today, they’re still on. Now, what that looks like has becoming totally different, and so we’re not sure what’s going to happen, and if they’ll still go on.”

With that in mind, Big Thunder Marine was looking for alternatives to supplement the shows or replace them if they were cancelled. Inspiration struck as Anderson was looking for a new Lake of the Ozarks home. He noticed that most Realtors were using the same company – Matterport – to host virtual tours of homes for sale.

“And I thought, ‘Man, I bet that’d work for our showroom,’ and I started doing research, and I talked to the company and they gave me some examples, and we just decided to start shooting it,” Anderson says. “From the time we decided, and ordered the camera, and put the website up, it was literally two weeks.”

The Big Thunder team shot the boats themselves at night while the showroom was closed to minimize disruption to regular business. They created a virtual boat show for each of seven brands – Chris-Craft, Crest, Fountain, JC Tritoons, Manitou, MasterCraft and Monterey – by rearranging the showroom to highlight each individual brand. They shot the footage over a period of about two weeks, using the Matterport 3-D technology.

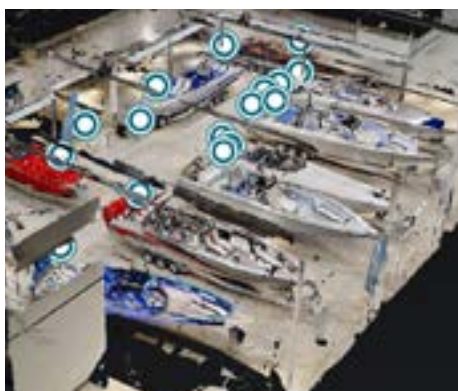


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The virtual show launched online with the first three brands the day before Thanksgiving, with the rest rolled out over the following weeks at bighundermarine.com/2021-virtual-boat-show/. The Matterport technology allows visitors to move around the showroom and zoom in and out to see details of specific boats. By clicking on a given boat, they can learn more about each model.

“We have videos that play, and we have links to our website, and links to manufacturer sites, and wherever else,” Anderson says. “And that’s why we liked this part of it, because now that the shot’s done, I can just keep changing the show and say, ‘This one’s sold, but here’s another one coming in,’ or ‘Here’s another one we have in stock.’”

The cost for the program was minimal. The Matterport camera was \$3,000 – less than Big Thunder Marine spent on carpet for the cancelled St. Louis and Kansas City NMMA shows last year, making the one-time investment an easy decision, Anderson says. The hosting service is \$69 per month.



“We really kind of stumbled upon this, and I’ve not seen anybody else in the boat business really use it, especially the way we use it,” he says. “We just took it and ran with it, and we’ve been really happy with the result so far.”

The plan right now is to run the virtual boat show through the normal boat show season, tweaking it as the year goes along to highlight the virtual Kansas City show, for instance.

“Then, I see it changing over to be just a virtual showroom for us. So again, the shot’s the same, but we just call it something different,” Anderson says.

Big Thunder is marketing the show through email blasts, social media and QR codes in its print advertising.

“We have a Facebook page with over 21,000 followers,” Anderson says. “We have an Instagram page of, I think it’s over 33,000. We have an email database of 12,000 people. We’ve really put together a lot, and even at every realm, you can put a link to the site on it, or a QR code that takes you there.”

Within the first week, the virtual show received hundreds of visitors, with 30 percent of those visitors returning at least once. The customers have been impressed, as have Big Thunders boat builder partners.

“A lot of our manufacturers are kind of blown away with it, [saying] that they haven’t done anything similar ever, even in their big dealer meetings and things, where they’ve had all these boats on display, they’ve never really shot them like this,” he says.

Boat dealers have had to learn to be flexible this year and adjust their businesses on the fly. With all the uncertainty around inventory, boat shows and other events, it’s important to be prepared.

Now, it’s towards the end of the year, and it’s like “Okay, well, boat shows aren’t going to happen. What are we going to do to be in front of it all?” And we really tried to be in front, and get out in front of our competitors, and everybody else in the market, and that’s how this boat show thing came up.

“Look, we don’t know if boat shows are going to happen,” Anderson says. “I don’t want to be sitting here in January when the show cancels a week before move in, and go, ‘Now what do we do to get business?’ I’ve already got it. It’s built. It can be changed. I can promote it differently. I can market it differently.

“The beauty of digital, and we’ve been doing it all year, is that you can test it and see what works. And if something works, you can go deeper with it, and if it doesn’t work, you pull back from it.” ★



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KEY STRATEGIES FOR A SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL BOAT SHOW

By Adrian Rushforth, Director, Global New Initiatives, Shows & Events, Mercury Marine

Welcome to the world of virtual shows!

In this time of uncertainty surrounding live shows and events, technology is here to save the day.

Although new technologies and social media platforms have proliferated over the past several years and have become essential tools for most of us during the course of our day, digital or virtual trade shows have continued to be perceived as too complex for practical and effective execution.

But that is quickly changing.

With many trade shows now forced to significantly limit capacity or cancel altogether, virtual shows are stepping into the limelight and being explored and used as they never have before. From art shows to concerts to conventions, physical shows and events are quickly morphing into safer, more accessible virtual experiences offering engaging ways to connect people, communicate, and conduct e-commerce.

Virtual shows are not one-way streets. This is where technology has jumped in. While businesses and show producers are anxious to attract consumers to their virtual shows, consumers are just as eager to engage, if offered the right reasons and online capabilities.

While technology is providing us with the tools to be able to achieve these goals, the real keys to hosting a successful virtual event are catering to consumers' interests and delivering a quality experience. So, what are attendees looking for?

1. Meaningful content — People's access to and consumption of online content is at an alltime high. Recent studies show that people are suffering from digital burnout due to the sheer amount of content that is now available to them. The old saying, "quality over quantity," holds true for virtual shows as well. People are looking for meaningful content that allows them to plug into their passions. They want to explore, learn, be entertained, and potentially make a purchase. The content you present must resonate with your audience. If it doesn't, they will quickly go somewhere else to find what they need. A successful virtual show must offer unique content in an interesting and meaningful way to your audience.

2. An authentic experience — Once you have meaningful content, it must be delivered in an authentic way. An authentic virtual experience really comes down to knowing who you are talking to. You must balance all the relevant links, clips, pictures, and content with the right tone, feel, and technology to deliver an experience your audience relates to and enjoys.

3. Experiences similar to a physical show — In a world where many familiar experiences such as physical shows and events are no longer happening, people are still looking for the same benefits they received from attending a show in person. Many of those benefits can be replicated virtually and serve as crowd-pleasers. Introducing and showcasing a new product, offering show specials, providing interactions with or instruction from guest speakers — all of these activities and more deliver an experience that engages people in a way that they are used to enjoying. Look for ways to engage their senses through sound and video, and in new ways that you may not be able to do with a standalone website.

4. Personalized experience — Allow your guests to plan their own journey through the virtual show. Allow them to explore things on their own. Allow them those moments of discovery. Allow them to access as much content as they can when they want. Give them the ability and opportunity to interact with you when they want. The more they feel in control of the experience, the more time they will spend at your virtual show.

TYPES OF VIRTUAL SHOWS

Just as there are many different types of physical events that you could stage, the same applies to virtual shows and events. Here are some suggestions on the types of virtual events you could host, from the simple to the more complex.

1. Live Tweeting — Start an online discussion from any event or from your dealership. Using a hashtag helps start an online discussion. Ask questions to instigate conversations among participants.

2. Social Stories — Platforms such as Instagram Stories, Facebook Stories, and TikTok allow presenters to share videos, provide product tours, conduct interviews and give seminars.

3. Online Webinars — Many of us have recently had to embrace the world of online meetings. Many of the platforms you use for online meetings also allow you to present digital webinars. The advantage of this format is the ability to share PowerPoint slides, present video or other visuals, or give demos. Seminars can be presented in a variety of ways and through a multitude of platforms, including Zoom, Livestorm, Demio, 6connex, and YouTube Livestream.

Online webinars are usually conducted in one of the following three formats:

- **Live Webinars** — As the name implies, a live presenter conducts the webinar at a predetermined time. If you are conducting a live webinar, be sure to conduct several test runs before going live, just to ensure that you don't run into any technical glitches and that the presenter is comfortable with the environment. Live seminars are live. There is no do-over button or opportunity to edit the live presentation. What you see is what everyone sees. Be sure to offer the webinar as an on-demand feature after the live event so people who may have missed it get a chance to view it later. With live webinars, you also have the ability to answer questions from the audience or interact with the attendees during the presentation.

► **Prerecorded Webinars** — This option allows you the opportunity to capture all of the energy and spontaneity of a live presentation, but with a safety net. If something goes wrong, or if you aren't happy with your performance, you can redo it until you are happy with the end result. It also allows you to edit together different segments, which may enhance the presentation further.

► **Mixed Webinars** — With this option, you may decide to prerecord your presentation but then hold a Live Q&A session after the presentation. In this case, you can ensure your presentation is nailed down the way you want and still allow for live interaction with the attendees after you're done. Some of the platforms listed above give you the option of offering the presentation on-demand and then having a much longer live time for Q&A after. This allows attendees to watch the presentation on-demand at a time that suits them but still be able to participate in the live Q&A.

4. Social Livestream — Similar to the Live Webinar option, most social media platforms (Facebook Live, Twitter Live, Instagram Live) offer a live video feature so you can broadcast directly from that social media outlet. These platforms also allow for comments and feedback from your audience.

5. Virtual Show Platforms — At the more complex end of the spectrum is the option to create a fully immersive and interactive environment, including multiple streams and sources of interactive content, virtual booths, chatrooms, meeting rooms, and seminar and presentation areas, all under one platform. This type of format is good if you are presenting multiple brands or products. Platforms like vFairs, 6connex, Intrado, Hexfair, and Communique provide a complete package that allows you to facilitate an experience that includes as many of these components as you require. Most of these providers offer online purchasing functionality. Many also provide analytics regarding the attendees participating in the show, their activities and interactions within the show environment, and contact information. Also available is the ability to “gamify” an attendee's experience through scavenger hunts and trivia games. These activities keep people engaged with the show and its content. Live chat rooms allow booth staff to interact with attendees via text, audio, or video in real-time as well as allowing attendees to interact with each other in designated chat and meeting rooms. These immersive environments allow you to create your own custom trade show floors, individual trade show booths, and even auditoriums to host your seminars and presentations.

THINGS TO CONSIDER WHEN EXECUTING A VIRTUAL SHOW

Here are some important considerations to factor into your plans to proceed with your virtual show.

1. Strategy Questions — What are your goals or objectives? Who is your audience going to be and what are their reasons for attending? How are you going to meet your audience's needs? Which virtual show format is going to reach and engage your audience in the most efficient way? Do you have relevant content currently available or will you have to create new content? Do you have the resources to create new content? Which platform supplier will be the most efficient and effective at achieving your goals and objectives?

2. Logistical Questions — These should support your goals and objectives. Your choice of platform may help to resolve some logistical questions, which should include the following: What are the dates and times for the event? Are there competing events during this time? Do you have the personnel and time to dedicate to the event? Will there be a fee for attendees to participate or attend? Do you require attendees to register? What data do you want to capture? What are the laws around capturing and using personal data? Do you require the ability to conduct financial transactions online? What analytics would you like to capture? Are you going to conduct an attendee survey?

3. Promotional Questions — What are your promotional plans? How do you reach your intended audience? How do you spread the word about the event? Should you offer sponsorships or partner with other media partners? Are there other channels that you can leverage to promote the event? Do you want to send out reminders and messages to preregistered attendees? Do you have other things to communicate to your attendees prior to the event?

4. Technical Testing — Make sure you conduct at least one trial run with test attendees prior to going live. Try all your links if you have them. Is all your content loading properly? Is the platform or environment loading properly? Is it easy for attendees to engage with the show and find what they are looking for? Is content missing, mis-sized, misplaced etc.? Is there tech support available for you and your attendees during the show?

5. Post Show Follow-up — In conjunction with your show plan you also need to develop a post-show plan. Prior to your event you must take the time to understand the privacy laws so that you understand what information you can gather from the attendee's and what you can legally do with it after the event. Once the show is complete, most platforms will provide you with excellent data about the attendees including email addresses and other contact information. You can also gather information like: a) the amount time they spent at the event, b) did they request follow-up information, c) did they complete contests or surveys, and d) what aspects of the show did they engage with? All this information will help you build a profile for each attendee. The key is developing a follow-up plan that you can execute quickly after the event that lays the foundation for you to nurture these relationships by providing helpful and relevant information to the prospect. This will help build a long-term relationship with the attendee so when they are ready to purchase, they already have a trusted relationship with you.

As you can see, there is a lot to consider when putting together a virtual show; however, the benefits can be substantial if the event is executed properly. The latest technologies now allow you to achieve your goals and objectives in a much simpler and more cost-effective manner than ever before.

Virtual shows and events are not replacements for physical shows and events; rather, they complement them. Virtual shows allow us to reach out and engage with people in very meaningful ways. They create opportunities for us to connect with each other and with the things and activities that bring us joy. They allow us to stay safe in a time when some traditional activities may not. And they allow virtual attendees to reach back out and interact directly with us. ★

THE FUTURE OF MARINE MARKETING: VIRTUAL TOURS & TRADE SHOWS

By Dealer Spike

One of the biggest surprises of the COVID-19 pandemic has been an absolute explosion in marine sales as people realized that a boat provided a safe, socially distanced form of family recreation. Sales across all categories—both new and used—have jumped significantly as a result, cleaning out inventory. While this has been great news for most boat dealers, current inventory levels remain low due to the pandemic-driven shutdown of both US and international factories. Yet data from Boats Group shows that consumer demand and online research have only grown: Web traffic is up 56 percent and online leads have jumped a staggering 176 percent year over year in the last few months.

Many dealers are using this time to optimize their online presence to maximize sales once new units start rolling back into their showroom. For marine dealers, this means looking at new technologies and lead generation strategies, from virtual tours, to live chat and even the concept of virtual trade shows that would replace the large, physical boat shows that traditionally have driven the selling season.

At Dealer Spike we are focused on innovative tools and techniques for driving online leads and in-store sales for dealerships in eight industries, including the unique dynamics of the marine marketplace. Our expertise comes from real-world dealership experience and a passion for listening and responding to our dealers' needs. That's why we're sharing our key insights into what it will take to help you thrive once boats start flowing back into showrooms and customers start shopping in what has become known as the "new normal."

Creating a virtual showroom

Recent research indicates that the majority of today's marine customers start the buying process online for new units and parts before making an in-store purchase. About 88 percent of all product searches begin online, and more than half of those take place directly on a mobile device.

This change in buying behavior means that dealers must shift their marketing resources to align with new customer preferences and patterns. The best way to do this is to create a highly interactive "digital showroom" that engages and nurtures prospects from the first time they visit your website to the day where they come in to pick up the boat. Done correctly, it's an approach that can seamlessly mirror the traditional buying process by informing and exciting buyers while they are browsing, no matter where they are or what device they are using.

Still have doubts? Then just think about it: If a picture is worth a thousand words, imagine how much a virtual tour is worth!

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For starters, having a virtual tour of every unit's trim levels and features is the perfect way to give online shoppers the same experience they get at a showroom but from the comfort of their home. Virtual tours are simulations of existing products, usually composed of a sequence of still images, and are designed to allow your customers to "step inside" your dealership from any device. That's important because, according to recent studies, most users stay on a website less than 59 seconds. If you don't manage to capture a user's attention in less than a minute, you've lost them.

There are several platforms available that makes it easy to offer virtual tours that drive sales, but it's essential that they offer some key features to streamline the process and make a polished, professional tour easy to execute and deliver:

- ▶ **Guided Photography:** You're not a professional photographer, so you'll need a guided process that makes shooting 360-degree images simple and painless to produce.
- ▶ **Tools for Quality Footage:** Built-in spin encoding and automated background blurring features ensure that the focus remains on the unit. Making sure you also have a stabilization feature ensures a smooth rotation of the image for a full display of the model.
- ▶ **Customized Callouts:** You can highlight key features to provide customers with more information as they scroll over the image with their mouse or finger—just a single tap opens a text box with more details.
- ▶ **Mobile Optimization:** 360-degree spins adapt to any screen size without loss of quality and load quickly on all devices, and they're fully compatible with mobile browsers.

In addition to creating a new, interactive way to engage online prospects, a virtual tour enhances your dealership's ability to generate faster sales. When a website has 360-degree photos, the conversion rate on products sold on those pages is about 27 percent higher than for standard two-dimensional images. More importantly, 56 percent of shoppers have said they would purchase from a 360-degree product walkaround compared to regular static photos. You also get a significant boost in engagement, as studies have also shown that websites with virtual tours are viewed 5 to 10 times longer than those without.

Turbocharging the Virtual Experience

Once you've begun offering self-service virtual tours on your website, you can turbocharge that experience by adding an interactive "chat" feature to your site to accompany the dynamic visual presentation. Having a live chat feature on your website is an integral part of good customer experience because it allows you to connect with your customers in real-time as they browse. This characteristic distinguishes chat from all other contact channels, such as the phone or email, and can positively impact your business's success. Customers that use live chat are three times more likely to make purchases versus those who don't and, when you add a sales person's insights and ability to quickly answer questions during a virtual tour, you've transformed the core of the traditional showroom experience into a 24/7 virtual selling platform!

In the long run, chat-enabled virtual tours also boost confidence in your business as clients and customers can view inside and see how and where you work. Prospects naturally feel more affinity with business they can see, and 80% of consumers think 360-degree images reflect well on a dealer's reputation.

Virtual Trade Shows: Pros & Cons

With the COVID-19 pandemic projected to extend well into 2021, many marine dealers are faced with the looming decision of whether to exhibit at a virtual boat show, host their own event or pass altogether as the next selling season arrives.

Virtual shows require a new way of selling, and there are a number of issues to consider before attending:

Virtual Trade Show Pros: 😊

- ▶ **Lower Cost:** As long as you have enough content, compelling virtual tours and the ability to engage prospects through live chat, virtual shows are just cheaper to attend. There are no travel costs, you don't have to take time away from your dealership, you don't have to set up a booth and there are no shipping or hospitality expenses.
- ▶ **Increased Exposure:** Because they are online, these events aren't limited to a venue's scheduling and they can run much longer than a physical show. Attendance is always dependent on the show's promoter to be able to drive awareness, but the increased duration gives more people the opportunity to "tour" the show and visit your booth.
- ▶ **Better Reporting:** The biggest advantage of a virtual show may be better lead generation. Since the online experience always generates more accurate visitor data than relying on memory when someone at a show expresses interest in a unit, virtual shows provide a detailed list of people who have requested more information. These lists typically provide some form of contact information—usually name accompanied by an email or a phone number—and some shows will share who has been downloading information from your virtual booth as well.
- ▶ **Instant Sales:** By embedding an online shopping cart at your event, you can eliminate purchasing delays and maximize conversions by providing the platform to make transactions in real-time. This online store captures not only existing opportunities that you've nurtured throughout your event but also passive opportunities that would otherwise be untapped and unexplored in case of a physical show.

Virtual Trade Show Cons: ☹️

- ▶ **Not Personal:** One of the big downsides of a virtual show is that they are impersonal, and you don't get that one-to-one interaction that helps close so many sales. It is also impossible to connect with people who are browsing the aisles unless they click to enter your "booth."

► **Not as Exciting:** The online experience generally isn't as engaging as a physical show, and many attendees can be at a virtual show while also surfing the web or checking their social media accounts. People also don't respond to the energy that happens when a physical booth gains the attention of a small crowd and draws other attendees in.

► **Limited Networking:** By design, a virtual environment makes networking opportunities much more limited because you are not actually walking the aisles of a show, bumping into possible new clients and business contacts. While there are opportunities to "socialize" in the virtual lounge, much of the chatter mimics social chatter through instant message, rather than talking in a face-to-face conversation. Also, while participants are free to attend as many booths as they please, there is no opportunity to directly touch and explore new units.

► **Focused Engagement:** Even though you may have an awesome set of new models to promote, prospects can't "see" them as they would while walking around on a traditional show floor unless they click on your booth. Staying immersed in the show and not in other activities or work can be difficult for many attendees.

Another alternative is to "host" your own virtual show. This can be especially attractive if you have a number of new units or a new brand your dealership wants to launch with a big splash. Since you can run your booth and attend others with the click of a mouse, you can attract prospects from anywhere in the world. Without the costs of renting and running a convention center, traveling and shipping, virtual trade shows are also becoming an attractive "green" alternative to traditional events. Keep in mind you will still have the added expense of contracting with a virtual trade show platform provider and the burden of digitally promoting the show across a number of online channels.

No matter which route you choose to take, the dramatic shift to online shopping for boats will be an even more critical element in the early sales cycle as manufacturers resume production and the economy begins to stabilize. To keep the momentum rolling, dealers need to take steps now to optimize their e-commerce operations to be ready for the next selling season. In an era of restricted physical interaction and multiple communication channels, it's essential to get in front of shoppers wherever they are and, more importantly, provide a compelling experience that allows you to quickly connect with them once they have contacted you and are in the sales funnel. ★



NO SHOW BOAT SHOWS

By Rich DeLancey, Dealership Toolkit

For decades boat and marine shows have been a staple of society and an integral part of the marine dealership process. Millions and millions of dollars are annually spent moving, displaying, staffing, and, most notably, selling in civic centers, arenas, convention halls, and waterfronts across the United States and Canada. The COVID-19 Pandemic has forced many shows to cancel due to the demands of social distancing. The situation has left many dealers scrambling and worrying about how they will replace the exposure and, most importantly, revenue that these shows customarily provided as part of the annual plan.

As a young rep selling digital to marine dealers, I used to get super excited and disappointed within seconds of each when meeting a dealer for the first time. The exchange would go something like this, “Rich, we spend about \$525,000 a year in marketing.” My heart and head started spinning up all the cool things I could do online for this dealer. Alas, that was not to be because of the next line that would ultimately come out of the dealer’s mouth, “About \$350,000 of that budget is our boat show cost.” In my head, the online ads just got a little smaller.

At Dealership Toolkit, I have a very smart CFO watching the money. She keeps me grounded when my Steve Jobs-sized dreams meet the reality of our bank account. I would imagine many dealerships have similar people who keep the trains on the tracks. I can almost hear the conversation that may be occurring in offices all over. CFO, “We typically spent X on shows and Y on advertising. If we got by with Y on advertising for years, we should bank X for a rainy day or improve the P/L.”

As I transitioned from Chief Digital Officer to Chief Executive Officer, the P/L became as important if not more important than the technology I was producing or ads I was running. Dealer principals often struggle with deciding which levers to pull to keep the funnel full without breaking the bank, which brings me to the point of this paragraph. As tempting as it may be to say, “I’ll just bank this unspent boat show budget,” don’t sacrifice the future for a better financial statement today. At the same time, don’t spend on things that won’t give you a level of return you are accustomed to seeing for those funds.

The last sentence is easier said than done, as an average dealer gets dozens of calls a week from advertising vendors that can “Change their world.” So, where do you begin? The answer to that question lies in taking your digital game up a notch. For the dealership, digital has been niched into websites, social media, and pay per click ads over the last couple of years. Through an occasional email blast or display ad, most dealers feel like they have digital covered. There is so much new happening in the digital world today that I encourage everyone to take an in-depth look at what they are doing. The first temptation with digital is to say, “Let’s have a virtual boat show.” I would caution against this approach. The reason being scope and scale.

Organizations like Camping World have made the virtual show an art form. With Blake Shelton concerts, celebrity hosts, and tons of manufacturer support, their online shows

have been a big success. For the average local dealer, selling Blake Shelton a boat is as close as they will ever get to him having a private concert for their customers. Compared to the mega-events occurring online, your dealership will come off as small and amateurish to those who attend if you could get people to attend. There is a reason why Camping World is doing celebrity concerts; they know the product isn't a strong enough draw on its own.

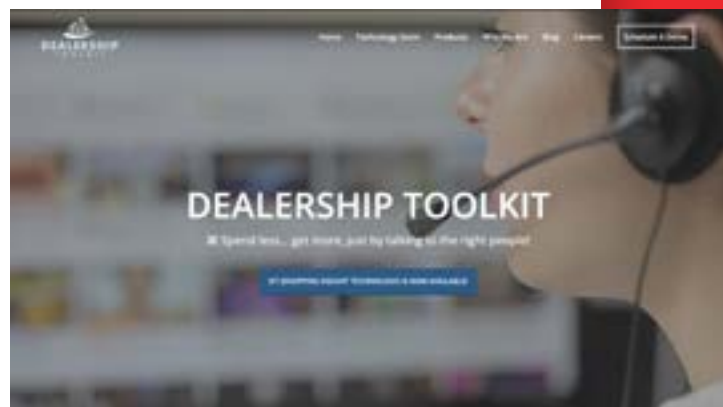
A better alternative would be a private "by appointment" show at your dealership or a marina nearby. COVID social distancing makes 300 people in the showroom at one time a bad idea. But if you could have families coming at staggered, scheduled times, you could get the message out and some sales in.

Make it a special "By invitation only" or "VIP experience." Get the manufacturer reps involved and have them on-site to answer questions straight from the horse's mouth. Take the money you are saving moving boats up and down the highway to the arena and have some lovely gift boxes made for the visitors. Have a photographer on-hand shoot photos that can be shared on social media to build excitement and encourage people to call asking about the event.

Filling up the calendar with appointments won't be easy but is doable. The best way, but probably the hardest, is to have the salespeople call all of the customers/prospects personally and invite them to the show. This is the hardest because making salespeople make phone calls is like sticking your hand in the blender. While fantastic on a sea trial or with a showroom up, many salespeople have trouble cold calling. So that you aren't left holding the bag, I would suggest using a call service to reach out, screen, and set up the appointments for you.

Now, this may come off as a little self-serving as Dealership Toolkit owns a call center. It is also educated from experience—our center books dozens of appointments a day for boat dealers all across the country. In the age of DMs, VMs and texts, many people enjoy and are very responsive to a good old-fashioned phone call. Call centers make your dealership sound big, and your event important. They are typically staffed by people who won't cower in the corner or say "the heck with this" after five customers in a row criticize them for calling.

Help improve your call ratios by backing up the event with digital and traditional advertising campaigns. Email blasts, glossy direct mail invitations, and a sign in front of the dealership are excellent ways of bringing recognition and driving interest. Digitally take your customer list and create custom audiences for Facebook, Google, and Geo Mobile ads. Think beyond the simple 300 x 250 static ad. The technology exists today for rich media ads that are interactive and can include video. Run the ads in a geographic radius of marinas and popular bodies of water. Nothing wrong with setting a geo-ad up for the center of a lake. The only people who will ever see that ad are people playing on their phones while on a boat. After all, if they are in the center of a



lake without a boat, they have more significant issues to concern themselves with. Think beyond the box on show dates and times. There is no need to confine yourself to 8 a.m. to 8 p.m. on a Saturday. Your virtual boat show could last 20 days, as long as you can continue to bring in appointments.

The search phrase “Buy a boat” hit a five-year high on Google in June of this year. The number of first-time boat buyers has been off the charts. Many dealers could have sold three times as many in 2020 if only they had the inventory. This is a dealer’s chance to reset expectations and develop a new way of business. Many dealers spend millions of dollars on beautiful facilities, only to pack their boats up and stand in a cold convention hall every January. If we can teach people that the best way to buy a boat is at the dealership, it will make you more profitable in the long run.

COVID is forcing our hand, and it is also forcing your competitor’s hand. Now you can skip the show this year without worrying because everyone will be missing the show. ★



UP YOUR MARKETING WITH FREE TOOLS AND DIGITAL ASSETS FROM DISCOVER BOATING

Looking for ways to enhance your marketing and reach? DiscoverBoating.com has a variety of complimentary tools and resources to help promote your business and increase your engagement with consumers on a local level and beyond.

BOATING LIFESTYLE IMAGES

Be a part of the industry's national Discover Boating campaign and help your customers get on board! Select as many images as you like and then simply download them to add to your web site and print materials, or social media channels. [Click for images.](#)

DISCOVER BOATING VIDEOS

Stream, download or embed Discover Boating videos to share in your showroom, on your website, through your social network or in your next email campaign. Show your customers that life is always better on a boat! [Click for videos.](#)

INTERACTIVE TOOLS & RESOURCES FOR CUSTOMERS

Discover Boating researched and evaluated which online resources consumers consult before making a purchase. These tools can be pulled directly from [DiscoverBoating.com](#) and easily incorporated on your company's website (without taking visitors off your site) - from a boat loan calculator to boat registration, and more.

SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT

Starting a conversation with your customers (and potential customers) through social media provides another way to build relationships. Connecting via Facebook, Instagram and Twitter are a great start.

Discover Boating offers sample posts for Facebook and Twitter if you need photos to use in your social media outreach. Remember to tag @discoverboating and #discoverboating in your posts! Discover Boating also provides tips and best practices for posting content on your social media channels. [Access Discover Boating's social media toolkit here.](#)

RESEARCH & EDUCATION TO INFORM DECISIONS

Discover Boating continues to be committed to making strategic marketing decisions that are grounded in sound research and statistics. These learnings and studies are available to you to grow your business, from [how to sell to a first-time boat buyer](#), to [Discover Boating's Web Referral program](#), [webinars](#) and more.

LOGOS

Lastly, [Discover Boating logos](#) are available to download for your website and other marketing materials. ★

**MRAA'S
GUIDE
TO BOAT
SHOW
SUCCESS**

Discover Boating has launched the ['Buying Your First Boat' free digital download](#) to help simplify the purchase process for new boat buyers. The guide includes tips for finding and buying the right boat, trailering and storage options, the benefits of buying from a dealer, and more. Each chapter of this guide provides suggestions to make ownership easy. This is a great tool for your sales team, as well as to print and share with customers.

For questions on how to apply any Discover Boating marketing tools to your website, contact Freya Olsen at folsen@nmma.org.

IN 2021 (AND BEYOND), THINK DIGITAL

Whether your partner-produced boat show is moving online, you're planning to host your own virtual sales event, or want to reach a broader audience under the confines of the pandemic, putting more focus on digital in your marketing plan is more important than ever. You'll want to think digital to stay competitive, generate sales, keep in touch with customers, and reach new boat buyers in 2021 (and beyond).

Digital marketplaces and online offerings allow you to utilize select online hubs to showcase your product and reach broader audiences, while helping your customers narrow down their search in a matter of minutes.

These marketing and sales platforms provide a solution to generate sales amid the pandemic, while providing the foundation for a long-term complement to in-person experiences when boat shows and other in-person sales events return.

You can provide special "boat show deals" or winter bargains and incentives to hook online buyers, and capture broader audiences by joining event organizers' digital offerings and marketplaces.

And, while nothing beats shopping and comparing boat models side by side, or getting on the water at a boat show for a sea trial, you can still provide this opportunity for qualified customers and hot leads to sign up and visit your dealership to close the deal.

Consumer shopping habits and desires were shifting to online purchases pre-pandemic, and it is clear that during the pandemic and beyond, incorporating digital sales practices into your business plan are no longer a nice-to-have, but a must-have.

Boat shows provide a solution to the strong consumer appetite for access to all brands and boats in one trusted place. NMMA expects a strong return of boat shows in Q3 of 2021 and until then, with most boat shows canceled or postponed in the first half of 2021, many companies are asking themselves how they'll replicate that experience for their customers.

Some are asking about the value of the virtual boat show. This past year we've learned that an online event can miss the mark, leaving exhibitors and consumers frustrated because they're not getting the 360-degree experience they expect from the in-person event. While online boat shows have their place, it's important they focus on the customer first, ensuring a meaningful, valuable experience, instead of trying to replicate the live boat show online. First understanding what you want to accomplish from an online event, and then answering why, where, and how an online event can fit in the day-to-day life of your customer are important places to start.

There's no question: Rethinking how we market and sell to the consumer by leveraging digital is a powerful key to our industry's future growth. NMMA and Discover Boating are working on helping the industry do just this and in the coming weeks will be announcing ways to get in front of consumers in new, impactful ways. Until then, contact Alisdair Martin at amartin@nmma.org to learn more. ★

WHY DIGITAL MARKETING MATTERS NOW MORE THAN EVER BEFORE

Filling the funnel and building relationships is possible - even when boat shows are not

By Jenny Burkett, Boats Group

The effects of the pandemic have redefined how Americans take a break and how they buy boats. Buyers and sellers alike are pushing the pedal to the metal when it comes to adapting to all things virtual. This year's quick shift to technology has strengthened the industry and empowered more marine retailers to fully embrace marketing at a time when boat shows hang in the balance. Digital marketing has stood up to this year's challenges and is now more than ever today's proven leading strategy to sell more boats faster and the answer to connecting in a virtual world.

Filling the funnel and building relationships now with prospects is possible, even when boat shows are not. Consider this: In September alone, Boat Trader's clickthrough-rate from Google SERPs was up 27 percent YoY. The significance of this organic data point for dealerships represents the importance of relying upon a trusted sales platform with strong SEO to be ranked and viewed — and reinforces having a stellar online presence to convert buyers. There has never been a more important time to have a focused digital marketing strategy that reaches the entire funnel as consumer behavior signals more digital demand.

Additionally, taking into account new boaters of all ages and backgrounds who already purchased a "COVID boat," no business can ignore what having this new customer base means in terms of developing diverse advertising, consistent communication, and marketing new training programs and services. After all, some new boaters are deciding if boating will remain in their long-term plan.

So, how can you ensure that this season is a showstopper?

Seize the opportunity

As some marine retailers cut back on marketing efforts in response to the pandemic, those who invest now will capture even more exposure to the rapidly growing audience of boaters. Digital marketing is quick to optimize and the steps to attracting buyers and capturing quality digital leads are actions that can be taken immediately.

Take center stage like you would at a boat show with on-point online outreach, such as digital ads that are enhanced with localized geo-targeting or placed in front of boat shoppers that have been actively searching for that specific type of boat. Demographic filters can also be applied for marketing rare boats to niche segments. Digital marketing allows you to determine how you want to fish — with a spear or with a net where all the fish are biting.

Know how the hottest prospects are shopping

Online boat shopping has been on the rise for years; however, mobile viewing continues to be the leading way buyers in 2020 prefer to shop. Compared to desktop this year, listing views from mobile devices have accounted for 64 percent of all listing pages viewed, and in terms of YoY growth, the volume of mobile viewing has increased 87 percent across the Boat Trader app and mobile site. As the mobile-first trend continues — and as boats are selling faster than ever before — buyers' expectations of finding the best inventory as quickly as possible will only increase. Ensuring that your business has a presence through a user-friendly mobile experience is key to capturing active shoppers.

Build relationships

Digital marketing helps fill the void of traditional face-to-face marketing and it's important to make every message meaningful, because behind each clickthrough and lead submitted is a customer. Content-rich email journeys, targeted ads and interactive social media campaigns deliver value and make it easy for customers to feel confident about taking the next step to making a purchase.

Having a “rapid response” plan is very effective for establishing personal connections and earning sales. Simply shooting a quick text or sending a short email after every visit is one way to show prospects that you care and want to win their business. Lead the market quickly by holding the position as the local boating authority and go-to resource.

Post-sale, design time-scheduled outreach to keep customers close and to have the chance to routinely ask for referrals. Happy customers are willing to write online reviews and introduce their family and friends who also want to buy boats. When communication is genuine and frequent, relationships are built.

“Train to retain” customers

It can't be assumed that this year's wave of new customers will continue to buy from you for their accessories, gear, next boat or service needs. So, add one more tactic to the business plan. Provide new boating families and couples with reasons to buy more and to buy again with engaging resources like smaller-scale, in-person events or Zoom calls that have a programmed agenda (sea trials of new models, training for docking, how to winterize, tour of dealership, etc.) to discuss a wide variety of “newbie” boater topics.

Because two-foot-itis is real, and because current boat owners have also been caught up in the boating frenzy this year, nurture existing customers with marketing that teases the “next boat.” Take the “TLC” approach — what's tempting to add to their current boating experience? What might be lacking? What can be changed? Here lies a great opportunity to corral used inventory.

These ideas only scratch the surface of creative digital marketing and all that it can do, but the time is now to forge ahead and shape the future of your business during this tailwind. ★

