

Event Management Wizardry

- *A View Behind the Boating Event Management Curtain with Certified Dealer and MRAA Gold Member Boat House Cape Coral, Fla.*

By Jerrod Kelley, MRAA Content Manager

Overlooking the importance of dealership events limits your business growth and leads to missed opportunities to connect with indecisive customers. Worse, you can't afford to lose ground to competitors who fully embrace events to build relationships, foster trust and fortify their brand. Focusing on and delivering an outstanding customer experience is vital to the success of your business. Marine retailers that have figured out this event management wizardry have become pillars within their communities and lifestyle brands for boaters.



The Boat House Florida crew hosted another successful Pelican Pass Rendezvous in April.

We know customer events cost time, money and require full buy-in from your staff, so we connected with The Boat House of Cape Coral, Florida, a Certified Dealership part of an 11-store, 12-location company in Florida, Illinois and Wisconsin. We spoke with Seth Bartodziej, Marketing Operations Coordinator, to learn how The Boat House Florida team pulls off hosting 40-plus events annually and tracks each one to capture ROI.

History Lesson

The Boat House started its adventure into events when President - South Tom Hansen and another team member envisioned hosting a customer-based boating event with a rendezvous-style atmosphere. The events began with going to restaurants, but once Eric Lundgren, VP of Sales, came aboard, The Boat House Florida team jumped into this new vision.

"Hey, we should go to beaches," said Lundgren. "That allows more boats, customers and community to get involved. It's been an evolution, and we started to take it more seriously within the past two years."

From there, their event expansion included adding a designated grill boat. The innovative concept lets the team provide food, additional experience value and incentive for customers to join the events.

Community, Education & Soft Selling

It's critical to connect, instruct and share boating with the community and customers you serve. The Boat House has three objectives with its Rendezvous events.

The first is community building. These events help customers use their vessels correctly and gain firsthand experience of the health benefits boating provides. It opens the door to uniting them with other boating enthusiasts, takes them on adventures of varying size and lets them live the lifestyle, which is one of the reasons they entered boating — to be outdoors with friends and family.



The Boat House grill boat has been a big addition to the fleet.

The second objective is one of the most important aspects of any boating event. Your team gets a chance to aid the customer by helping them learn in a real-world environment. This level of connection is unmatched and boosts their trust in you and their confidence at the helm.

The Boat House Florida used proactive customer service for its Pelican Pass Rendezvous. They promised an enjoyable day on a secluded island filled with food, beverages and beach games. The event flyer (PDF) included the time, date and waypoints for the adventurous and skilled customers to join them. The team also addresses potential customer challenges in two ways. The first was to include a Garmin Marine GPS tutorial video — Featuring Captain Steve Levy of Coastal Charters & Services — to assist participants in navigating to the exclusive event, and learning how to insert waypoints in their Garmin devices.

Another method, a pre-meetup for first-timers and new customers, taught owners how to use the functionality of their boats and avoid mishaps. Certain waterways are tricky to navigate, so creating a meet-up location and guided route promotes safety and builds confidence. This educational framework creates other learning opportunities like proper anchoring or deploying power poles. Providing on-site education and safety tips raises the overall customer experience.

The third Objective, the soft sell, helps create an urgency for indecisive customers who may be on the fence about upgrading to a larger boat or trading in for a different model altogether. Attendance helps customers experience other boats, accessories and products in action. They also learn more about your team and your customer care.

Event Planning 101

Communication with customers should provide the details so they understand the commitment. Keep it clear, concise and confidence-inspiring. Consider revamping or altering how you share messaging. The Boat House team reviewed its event and made key changes annually. Evaluating your events saves time and reduces customer frustration.

“Pelican Pass Rendezvous was the first event I executed,” said Bartodziej. “I was spending so much time communicating and instructing folks on how to put in those waypoints. I said, ‘Let’s just make a video.’” That change helped his team streamline the process for customers and crew.

Another tweak was repositioning / communicating where the boats were anchored on the island. Too many were on the outside of the island, which required dual anchors. Going forward, they communicated to customers that they should look to the inside where they could pull up on the beach and not go through the hassle of dual anchoring. If customers were forced to anchor on the outside, team members would assist them in the process – if not hop on their boat and do it all together. Elevating customer experience.

Using post-event customer feedback and team discussions, list out observations, reflections and requests and decide which to implement to improve your event. It’s a must-do action if you only have one major boating event, but if you host dozens a year, it’s crucial for your success.

“With these customer rendezvous, we’re not just going to Pelican Pass, we’re going to North Captiva and Lover’s Key,” explained Bartodziej. “We have one, it’s like our Super Bowl, to the Keys for four nights. So, it’s entailing all of that data, and constantly evolving these events to make them more and more effective.”

You can’t host successful events and heighten customer experience if you don’t start by hosting AN event. Starting your events is the first critical step. Do not overthink it; put it in motion. It’s a learning process.

The Boat House learns from reflecting on its events, practicing humility and tracking its Key Performance Initiatives (KPIs). Its KPI tracker has line items in several areas, including:

- **Event name**
- **Projected attendance / Registered attendance**
- **Total delivered**
- **Net HTML opens / Net unique clicks**
- **FB ads/outbound clicks**
- **FB ad reach**
- **SQLs acquired / SQLs acquired**
- **Boats, parts, or services sold**
- **Net cost**
- **Cost / attendees**
- **ROI**
- **Investment gained**
- **Lead sources**

	2024 Events	Projected Attendance	Registered Attendance	Actual Attendance	Total Delivered
1					
2					
3					
4					
5					
6					
7					
8					
9					
10					
11					
12					
13					
14					
15					
16					
17					
18					
19					
20					
21	Grand Total				
22					

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For community events, “We base success off customer satisfaction, full attendance or attendance ratios of those who registered and who showed up,” added Bartodziej. “The sales events are definitely worth the ROI. You can see that if you track it accurately.”

When you remember WHY you’re doing events and WHO they are for, you understand it’s worth the investment of your team’s time, energy and resources.



The Boat House Florida team included the date, time and GPS coordinates so their more skilled customers could join the event on their own.

Look on the Brite Side

The Boat House uses [Eventbrite](#), a global platform that allows anyone to create, share, find and attend events that fuel their passions. Bartodziej calls it a go-to event and attendee management software and tool for event managers. Customers can see event costs (The Boat House doesn't charge) and ticket availability. It offers other benefits, too.

"It allows custom questions to be input when people register for your events," added Bartodziej. "It's really handy when it comes to your sales events specifically. You're acquiring full contact information and you can also put in their living address, which lets you identify which region they're in. That's huge down here to know which store that customer is associated with."

Along with the personal information, Eventbrite allows miscellaneous notes to help your team qualify potential leads. The Boat House has Eventbrite pages for all three Florida locations. The Cape Coral store has hosted 1,300 attendees at its events thus far. Bartodziej explained that that figure is smaller than their in-house numbers. Some participants show up but do not register, so you must account for them. The Cape Coral store doesn't currently limit or cap event attendance for any event it organizes except the Florida Keys trip, its premiere and exclusive adventure.

Social Media & Video

Your event planning must include social media sharing. The Boat House posts to Instagram and Facebook to create awareness and hype. Its efforts include sharing before, during and after the event. They also share some behind-the-scenes footage to create fear of missing out (FOMO).

The team produces Facebook ads targeted at pulling external leads. This tactic helps expose other boaters to your dealership and the brands you carry. It's a way to gain trust, showcase your industry expertise, promote boating safety and grow your prospect list. The Boat House also shares event info on its website, sends emails and relies on word-of-mouth promotion by event attendees and team members.

Producing videos has an impact on operations and the success of your business. Bringing aboard a videographer to create content is one option to help your team. If you don't have the budget to hire a full-

time position, you could hire a freelance videographer, especially for promoting and capturing your events. It maximizes your events and elevates the value proposition you bring to the industry while boosting customer experience.

“Our leadership team brought in an in-house videographer, Marshall Nicolson, our Senior Digital Content Specialist,” stated Bartodziej. “Ever since he’s been with the boathouse, that’s been his main focus. Video is part of our culture.”

Sales Events

To help the Florida locations mitigate increasing costs for certain inventory and brands and increase revenue, they hold special sales events and share them on Eventbrite. A recent event was a Crownline Ride & Drive. The red-carpet experience provides clients exclusive with walk-throughs and demos, and lets the sales team engage current customers interested in a trade-in or upgrade.



Creating a stronger boating community is one of the pillars The Boat House focuses on when hosting events.

Nature & Nurture

Anytime you host an event you must have a contingency plan and follow standard operating procedures to ensure you’re taking the correct steps. Implementing SOPs for each event helps you control the controllable and adapt to weather and other situations outside of your control.

“Our marketing team is very small, and we communicate where we need the support staff if we have to delegate certain items to the sales team members and or other departments that are potentially involved with each style of event,” explained Bartodziej. “It’s communication and SOPs! On the uncontrollable variables, we pray, go with the flow and hope for the best.”

Event management is a learning experience. Set up your team with the correct processes and plans so you are ready in good weather and when facing challenges.

Events and Technicians - Juggling the ROI

Including technicians in events is a good strategy, but you must weigh the impact it could have on your Service Department and its efficiency. The Boat House Florida locations have Saturday events when techs are not in the store.

“We place our rendezvous events on the weekends so that everyone can be there,” said Bartodziej. “Our sales events are during the week and our techs are still turning wrenches at that time. It’s just the sales team or business managers and the marketing team.”

Involving a technician helps ensure on-the-water service should the need arise. A Boat House technician (Josh Erwin) fixed an issue and played hero on a recent Florida Keys trip. His training kept the event on track. The customer was happy with the results, and the dealership and tech earned added trust.

Dive In!

Boater and customer retention is critical for your business. By investing in events and installing best practices for success, you're reinvesting in your customers. You are helping them become the confident captain they need to be, capture lifelong memories and enjoy the benefits of boating. Start your event management wizardry today!

Meet Seth Bartodziej

Seth Bartodziej (Bar-toe-jay), Marketing Operations Coordinator with The Boat House, has only been in the boating industry for about two years but says his first word was "boat." The Florida-born boating and outdoor enthusiast, who grew up in Minnesota, equally enjoys the salt life and fresh-water escapes in the Midwest. He recently picked up a used 14-foot Alumacraft with a Yamaha outboard to slay slabs. In June, he and his wife Melissa will make the move to The Boat House's Lake Country, Wisconsin location.

