

Inflection Point: Waypoints That Will Define the Marine Industry's Future

“Successful folks see challenges as an opportunity to achieve something others cannot.”

— Bill Yeargin, Correct Craft CEO – 2006-2026, from Sounding Trade Only

Purpose

The Marine Retailers Association of the Americas (MRAA) held, in early April 2026, its first Industry Summit at the Coeur d'Alene Resort in Idaho to discuss significant pain points currently affecting the recreational boating industry.

To say the marine industry is a confluence of forces would be an understatement. AI has increased both consumer knowledge and readiness and shifted their approach to investing in boating, from renting to ownership. These same consumers demand instantaneous follow-up and transparency that magnifies trust at every touchpoint, which includes AI use and the clarity around boat prices — new and pre-owned. Macroeconomic uncertainty, rising costs and shifting generational expectations are placing new pressure on affordability and reshaping how both first-time and repeat buyers approach boating. Therefore, instead of following the accepted norm, manufacturers, boat dealers, suppliers and the MRAA convened in Idaho to create a new baseline together.

The two-day Industry Summit was established to help passionate professionals recalibrate their mindset in how they view and approach business challenges. Challenges that limit both their current and future success and the success of the marine industry as a whole. Educational presentations by subject matter experts explored key market challenges and opportunities related to pricing, artificial intelligence and leading through innovation and change. Additionally, working collaboratively in small groups, Summit participants listened, brainstormed and identified practical and strategic priorities to help recreational boating fundamentally transform how it does business both today and into the future.

This cooperative event was the MRAA's initial step in identifying and implementing industry-refining waypoints that can proactively reshape both the marketplace and go-to-market strategies. Through facilitation and peer leadership, attendees achieved several strategic outcomes: 1) Defined roles and shared ownership across stakeholders in shaping the industry's future, 2) Clear understanding of the pricing, consumer and technology shifts reshaping the industry, and 3) Strategic direction to shape an industry roadmap.

More than just a meeting, the strategic decision-making assembly centered around building communicative and collaborative innovation for industry-wide transformation. Through alignment, all stakeholders — dealers, manufacturers, suppliers, service providers and the

MRAA — play a vital role in strengthening the marine industry by creating and earning trust, attracting new buyers, developing boater-retention methods and advancing AI readiness.

“We’re here to define the future that we need.”

— Lowell Applebaum, Vista Cove CEO

Scope

Existing marine industry pain points and emerging challenges are realities recreational boating leaders must navigate. Addressing them requires a shift in mindset, viewing these challenges as opportunities to align efforts and take coordinated, transformative action.

The Inaugural MRAA Industry Summit convened key industry stakeholders to collaborate on shared solutions and align on the future of the industry. As an intermediary, the MRAA facilitated this collective effort to establish clarity, build trust and strengthen industry-wide coordination. Centered on dealer success, the summit focused on three critical areas — price clarity, marine dealership AI readiness and change leadership — to help shape a more transparent, adaptive and customer-focused boating experience.

“Let’s start with an uncomfortable truth: today’s consumers are demanding pricing transparency — and the boating industry isn’t there yet.”

— Matt Gruhn, MRAA President

Day 1 — Achieving Price Clarity


Facilitator Lowell Applebaum, CEO of Vista Cove, and Matt Gruhn, MRAA President, opened the session by framing the industry at a turning point — shifting from individual priorities to collective leadership and shared decision-making to drive boating’s progress.

Two educational presentations reinforced this message with data. Findings from Thom Dammrich’s DePaul University dissertation on objective price information showed disclosing boat prices significantly increases product search, lead generation and purchase intent, while “call for pricing” reduces engagement and sales. These findings highlight ongoing industry challenges, including the lack of a uniform pricing system, inconsistent trade-in valuation and varying manufacturer and dealer pricing structures. At the same time, today’s consumers expect transparency and a clearer understanding of pricing.

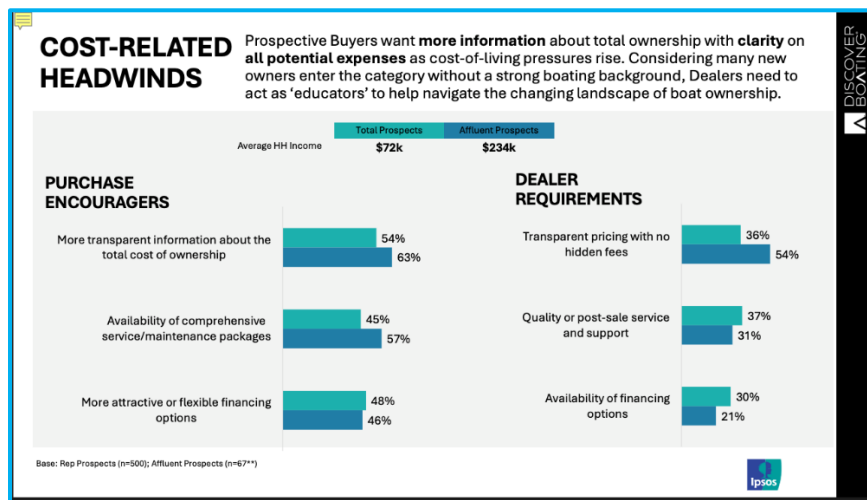
Implications

Lack of Price Clarity Can

- Disrupt the Purchase Journey
- Lead to Consumers Abandoning Their Search and Path to Purchase (if not completely, at least until later)
- Lengthen the Purchase Journey (delay a purchase)
- Lead to Fewer Sales Opportunities
- Leave Consumers Feeling Manipulated
- Consumers Feeling Forced into a Social Interaction with a Dealer that They Are Not Yet Prepared for

INDUSTRY SUMMIT 

Further insights from Ipsos research on next-generation boat buyers revealed that cost remains a primary barrier to participation. Both prospective and current owners cited high upfront pricing and uncertainty around ongoing ownership costs. These concerns are compounded by macroeconomic conditions, rising living expenses and declining consumer confidence, increasing demand for pricing clarity across all buyer segments.



To address these challenges, industry decision-makers must improve communication around pricing and total cost of ownership while exploring more flexible access models. Roundtable discussions, guided by consumer perspectives, helped identify key gaps and opportunities, reinforcing the need for greater alignment and transparency across the industry.

“AI is not magic, it’s mathematics.”

— Todd Smith, CEO of QoreAI

Day 1 — Build AI-Ready Marine Dealership

Todd Smith, CEO of QoreAI, framed AI as a defining shift in marine retail, emphasizing that speed of adoption is a competitive advantage. AI is evolving rapidly, and the industry risks falling behind without a clear strategy.

Dealers must own their data, map processes and implement AI to improve efficiency, while focusing human effort on relationships and judgment. Despite increasing experimentation, adoption remains unstructured, with a significant gap between dealers with formal AI strategies and those without. This divide is expected to widen, as high-performing dealerships leverage AI-supported systems and data ownership to gain a competitive edge.

Smith outlined four stages of AI maturity — Reactive, Descriptive, Predictive and Autonomous — noting many dealers remain in early stages without full control of their data. Attendees were left to consider three critical questions around data ownership, accountability and governance as AI becomes more integrated into dealership operations.

The slide features the QoreAI logo in the top left corner. Below it, the text 'ACT 4 - THE VISION' is displayed. The main title is 'Two kinds of dealerships.' The slide is divided into two columns. The left column, titled 'Runs on Intelligence', lists four bullet points: 'Proactive: acts before problems surface', 'Compounding advantage: data gets better every month', 'Same team, more output: efficiency without headcount growth', and 'Wins on intelligence, not just price or inventory'. The right column, titled 'Runs on Gut', lists three bullet points: 'Reactive: responds after the damage is visible', 'Yesterday's data: decisions lag the market', and 'Overstaffed inefficiency: more people, same output'. At the bottom left, there is a small number '30 / 38', and at the bottom right, there is a copyright notice '© 2026 QOREAI. ALL RIGHTS RESERVED.' The background of the slide shows a sunset over water.

“It’s not the technology that’s missing, but a new approach.”

— Kaihan Krippendorff, Founder of Outthinker

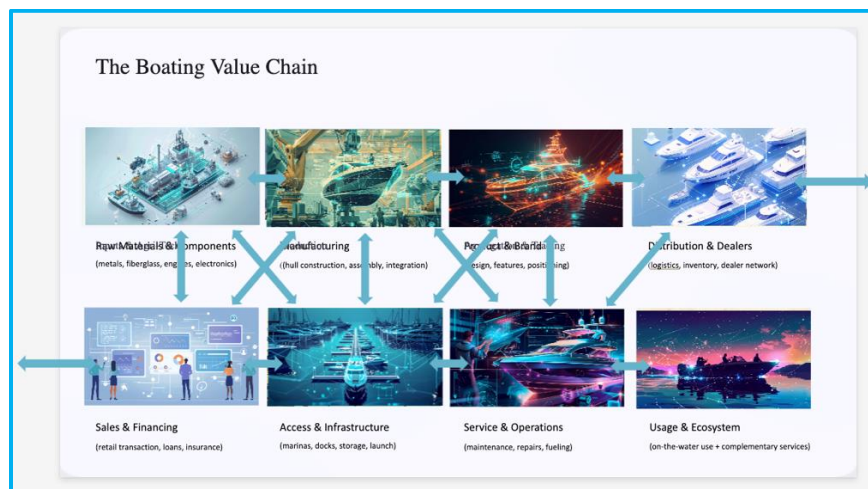
Day 2 — Lead Innovation & Change

Kaihan Krippendorff, Founder of Outthinker, opened Day 2 by emphasizing that industry leaders must challenge conventional thinking to address evolving challenges. Using the example of Dick Fosbury’s high-jump innovation, he reinforced that meaningful progress requires rethinking how problems are approached.

Attendees were introduced to a practical framework for evaluating future opportunities, along with key elements of the business model and the broader boating value chain. External forces, including changing consumer expectations and advancing technology, are driving the need for dealers, manufacturers and industry stakeholders to collaborate more closely and operate differently.

Through stronger alignment, the industry can shift from fragmented to seamless by delivering customer experiences that extend beyond the transaction. Creating value across the full ownership lifecycle builds trust, strengthens loyalty and positions dealerships as long-term partners.

Breakout discussions produced 15 high-priority topics, later refined into strategic direction. Achieving Price Clarity and Driving AI Readiness generated the strongest alignment, supported by additional focus areas reinforcing the need for coordinated, industry-wide action.



Ultimately, through better collaboration, the collective boating industry can go from fragmented to seamless when it creates customer experiences that delight at every step and transform boating from a purchased commodity into a transformative life event. Shared missions also create movements that last and build loyalty. When industry stakeholders learn to go beyond only the transaction and build entire lifecycle touchpoints, they can become the host and dependable service provider that creates lifetime value.

Strategic Topics Produced

Combining both first-day breakout discussions created 15 high-priority topics. They were then reframed to create strategic guidance and direction, and goal setting. Two of those topics, in Achieving Price Clarity and Driving AI Readiness — each complete with four subcategories of focus — captured the most collaborative agreement for change.

Achieving Price Clarity

- **Topic 1:** Align on what pricing success looks like across stakeholders
- **Topic 2:** Establish a trusted, standardized source for used boat values
- **Topic 3:** Leverage data and transparency to build trust and attract new buyers
- **Topic 4:** Create shared accountability for consistent, visible pricing across OEMs and dealers

Driving AI-Readiness

- **Topic 5:** Build AI fluency by sharing use cases, wins and best practices
- **Topic 6:** Identify high-impact use cases and apply AI to core dealership processes
- **Topic 7:** Lead organizational adoption through clear ownership and consistent engagement
- **Topic 8:** Advance industry-wide education to support AI-ready dealerships

Appetite for Reconstruction

Erin Gordon, Professional Facilitator and Visual Strategist at Vista Cove, guided participants in translating summit discussions into a clear, actionable playbook for shared leadership and coordinated industry progress.

Executing these waypoints now requires alignment and commitment. This is a defining moment for the marine industry to move in unison — where misalignment slows progress, and coordinated action drives it forward.

The MRAA Industry Summit marked the first step in an ongoing effort to reshape the industry. Sustained progress will depend on leaders and decision-makers continuing the work — committing to collaboration, advancing solutions, and driving meaningful change that strengthens the future of marine retail.

For dealers across North America, the appetite for reconstructing the boating business will define how you meet customers where they are. The work doesn't end here. It begins here. And the MRAA is here to lead our members, partners, and the industry in "beginning again" with confidence, direction, and resolve. Especially at such an inflection point, the integrity of our work has never mattered more.

Primary Source Content

Keynote Presentations:

- **Thom Dammrich** — Day 1, Achieving Price Clarity
- **IPSOS** — Day 1, Consumer Research Pricing Clarity
- **Todd Smith** — Day 1, Build the AI-Ready Marine Dealership: Reading the Water
- **Kaihan Krippendorff** — Day 2, Lead Innovation & Change

Summit Pre-Reads:

- *Achieving Price Clarity* ([Resource](#))
- *Building An AI-Ready Marine Dealership* ([Resource](#))
- *Leading Innovation and Change* ([Resource](#))

Related Articles:

- [The Next Level of Retail Leadership: Today's challenges demand industry wide thinking and shared direction](#)
- [Pricing Transparency](#)
- [The AI Imperative: Prospective boat buyers are using these tools, but far too many dealers are still hesitating to try them](#)
- [Leaders Prepare for Inaugural MRAA Industry Summit](#)
- [MRAA Launches 'Dealership of the Future' Task Force to Accelerate Marine Retail Transformation](#)