

SOUNDINGS Trade Only Today

DAILY NEWS FOR MARINE INDUSTRY PROFESSIONALS

[TradeOnlyToday](#) > [Columns & Blogs](#) > [Marketing Insight](#) > A day in a canoe reinforces value of lifestyle marketing

A day in a canoe reinforces value of lifestyle marketing

Posted on September 12th, 2012 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



I was in terrible need of escape. I'd suffered a major personal setback — the death of my beloved mother — and felt I had to get away. After weighing multiple travel options, I called a few close members of my family and we planned to meet up a few hours from our respective homes for a canoe trip on north Florida's beautiful Wakulla River. I hadn't been canoeing in more than 20 years.

The six-hour retreat was exactly what I needed. I wedged myself up into the narrow bow of my fiberglass canoe and dug my toes in. My strapping nephew Mark positioned himself aft while two more three-seater canoes were loaded with the adults and kids of varying ages who made up our motley crew.

As we pushed off, I sucked in the fresh, clean air. From that moment on — even during the brief rainstorm we encountered on our return jog — our day was truly magical. We paddled through spectacular wide and narrow bends with surprises at every turn — blue herons and snowy white egrets perched majestically, osprey nests high atop stately trees, birds swooping, fish jumping.

The highlight, though, was the manatees — no more than a paddle's length away and swimming directly alongside our canoes. I counted nine during the course of the day, including a family of three, who were frolicking together as we watched in awe. It was breathtaking to be that close and to feel such an incredible connection to these amazing creatures in their natural habitat.

As we paddled along, I couldn't help but feel inspired by all the wonderful boating activity around me. We passed groups of boaters pulled up along the shoreline, connected by colorful, interlocking tubes, topped by adults and kids of all sizes and shapes who were laughing, splashing and carrying on. We passed boaters anchored beneath sprawling trees with sturdy limbs stretching out over the river, as kids (and some adults) leapt off the bank and swung before dive-bombing into the cool water. We paddled past dozens of pontoons loaded with families and friends, sportboats with beauties sunbathing in the bow, small fishing boats, jet skis, kayaks and scores of other canoes. The banks were dotted with docks and all kinds of boats — old and new (of course, I found myself tracking brands and models). Virtually everyone we passed smiled and exchanged the boating wave ... that age-old gesture acknowledging a shared passion for the water. The river was teeming with life — filled with people having fun on and around and in their boats.

My own experience was almost Zen-like, as the thought overwhelmed me: This, right here, is what I market and sell. This is the boating lifestyle. This is what people invest in. It is not the fiberglass, not the product features and not the price. This experience of boating and all that it delivers is what people want.

This is freedom from the distractions and stresses of life. No kids glued to the tube or video games. No cellphones. No suits working the proverbial deal. This is the ultimate escape, the adventure, the fun, the antidote — nirvana! It crosses ethnicity, age and gender lines. From those in the flashiest of riverboats to the lowliest of canoes, we all were sharing the boating lifestyle. There was no hype, no pretense, no PR, no staged photo shoot. This was the real deal.

No matter the platform or design, recreational boats share one thing in common. They deliver fun with a capital F. That is what we have to remember. That is what we need to market and sell. It doesn't matter whether it's a sportfisher in the Outer Banks or an Opti in Milwaukee; everything we do needs to revolve around the fun of boating.

As we move forward with our Discover Boating campaign, we need to focus on how to best portray the boating lifestyle. It is really all about normal people on the water having fun. We need to continually solicit YouTube-style videos — authentic, non-slick, non-commercial productions — that tell the boating story from many different perspectives. Nothing compares to seeing the joys of boating unfold in living color, as I did that day on the Wakulla River.

How about hosting a Boating Fun YouTube channel (linked to the Discover Boating site) that archives videos capturing the boating lifestyle? Let's expand the NMMA's brilliant video and photo contest of a few years ago, targeting all of our boating segments for participation. Let's figure out fun ways to promote, publicize and reward our boaters for sharing their boating lifestyle. As our industry's best and most passionate advocates demonstrate their zest for the water, others may become inspired and embrace the same.

For years, I have pitched an experiential Boating Extravaganza that travels the country, at least to major boating markets. I'm not talking about big trucks with simulators or TV shows. I'm talking about a floating caravan of fun that moves from market to market, bringing the message, spirit and firsthand experience of boating to people who have never experienced it before. If you want to get people hooked on boating — in all of its many varieties — they must experience it.

This traveling boating fun production would make a series of stops at which manufacturers and dealers could create a hands-on boating experience. I can imagine a major PR blitz as the boating caravan steams into town. I envision a boat show on land in a festival-type atmosphere, showcasing product types, coupled with free boat rides and demos. I also would see a fun mix of lifestyle-oriented boating demonstrations that show people enjoying the water through various activities such as wakeboarding, water skiing, fishing, small-boat sailing — perhaps even a few free seminars. Although I don't have the concept or logistics totally nailed, I am convinced it is an ingenious way to market our lifestyle.

Unless you've been asleep at the wheel, you know that one of the buzzwords in marketing and consumer behavior circles today is "lifestyle marketing." Lifestyle depicts the ways in which groups of consumers spend their time and money. It embodies the mix of attitudes, values, interests and way of life of a targeted consumer group. Besides being an avid boater of 30-plus years, I'm also a die-hard biker. I live it, breathe it and ride with unbridled joy every chance I get. And one of the best examples of a company that has successfully harnessed "lifestyle marketing" is my brand of choice, Harley-Davidson.

There is a cult of motorcyclists like me who embrace the Harley lifestyle. Harley has done a superb job

of engaging us and creating that lifestyle image while driving thousands of die-hards and newcomers alike to buy in. Last statistic I heard, 15 percent of Harley's new customers are women. We need to study and learn from lifestyle marketing leaders such as Harley and Nike, or any number of others, that have integrated their products with a 'genuine lifestyle experience' that is highly desirable to those who embrace the package.

As an industry competing for recreational dollars, we must promote our boating lifestyle and communicate all of the emotional elements it embodies. From an industry perspective, our goal must be to attract newcomers to our lifestyle and to effectively influence our prospects and persuade them that boating will enhance their lives.

As marine marketers, one of our top goals must be to demonstrate clearly how boating can and improve quality of life. To be effective today, marketing and advertising must have an emotional driver at its core. In our country, unlike others, people don't buy boats because they are practical or for transportation. People invest in boats because they want what the boating lifestyle offers.

We need to figure out how to show them. If you ask me, a ride down the Wakulla River might be a great place to start.

Wanda Kenton Smith is an award-winning, 31-year marine industry marketing veteran based in Destin, Fla. She is president of Kenton Smith Marketing (www.kentonsmithmarketing.com) and president of Marine Marketers of America. She also edits two online sailing publications.

This article originally appeared in the September 2012 issue.