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Are we finally taking off the blinders?

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One of the most fulfilling days of my 36-year marine industry career came at the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show in November. I sat hopefully in the audience at the Marine Marketers of America biannual meeting, observing the faces of those who had assembled for NMMA president Thom Dammrich's introduction of the New Markets Task Force educational module.

Thom shared a compelling message that has stirred my heart for more than two decades and one I have dreamed the industry would one day embrace. Of course, I'm talking about the emerging markets that are changing the face and composition of our great nation. Dr. Martin Luther King, one of my favorite champions of inclusion, had a dream that inspired and changed our nation. I, too, have had a dream — a dream that I've fervently believed has the potential to grow our industry and bring many new people into boating. It's a dream whose time, I hope and pray, is finally beginning to come to fruition.

Since I began writing this column in 1998 I've been passionate about the need for our industry to tap the buying power of new markets. I've addressed the economic clout associated with several potential targeted markets from this perch — the fast-growing and affluent Hispanics, Asians and African Americans. I was among the first to raise my voice about the critical role of women in the decision-making process of boating products and services. I've talked about the influence kids carry in today's market and how their opinion impacts decisions on everything from where the family goes for dinner to what recreational pursuits it will engage in to what brand of boat it will choose.

I've shared the huge financial potential of the affluent gay and lesbian market. For many years I have talked up the buying power of these new markets, but few paid attention. I believed then, as I do now, that we must remove the blinders we've worn for so long. It's time to warmly welcome everyone into the boating family.

The one target market we have focused on — solely, in my estimation — has been the traditional 35-to-54-plus-age Caucasian male, which I've dubbed the Great White Shark. No doubt about it — the shark has fed us quite well for decades. However, the facts are clear: That Great White is graying. More important, his numbers are shrinking, significantly. Yes, he's still a very viable and a very big fish in our sea of prospects. But he's not the only fish in the sea these days. There is a wealth of younger fish, multicolor fish, whose population is exploding. The moral of my simple analogy: As an industry, we must cast a much wider net.

That is the message of the Recreational Boating Leadership Council's New Markets Task Force educational module that Dammrich shared at FLIBS. The presentation was nearly a year in the making, the result of tireless work of a group of industry folk who grasp the importance of this trend.

As the individual who chaired this group, I readily admit my prejudice on the topic. The training module not only provides eye-opening trends and statistics on three of the most prominent new markets — Hispanic, Asian and African-American — but more importantly it also communicates the exciting bottom-line results of five pacesetters who get it and who are reaping the financial rewards from their investments.

These companies were selected from among a nationwide group of 17 that were nominated. Each is featured in a best-practices video profile. Their perspective and strategies, along with their success stories, represent the stuff from which my dreams were made.

Take Bob Pappajohn, for example, of M&P Yachts in Vancouver, British Columbia. Bob and his crew have focused on reaching the Mandarin Chinese market, a vibrant and rapidly growing demographic in his region. His strategies have paid off handsomely, with the Mandarin Chinese business now accounting for 40 percent of his dealership's gross sales. When you consider the price point and high-end product mix he sells, that's not chump change.

Carlton Phillips of Prince William Marina in Virginia is in a highly affluent multicultural mecca and boating hotbed near the nation's capital. The two-time former No. 1-ranked Boating Industry Top 100 boat dealer and Hall of Famer sells successfully to Hispanics, African Americans and Asians, and has for years. He also sells to gays and lesbians.

If you know Carlton, you can't help but love his down-to-earth approach to business. He and his team throw open the doors to everybody, with nary a thought about ethnicity. It's why he operates a world-class dealership.

Big-box retailer West Marine is all about reflecting the values of the customers it serves. Through a variety of marketing initiatives and with full support from senior leadership, this company has launched multiple initiatives on the multicultural front. CEO Matthew Hyde is a believer, and he encourages the entire marine industry to follow suit.

TUI Marine, and specifically global charter business The Moorings, has a partnership program in place with Capt. Paul Haig Mixon of the Black Boaters Summit. For more than a dozen years they have partnered on charter travel vacations to the African-American market, which has now expanded to include multiple providers now offering this service.

Capt. Paul, an accomplished African-American sailor, and his wife, Marvelle, a highly successful business owner, serve on the New Markets Task Force. They believe the industry needs to get wise about the buying power of African Americans and get behind supporting targeted initiatives.

Besides the African-American market, The Moorings has expanded its outreach to Latin America, as well as the gay and lesbian markets. Its charter business provides a great opportunity for new markets to get out and test the waters, so to speak, in a controlled environment that is known for excellent customer service.

As chief marketing officer for Freedom Boat Club, I'm fortunate to work for a forward-thinking CEO in John Giglio. When I approached him a year and a half ago about launching a test-marketing Hispanic initiative for Freedom Boat Club in southwest Florida, where 17 corporate-owned clubs are based, he studied the stats and quickly agreed.

We have invested in dedicated staff and have executed multiple marketing initiatives, including translated marketing collateral and website content, development of many community partnerships, PR and some limited print and TV advertising. These efforts already are paying off with membership growth. We've shared our findings with our franchise family and plan to package a program for their respective markets.

I sincerely hope you'll recognize the opportunity that new markets afford and jump on the bandwagon. Not only is it a good thing to do, but as West Marine's CEO Matt Hyde said, it's also the right thing to do for your business. New markets not only represent a growth opportunity, but perhaps even more important, they also represent the future. When you study population trends, it's abundantly apparent that these new markets are outpacing all others. Don't forget to connect the dots: The new markets include the much coveted millennials the industry is so desperate to attract.

I'd like to extend a personal invitation to you to tune in for the RBLC New Markets Task Force training module, which is titled "Strategies to Reach New Markets." Besides the launch of the educational module at Fort Lauderdale and a second abbreviated presentation at MDCE, there are two additional programs on the docket.

Please save the date and mark your calendar for a free industry webinar hosted by Boating Industry and presented by Dammrich on Jan. 5 from 2 to 3 p.m. EST; registration link: <https://attendee.gotowebinar.com/register/4982195427699552258>.

In addition, I will be presenting the full program at the International Marina & Boatyard Conference on Jan. 26 in Fort Lauderdale.

If you work with an organization and have interest in a live presentation or webinar for your group, please let me know. If you'd like to get ahead of the curve, there are free downloadable PDF tip sheets from each of the spotlighted companies that can be accessed on the RBLC website at <http://www.rbcl.org/the-issues.html>.

In closing, I must give credit where it is due. I'm so grateful that the RBLC and its original group of stakeholders identified diversity (later named new markets) as a pillar for industry growth. I must also extend heartfelt thanks to all who worked on this ground-breaking initiative, which includes 20-plus individuals serving on the New Markets Task Force, many of whom represent ethnic diversity themselves. Members of this group researched and submitted statistics, coordinated industry best practices nominations and submissions, conducted one-on-one interviews and made recommendations for profiles.

In addition, we wouldn't have this powerful new production without the generosity of five organizations that collectively pledged \$25,000 for the video — Frank Peterson and the RBFF, which provided \$10,000 in seed money, along with the MRAA, Freedom Boat Club and the Discover Boating/NMMA at \$5,000 each. Thank you!

We produced a national RFP for the video production, and Mike Menne of Strait Production and his crew did an outstanding job helping to set the stage to tell the stories from our five spotlighted companies. He went above and beyond to deliver a very high-quality production.

It's taken a long time to get here. Yes, we have more work to do, but as we continue to move this effort forward I sincerely hope your business will be part of the story.

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This article originally appeared in the January 2017 issue.

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