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Marine Marketing Adapts to Artificial Intelligence

It's being used in a lot of ways, but many survey respondents aren't yet sure on quantifying ROI

By Wanda Kenton-Smith September 9, 2025



A broad swath of the boating industry is using AI in some capacity, with dealers leading the charge. PHOTO: GREENOPTIX - STOCK.ADOBE.COM



I recently conducted a customized survey with a goal of measuring AI activity and applications in the recreational marine space. The confidential survey included 13 questions, with some of them open-ended, allowing participants to share candid input.

More than 63 qualified responses reveal that there is broad use of AI across the marketplace. Nearly one-third of respondents, 32%, are marine retail dealers, with 19% who are advertising or marketing agencies, or marine consultants representing marine clientele. Some 11% are marketers working in marine media. An additional 10% each include boatbuilders and others. Gear, accessory and equipment marketers comprise 6% of the audience, followed by marine associations at 5%, and engine manufacturers at 3%. Boat club and marina marketers claimed 2% each.

When asked to describe their level of familiarity with AI, 46% said "very familiar," and 35% said "somewhat familiar." Sixteen percent said "entry level," while 3% said "unfamiliar." A strong 87% are using AI tools in their marketing strategy, while 13% are not.



One of the most insightful findings addressed the various AI tools being used by marine marketers. While 10% of respondents aren't using any, the vast majority, 89%, are actively engaged with ChatGPT or other AI writing programs, followed by 32% using Meta or Google ad AI automation. Some 17% are using AI-powered customer relationship management and email automation tools, along with AI video creation tools like Runway or Synthesia.

Another 14% tap AI's social listening and sentiment analysis tools, with 11% leveraging AI image generators and/or AI ad creative tools like Smartly.io. About 3% utilize HubSpot's AI features. An additional 11% listed "others" in their marketing arsenal, including transcription, note-taking and coding services; customer segmentation and targeting tools; chatbots; voiceover and text-to-voice; and Meltwater's P.R. features.

In terms of specific areas where recreational marine marketers are leveraging AI technology, content creation commanded 79% of responses, on everything from social posts to ads, blogs and boat listings. Email marketing captured 46%, followed by market research activities at 40%. Photo and video editing is another popular area of focus at 32%, followed by social media management at 29%.



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Advertising optimization (budgeting and targeting) is used by 24%, with online boat listings at 22%. Customer segmentation and personalization is conducted by 21%, followed by chatbot usage at 16%. About 3% use AI technology in the production of owners' manuals, and 8% listed additional uses such as legal documents, contracts,

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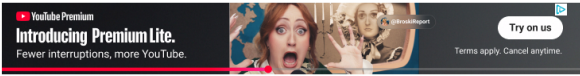


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The majority of marine marketers, at 62%, are self-educated through free, online tutorials, including YouTube segments, with another 38% each attending seminars or webinars and reading articles or reports. Some 13% attended educational programs provided through marine industry channels, with 11% taking free online courses with certifications.

An additional 35% shared their own path to AI education, including everything from trial and error to paid courses, company-supported AI hackathons, and organized groups, such as the Cobalt manufacturer marketing team.



Balancing AI use with other revenue demands is a balancing act for marine industry businesses. IMAGE: TIERNEY - STOCK.ADOBE.COM

The survey also asked: "Do you believe AI will lead to future marketing job loss at your organization?" While a resounding 62% voted "no," an equal 19% each said yes or were unsure. One respondent addressed this fear by writing: "It will make my job disappear. Not an opinion, a true fact."

More than half of respondents, at 54%, fear the loss of authenticity or brand voice. Another 29% are concerned by the lack of in-house staff and expertise, as well as data privacy and compliance issues. The cost and budgeting for tools and training was noted by 19%, followed by complexity of learning at 14%. Lack of management support was cited by 13%, with another 6% voicing uncertainty about where or how to get started.

In the "other" category, 24% questioned everything from the accuracy of information and data being generated to the need for quality and consistency, misuse of copyright and IP content, dilution of brand authority, and ethical and environmental concerns.



In terms of investing in AI during the next 12 months, 63% percent anticipated dedicated funding, with 33% reporting "very likely" and 30% "likely." However, 29% of respondents were "unsure," while 8% said "unlikely" or "very unlikely."

As for ROI, 29% said it's too early to tell. Another 25% said AI is making a major positive impact, but admitted the results were not easily quantifiable. Some 16% said AI has made a moderate impact, with another 10% reporting major positive returns that are quantifiable. Another 8% reported no impact, with the balance of respondents unable to respond due to lack of participation.

When it comes to what marine marketers most want to learn or understand about AI, there were 34 unique responses ranging from CRM applications, sales support and ongoing customer communications to inventory management, AI's impact on Google algorithms and how to enhance website content without risking penalties.

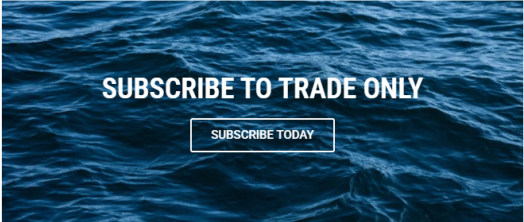
"The marine industry is far behind when it comes to branding, marketing and, especially, AI," says Merrill Homann-Charette, chief marketing officer of NauticEd. "The few organizations talking about it barely scratch the surface. They simply don't have the experience to offer more than generic insights. The reality is AI will likely do more harm than good in this space, not because it's a bad tool, but because most companies don't know how to use it."

"They're so far behind that even beginning to catch up feels overwhelming," Homann-Charette continues. "AI is like any tool. It requires skill, practice and constant adaption. And staying current is the real challenge. Basic, surface-level content is now worthless. The only content that will cut through the noise is rooted in lived experience — something you can't fake, automate or outsource."

Michaela Austin, director of marketing for Goodhue Boat Co., calls AI a game-changer for her marketing workflow: "It's allowed me to plan smarter, act faster and market more strategically across all nine locations. When it comes to quarterly campaigns, AI has helped me analyze performance data and customer behavior trends from past seasons to forecast demand, fine-tune messaging, and deploy campaigns that are better timed and more targeted."

"For boat-show planning," Austin adds, "AI tools have supported everything from lead

capture optimization and booth traffic analysis to automated follow-ups that nurture prospects more effectively. It's also taken a lot of the manual, time-consuming work off my plate, like content repurposing, email segmentation and performance reporting, freeing me up to focus on higher-level strategy and creative direction. By using AI as a collaborative partner rather than a replacement, I've been able to elevate both the quality and impact of our marketing efforts across sales, rentals, boat club and retail."



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