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An Impassioned Mayday for Boating Education

Safety isn't just the realm of government and nonprofits. Our industry needs to engage now

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During my 35-plus years as a marine industry marketer, I've embraced two causes that compelled me to action.

One was our industry's need to be more welcoming and inclusive toward women. I launched a national educational training program, Marine Marketing to Women. For three years, on my own dime, I conducted and published national research, and produced a video training program. I was hired to present what I dubbed "The W Equation" to several thousand dealers and industry stakeholders at boat shows and dealer meetings. I shared data and findings about the significant influence of women on buying decisions, along with best practices to court women, build trust and sustain their business.

Next came the seismic shifts in our national population beginning in the early 2000s, and the importance of welcoming and engaging ethnicities outside of the traditional 35- to 54-plus Caucasian male. I shared findings in multiple columns and presented seminars, and accepted the invitation to chair the Recreational Boating Leadership Council's Diversity Task Force, later renamed the New Markets Task Force. We created a 35-person multi-ethnic task force, scripted and produced an award-winning video spotlighting best practices, conducted live and webinar-based training and launched a b2b advertising and PR campaign.

Today, there's another cause that has stirred the passion within. Boating education is something we as an industry must all care more about. We need to ensure that boaters are educated and trained to operate safely.

Yes, there are admirable organizations that live and breathe the boating-safety issue. I've learned about them through my marketing work with several clients, and through my involvement with the National Boating Safety Advisory Council administered through the Coast Guard. I've been shocked to learn about countless fatalities and accidents that could have been prevented had basic boating safety protocols been in place.

As we prepare for the boating season, I'm challenging industry marketers to offer boating education courses at the retail level.

I submit that boating safety and education are not just the responsibility of military and government entities, or nonprofit associations and foundations. The recreational boating industry needs to engage on this issue.

This need has never been clearer than during the pandemic in 2020 which delivered the biggest surprise sales windfall in recent history. According to Jack Ellis, managing partner of Info-Link, approximately 350,000 people purchased their first powerboat or auxiliary-powered sailboat, while another 65,000 bought their first PWC, having never owned a boat. That's a total of 415,000 first-time buyers of new and used boats.

While this figure represents a whopping 35 percent increase in first-time boat ownership over the previous year — which is great news — my real concern is that the vast majority of these first-time buyers likely did not experience quality boating safety education. Many traditional boating safety programs taught by the U.S. Coast Guard Auxiliary, United States Power Squadrons and independent boating schools were either shuttered or restricted because of Covid-19. Many boat dealerships also curtailed in-house instruction due to staffing concerns or social distancing mandates.

As a result, we now have hundreds of thousands of boaters gearing up for spring and summer boating who are uneducated and unprepared, which represents a real threat on our waterways. Many newbies have no clue how to launch, operate or retrieve their vessels, cross wakes, navigate, anchor, or tow kids on water toys. But they are turning keys and throttling forward.

I've been perplexed by the attitudes of some industry stakeholders who unwittingly believe that acknowledging the need for boating safety messaging portrays boating as dangerous, and/or creates a potential objection to a sale. Let's just change the term "boating safety" to "boating education" and remove the stigma.

Failing to address the topic is simply inexcusable. The best and right place for boater education is at the point of sale. I'd like to suggest we form a task force including top retailers, the MRAA and other concerned industry stakeholders to collaborate on how to address and power this urgent priority forward.

If you're not persuaded to become part of this conversation for all the right reasons, then maybe this consideration will rattle your cage: Consider those folks who forked out top dollar for a boat in 2020. What will happen when they have a miserable experience because of their lack of training? If they have an accident? If their dream boat turns into anything but? Consider the potential negative economic impact to our sales pipeline if scores of new boaters dump their products after a season.

As we make final preparation for the busy boating season upon us, I'm challenging — no, I'm downright begging — our industry's retail marketers to offer and encourage participation in boating education courses. I'd like the rest of us to join the campaign by actively posting social media messages promoting boating education courses and providers. A basic google search will yield many trusted resources that can be mined, including the robust new Water Sports Foundation National Boating Safety Media Center, which offers free curated content, graphics, and imagery and video from dozens of safety and educational stakeholders. Other sources include the Discover Boating website; the Sea Tow Foundation's Sober Skipper and Life Jacket Loaner programs; the Recreational Boating and Fishing Foundation; the National Association of State Boating Law Administrators; the National Safe Boating Council with its excellent "Wear Your Life Jacket to Work Day" campaign, and others. There's no better time than now to talk about and promote boating education and resources, along with topics like boating under the influence, the need for life jackets and proper onboard safety equipment (including the new law regarding emergency cut-off switches), or any number of other safe-boating tips.

If I haven't convinced you yet, here's my final plea: Consider your own family or closest friends. Imagine that they just purchased their first boat. Wouldn't you do everything within your power to ensure they were prepared, comfortable and confident prior to their solo launch? Would you knowingly unleash your loved ones on the waterways without proper education?

Let that sink in.

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