Owning the Moment

How top marine retailers are planning to win in a challenging market

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As the recreational marine industry continues to navigate difficult conditions, top retailers are already adjusting course for the traditionally slower months ahead. I asked a group of them — including some of the industry's most experienced and highest-performing dealers — nine questions covering sales trends and marketing strategy, staffing, budgets and manufacturer support.

Two questions were open-ended for attribution; the remainder were confidential to encourage candid responses.

The group reported mixed but generally resilient results: 12.5% said sales improved over 2025; 62.5% were on pace with the previous year; and 25% reported slower activity. Respondents overwhelmingly cited the economy as the biggest obstacle to closing sales. Other recurring concerns included weak consumer confidence, buyers holding on to existing boats longer, shoppers waiting for better deals, and escalating new-boat prices.

Half the respondents had increased marketing budgets over 2025, while the remainder held spending steady. None reported budget cuts. Marketing staffing showed a similar split. More than one-third retained staffing levels; an equal percentage added team members; 25% reduced staff. Manufacturer support rated positive overall, with 75% saying "somewhat supportive" and 25% reporting "strong support."

Regarding marketing investments, some respondents have reduced funding to outside vendors, and also eliminated broad wareness campaigns and/or social media content that fails to deliver. One dealership eliminated "broad, one-size-fits-all email campaigns, generic brand messaging without a clear call to action, and marketing for marketing's sake," abandoning vanity metrics unrelated to lead generation.

Dealers did invest in higher-quality content, stronger customer relationships and faster lead response. Several cited greater use of AI for content creation, personalization and marketing automation.

"In 2025, promotions were large enough to motivate deal-seeking buyers, or they were eagerly negotiating to score deals with a sense of urgency," one top-ranked dealer said. "In 2026, with consumer confidence still soft, that urgency has largely faded; buyers have seen 'limited time only' for too long, and it's lost its hook. So the focus on and demand for helping dealers build self-guided experiences which let customers do business on their terms has strengthened."

Another said, "Marketing has become much more agile and data-driven. Success is no longer measured by impressions alone, but by qualified leads, appointments, engagement quality and boat sales. AI allows us to move faster, personalize communications at scale and spend more time on strategy while maintaining premium brand experience. At the same time, we're placing greater emphasis on understanding each customer's journey — from first inquiry through ownership — to build lifelong relationships rather than one-time transactions."

Participants also reported internal process improvements. One team was "no longer winging it and focused more on strategy." Another said, "We stopped asking, 'What's the next campaign?' and started asking, 'How do we build a marketing organization that keeps getting better regardless of how things may change?'"

Communication with existing customers has increased. Nearly two-thirds reported more-frequent engagement versus 2025, while 12.5% maintained cadence. One quarter communicated with less frequency.

My opinion: Existing owners remain every dealership's most valuable audience. Staying visible and engaged between purchases is a competitive advantage a dealer can, and should, control.

Regarding key challenges ahead, nearly every respondent referenced consumer trust. "The biggest challenge heading into the second half of 2026 isn't a lack of marketing channels; it's earning consumer attention and trust," said MarineMax vice president of marketing Abbey Heimensen. "Buyers are more informed, more selective and expect highly personalized experiences across every touchpoint. At the same time, AI is making it easier than ever to create content, which means standing out now depends on authenticity, strong data and a clear understanding of customer intent rather than simply producing more marketing.

"For organizations like MarineMax," she added, "the opportunity is to combine technology with human expertise. The brands that will succeed in Q4 are those that use first-party data to deliver relevant, personalized experiences; align marketing closely with inventory and sales priorities; and measure success by business outcomes, not just impressions or clicks. Marketing's role has evolved from creating awareness to driving measurable growth and building long-term customer relationships."

Goodhue Boats marketing director Michaela Austin agrees. "The biggest opportunity is to stop viewing marketing as a support function and start treating it as a growth driver," she said. "Consumers expect the same digital experience when shopping for a boat that they receive in other industries: easy research, transparent information, personalized communication and the ability to move through much of the buying process on their own. The dealerships that embrace data, automation and customer experience, not just advertising, will be best-positioned for long-term success.

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"Marketing isn't just about generating more leads anymore," Austin adds. "It's about removing friction at every stage of the customer journey. Dealers that make buying easier will ultimately win more customers."

Mary Strauss, director of marketing for Galati Yacht Sales, and Jeff Husby, general manager and owner of Regal & Nautique of Orlando and WaterSports Central, both addressed customer confidence.

"Moving into the second half of 2026, the biggest challenge isn't finding buyers; it's giving them the confidence to act," Strauss said. "Buyers are spending more time researching, comparing brands and seeking trusted advice before purchasing. At the same time, AI is changing how people search for information, making credibility and high-quality content more important than ever. Success will come from building trust at every stage of the customer journey."

Husby says building customer confidence and developing strategies to motivate existing customers to trade up is increasingly important. "Current economic conditions are not great, which makes it essential to fall back on our existing customer base for new-boat sales," he said. "Used boats seem to be selling pretty well if priced properly. New boats have had multiple price increases with inflation and are out of reach for many consumers. This will create a severe squeeze on dealers. … Many may not be in business in spring 2027."

Jani Gyllenberg, who spent two decades leading marketing, innovation and technology at Marine Connection before launching the consulting firm Untanglead, said that based on proven retail sales and marketing results substantiated with multiple Neptune Awards, he believes dealers that simplify the buying journey earn the greatest competitive advantage.

"Softer consumer confidence may tempt dealers toward discounting and miracle solutions, but cutting prices is not a strategy; it's a bandage," Gyllenberg said. "The real opportunity is to make the buying journey easier, clearer and more connected. Customer expectations are no longer set by the dealer down the street. They are set by Amazon, Carvana and every company that has removed friction."

Gyllenberg advocates overhauling dealership websites to support a self-directed buying experience with transparent pricing, story-driven product videos and smart digital tools that let customers schedule appointments, reserve sea trials, RSVP for events and submit purchase offers. The customer can then move forward on their terms, allowing the dealership to enter the conversation with a solid understanding of what the customer wants.

Retailers should learn from the best in the business. To gain ground, remove friction from the customer journey, respond faster, communicate more intentionally and make it easier for customers to buy on their own terms.

That's more than smart marketing. It's the competitive advantage. ■