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The genius of Kaye Pearson and the future of boat shows

Posted on May 28th, 2009 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



I've had lots of marketing issues on my mind lately. I normally go deep and tackle one topic, but this month I've chosen to go wide and broaden the reach.

First, I must express a heartfelt sense of loss over the death of Kaye Pearson, the venerable, results-oriented founder of Show Management, one of the world's premier boat show producers. Kaye was one of our industry's pre-eminent marketers, and one of my personal marketing heroes.

Before selling his company in 2006 to Efram "Skip" Zimbalist, he and his talented crew elevated the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show to the center of the map, making it the envy of producers around the globe.

I interviewed Kaye for a column several years ago about his marketing strategies and tactics because I was so impressed by his innovative approach and philosophy. He told me that each year he charged his team to develop seven to 10 new marketing concepts to test. Those that worked, he incorporated into subsequent shows; those that failed, he discarded.

Kaye wasn't afraid to take risks; he understood and championed the importance of getting "outside the box" long before the phrase was cool. As a result, his shows – Lauderdale, in particular – stayed fresh, dynamic and exciting.

Unlike some shows that display the same tired packaging and promotions year after year, Kaye keenly understood the value of delivering new experiences for the show-goer. He kept his audiences entertained, enthusiastic and coming back for more, all the while strategically building the brand and expanding his show empire.

Yes, a guru in marine marketing has passed on, but his impact continues to inspire those of us who recognized his brilliance.

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As it relates to boat shows, our Marine Marketers of America LinkedIn Web site has enjoyed tremendous growth since its launch a little more than a month ago. One topic on the discussions board in particular has generated heat. Southern Boating editor Marilyn Mower posted the following question, under a "Costs

of Boat Show Exhibits” heading:

“I’m beginning to hear some serious push-back from builders about the costs of attending this fall’s boat shows. Is this the beginning of the end of mega-shows or a hiccup? Should we be helping readers and clients develop alternatives to shows?”

This isn’t a new topic; it’s been bandied about for years on both sides of the exhibitor aisle. It’s been reignited, however, as a result of the near-

demise of marketing budgets for most boat show exhibitors these days.

While space precludes me from quoting sound commentary posted by intelligent industry marketers, I encourage you to check it out.

I added my own dollar’s worth to the discussion, and, in brief, I believe we are seeing a healthy weeding out of shows. Declining exhibitor participation has left some producers unable to underwrite a viable event. This natural attrition isn’t surprising or necessarily unwelcome, considering the present state of the industry and the proliferation of shows in recent years.

That being said, however, I’m an ardent “select show” advocate, and I believe the good shows – those that deliver for the exhibitors, the producers and the boating public – will continue to have an important position in the marketplace. The survivors will be those producers who market well, who can create an environment that will deliver bona fide boaters, and who get an excellent return for the exhibitors without holding them hostage with outrageous rates.

There were days in the not-too-distant past when show producers were kings and the exhibitors were pawns, many of them waiting none-too-patiently for a chance to improve their positions on the board. Now, however, the table has turned, and it’s a checkmate situation, with both parties holding equal footing and stake in the game.

I believe a new business model is required that takes a genuine partnership approach. Show producers must realize the dynamics of this new playing field if they are to thrive. Ultimately, this paradigm shift has the potential to be a very good thing for the industry if played right.

The second part of Marilyn’s post asked about developing alternatives to shows. If exhibitors rely solely on boat shows to generate annual business and sales, I expect they have probably already succumbed to the wiles of the marketplace. Boat shows are just one component in the marketing mix, albeit a highly valuable one.

The best boat show producers

always advise exhibitors to conduct their own marketing activities in conjunction with the show’s own marketing. Companies should be developing and executing individual promotional projects rather than putting all of their efforts into one basket.

Several alternative, low-cost marketing strategies have been addressed in my column in the last several months, but there is one I’m compelled to revisit. I recently read an excellent online post by another highly respected marine marketer, Norm Schultz, who has been a boat show producer in his own right.

Norm cited a winning marketing strategy employed by Florida-based Lazydays RV, a mega-retailer near my hometown that can’t be missed as you navigate through the congestion of Interstate 4 between Orlando and Tampa. The mirage rises from the winding black stretch of asphalt like the Taj Mahal,

dominating a 125-acre landscape blanketed by a seemingly endless sea of RVs and coaches.

While the RV industry has been battered worse than our own, this top-notch leisure product marketer has developed a strategy for outstanding service that is retaining its customers and keeping them coming back for more.

Norm cited an article from the St. Petersburg Times that outlined how the dealership is continuing to invest in fun and games for its customers, from the 170 on-site courtesy shuttles that transport visitors to its retail store to customer-friendly incentives like free breakfasts, seminars and complimentary three-year memberships to the Crown Club. The dealership CEO believes one-on-one interaction and generally giving the customer a good experience are paramount to success. "As long as we treat them right, they'll be back," is his big-picture philosophy.

I've experienced a similar mindset first-hand at my local Harley-Davidson dealership, where a wealth of activities and promotions continually lure me back to experience sales promotions for every product segment. Complementing the promotions are barbecues, free lunches, parties, weekly rides and demo days. I regularly receive e-mail blasts and direct mailers from them.

So this begs the question: What are we doing to communicate and create experiences that allow us to interact with our customers regularly?

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This article originally appeared in the June 2009 issue.