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Boat Shows Evolve Their Marketing

Winning boat-show strategies now include everything from preshow marketing to in-booth massage chairs

By Wanda Kenton-Smith November 6, 2025

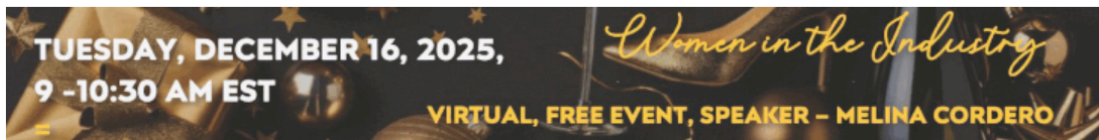


The Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show is focusing on a “consumer-centric” approach. PHOTO: FELIX MIZIOZNIKOV - STOCK.ADOBE.COM

The pandemic ushered in a tidal wave of change for boat-show producers, exhibitors and attendees. Producers had to innovate to survive. Virtual events with a plethora of components emerged, testing everyone’s appetite for a digital show environment.

While we've returned to in-person shows, smart marketers continue to leverage the best-performing virtual components for a hybrid audience, maximizing reach and marketing ROI. The virtual crowd is engaged through pre-event social teasers, livestreams and product tours from the show floor, and pre- and post-show digital content.

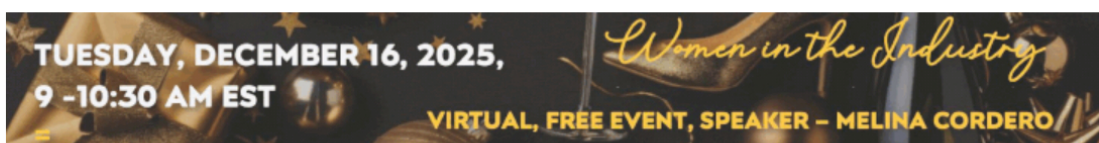
We're also seeing an effort to create more customer-centric, experiential and immersive show events. Andrew Doole, Informa's president of U.S. boat shows, says the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show will expand and elevate its VIP program, adding a Windward Lounge at the show's Superyacht Village. The Discover Boating Miami International Boat Show is relocating its yacht component to Miami Beach, while moving its sailing component from Museum Park Marina to IGY's Yacht Haven Grande at Island Gardens. The goal is to bring the show's core venues closer together and reduce travel times.



"By minimizing the need for long transfers, we're creating a more seamless, accessible and enjoyable experience for attendees, allowing them to spend less time in transit and more time experiencing everything the show has to offer," Doole says.

Ellen Bradley, chief brand officer and senior vice president of marketing and communications at the National Marine Manufacturers Association, says the NMMA show team is focusing on customer experiences tailored to each show market. New attractions include fishing tutorials, water-sports educational programs, social events with live music, and contests with prizes.

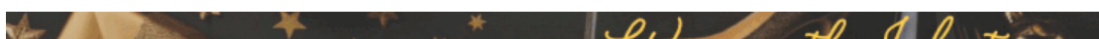
"We're continually evolving the 360-degree experience so our attendees have an opportunity to immerse themselves in all things boating — from the community to education to entertainment — all while having a world-class shopping experience, since the newest boats and marine products for sale are the real stars of the show," she says.

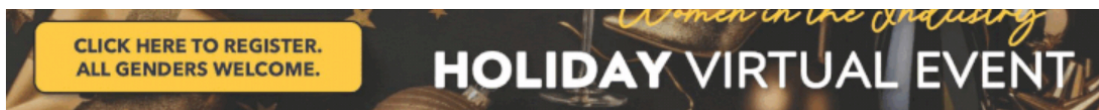


Doole also says his team is placing a stronger focus on the international market, with particular emphasis on Latin America. "This is especially important for the Discover Boat Miami International Boat Show, which consistently draws some of the strongest attendance from this region," he says. "We aim to expand the show's global impact and attract new customers who view Miami as a key gateway to the U.S. boating lifestyle."

Bradley says most NMMA show attendees are repeat boat buyers, so her team is focused on attracting future buyers, including a younger demographic. She says boat shows are the ideal venue to introduce newcomers to the boating lifestyle.

The Fort Lauderdale and Miami shows are both planning to invest in multiple media platforms, including digital, print and social advertising; search-engine and email marketing; television and radio advertising; outdoor and transit signage; public relations and influencer marketing campaigns; event listings; and marketing partnerships. Some boat shows will also include direct mail, YouTube ads and texting campaigns.





Exhibitors have marketing mandates, too. They may benefit from the producer's overall marketing efforts, but savvy exhibitors launch their own marketing initiatives to funnel buyers to their booths.

"The most successful exhibitors are engaging with their customers for weeks to months in advance, with preshow marketing that drives foot traffic to their booths and creates a reason for attendees to seek out their booth," Doole says.

Bradley concurs: "No longer can we simply show up, display products and wait for attendees. Instead, it's about connecting and creating community. The exhibitors that leverage boat shows to focus on showing boaters all they have to offer are finding great success. This means inviting potential new customers and first-time boat buyers into their community and making them feel important.



"Some of the most important marketing and sales interactions happen before and after the show," Bradley adds. "The after-show opportunity goes back to the community-building mindset. Creating experiences that enable your potential new customers to see how you help them throughout their boat-owning journey builds trust and loyalty, which pays off in the form of lifetime customers."



Miami organizers this year are hosting all show components on the east side of Biscayne Bay for easier access. GARY REICH PHOTO

She also suggests a great way for exhibitors to get free publicity: “Engage with the show producers to leverage marketing plans and to ensure you’re featured. Producers are always looking for great stories to tell as part of their marketing, especially for social and P.R. Connecting with them weeks ahead of the show can provide opportunities to get creative and find no-cost ways to elevate your marketing exposure.”

Five of the six veteran exhibitors I spoke with rated boat shows as “very important” or “important” in their overall marketing mix. While 67% plan to repeat investment in the same shows as 2026, a third will add new shows to their rosters.

Frank Ferraro, recently retired chief marketing officer of Nautical Ventures Group, says boat shows generate 35% to 40% of his dealership’s annual sales revenue.

Scout Boats president Dave Wallace says shows are important, but he’s concerned that costs are getting harder to justify, reinforcing the need for a strategic marketing plan that maximizes ROI.

Marine Connection managing director Danny Goldenberg, who oversees nine Florida retail operations, says he’s strategically securing more OEM support, while Ferraro’s team is expanding its Aqua Zone, an interactive in-water feature co-branded with Informa Markets that attracts a large audience and generates strong P.R. coverage. The dealership will provide free water taxis, utilizing its Axopar and Vision Marine electric boat brands to gain product visibility.

Don Passell, owner of Yamaha Marine Center of Jacksonville in Florida, plans to promote top boat brands in his booth and carve out space to spotlight his parts and service departments. Managers will be on-site to engage with customers and educate them about the dealership’s offerings.



Across the board, exhibitors agree customer engagement is a must. Scout plans to host a VIP customer party at FLIBS and will debut new boats at other shows throughout the year. Sportsman Boats vice president of sales and marketing Victor Gonzalez is hosting an invitation-only product reveal of a new flagship at Fort Lauderdale, incorporating a long-standing strategy of offering exclusive show incentives. Sportsman has also reconfigured its booth with fewer units to create a more open, customer-friendly sales environment.

Indmar director of sales and marketing, Natalie Carrera, champions product launches and press conferences at boat shows to create buzz at the booth. Indmar is embracing the jet market, while Marine Connection is targeting new-to-Florida residents. Ferraro reports an uptick in African-American, Asian, Hispanic and Eastern European clientele, along with steady sales growth among women. Scout continues to build momentum in the tender market.

As a best tactic to close sales at the show, Marine Connection and Nautical Ventures both say money talks. "Offering real incentives backed by OEMs" is Goldenberg's hammer, while Ferraro cites "value-added, very attractive boat-show specials, only honored during the show."

Ferraro says his dealership's VIP program also pays big dividends. Prior to the show, the sales staff contacts top-tier clients to offer free show tickets, free parking at the dealership and free limo rides, coupled with priority walkthroughs and sea trials, all of which deliver documented sales at higher closing ratios.

Gonzalez also gives the nod to sea trials: "Having a demo dock with units to sea trial during the show has proven highly successful in transforming customers who were somewhat ready to buy into ready buyers."

In terms of boat-show advertising spend, all these exhibitors expect to invest in social media ads. Other top platforms include digital and print advertising, email marketing and direct mail, public relations and influencer campaigns, YouTube ads, and marketing partnerships.

Based on broader trade-show marketing trends, I also expect to see some immersive augmented- and virtual-reality experiences at product demos this year, along with branded photo walls for hashtag campaigns. Also, look for convenience areas at some booths, including beverage and snack bars, phone-charging stations and comfort zones with seating (including massage chairs). Scannable smart badges can capture customer information, along with prominent QR codes that link to exhibitor landing pages, product collateral, show promotions and incentives, and contest entry forms.



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