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## Crafting a Marketing Plan

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*Planning marketing activities in advance can help dealers save money while producing results*

Marketing is loosely defined as promoting and selling a product or service.

"The way I look at marketing is basically it's salesmanship in print, or salesmanship delivered in media," said Matt Sellhorst, head profits coach at Boat Dealer Profits.

Marketing is the avenue in which dealerships draw customers to their doors, and it has become increasingly important, some argue, as in-store traffic has lightened post-recession.



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### Starting a plan

One of the keys to successful marketing is to have a written plan. Drafting one annually helps a dealership stay on top of its marketing efforts throughout the year. With a plan, fewer campaigns are likely to fall through the cracks as the boating season begins.

"I think it's very, very important to plan it out because we don't have a lot of budget dollars, and as a dealer you're always trying to get as much for the money as you can, the most bang for your buck," said Paula Fulton, owner of BMC Boats in Longwood, Fla.

BMC's marketing plan is centered heavily around events. The dealership participates in four boat shows, hosts demo events every couple months and puts together other smaller sales and events at its location. Other promotions include coupons, "Spin to Win" deals and monthly e-newsletters. Fulton goes over the marketing plan each year with her husband and dealership co-owner Bill Fulton.

Marine Connection, with locations in West Palm Beach and Vero Beach, Fla., also analyzes its marketing annually.

"We review the year, look at where money is going in and measure it against what works," marketing director Jani Gyllenberg said.

While Marine Connection's biggest effort is put into the five boat shows it exhibits at each year, the dealership's marketing also includes banner ads on BoatTrader.com, TV and radio advertising, its self-developed website, vehicle wraps and social media. Because of this wide reach, Marine Connection has a detailed marketing plan that guides it throughout the year.

"I know there are guys who just wing it as they go, but for us, it's always like if you don't plan, it's like you're taking a vacation without an end point — you might go nowhere, or you might go a million places and spend too much money," he explained.

Mapping out a plan in advance can help a dealership meet its goals more efficiently.

"Taking the time to plan your route for success is critical if you want to maximize your return on marketing investment," said Wanda Kenton Smith, president of Kenton Smith Marketing. "In my experience, too many dealers work in a reactive, shoot-from-the-hip mode in their marketing activity, citing a 'let's try this or that' mentality with little forethought, follow-through or analysis. This approach wastes time and money, and the effort is seldom measurable or successful. The well thought-out marketing plan is the intelligent dealers' formula for success."

Kenton Smith recommends dealerships start their marketing plans with an annual brainstorming meeting of key management staff.

"I always start by asking the key management team what they wish they could achieve in the coming year from a marketing perspective. I also ask what their biggest challenges are in marketing that they wish they could overcome," she said.

Those ideas are then prioritized and developed into marketing goals for the coming year. Each department should be involved, so that each has its own goals and tactics. Once the plan is finalized, Kenton Smith encourages the management team to meet with the dealership's salespeople to assure everyone is on the same page.

Sellhorst advises dealerships to include their sales staff when developing marketing messages because the salespeople have already created successful pitches.

"The people that know how to sell boats are the ones that should be helping generate the messages. They know what is going to work in their market for their brands, for their dealer identity," he said.

Sellhorst breaks marketing into two categories — lead generation and conversion. Dealers who aren't seeing enough traffic in their showrooms need to focus more on



Events, such as demo days, are among BMC Boats' more popular marketing efforts.

lead generation, while those who have enough traffic but could use more sales should focus on converting that traffic into sales.

Lead generation marketing should be focused on a variety of sources, including a dealership's website, complete with photos and videos of all boats; Google Adwords; and any and all classified sites, including but not limited to BoatTrader and boats.com.

"That way if you're searching for boats in my area, you can't help but find me; you can't help but see my message," Sellhorst said.

Conversion marketing can be targeted more at direct mail, phone call and email efforts, allowing salespeople to make a larger, more personalized impact with customers who have already shown interest in buying.

"It's much less expensive because you're focused on a small number of people that are qualified rather than going out to the mass market," Sellhorst said.

He recommends a marketing calendar be created at the beginning of the year, pointing out when each campaign should be deployed.

"You have that calendar in front of you that's a constant reminder of 'Hey, let's not forget about marketing,'" he said.

Though a marketing plan directs a dealership's annual efforts and spend, room can be built in for flexibility. Marine Connection leaves space in its budget for minor adjustments throughout the year, and BMC Boats will add promotions as appropriate. Kenton Smith says a flexible marketing plan allows a dealership to make changes as necessary.

"A marketing plan must be somewhat fluid. We all know from recent experience that unanticipated changes may happen in our world ... either the world at large or in the world in which we live and market. We must be able to quickly reassess and refocus our goals and priorities, should our world or local conditions dictate and demand a shift in priorities," she said.

If new promotions are added during the year, management should ask itself if the new campaign fits the dealership's priorities as defined in the marketing plan. If so, the plan should be redrafted, and approval of the new plan should come from all involved, Kenton Smith said.

## Return on investment

No marketing plan is complete without a way to measure each campaign and strategy deployed.

"The most important thing for me is I want to make sure it's measurable because if something's not measurable, I can't tell if it's working or not," Fulton said.

BMC Boats uses a variety of methods to measure ROI. Through direct mail, coupons offer insight into what drew a customer into the dealership. On social media, BMC will sometimes ask that customers mention a post to "Spin to Win." For demos, the dealership requires RSVPs and sets appointments for customers, and online, BMC uses



trackable Google Adwords and unique URLs. (YamahaBoatsOrlando.com, for example, has been used in the past.)

“You have to have some kind of call to action and a measurable way to find out if they got your message or not,” Fulton said.

Along with Google Adwords, Marine Connection uses unique trackable phone numbers and specific landing pages (such as MarineConnection.com/Hurricane) to track how customers come into contact with the dealership. Though those efforts measure traffic, they don’t track how many website visitors bought a boat, which can be a challenge.

“We can track where these customers are coming to our website and how they’re getting there, [but] it’s difficult to track if that actual customer becomes a buyer,” Gyllenberg said.

In order to better gauge how customers learned of the dealership, Marine Connection sends a survey — along with a gift set — to each boat buyer that asks about every place that customer heard about the dealership, not just the most recent.

Sellhorst recommends dealers use unique trackable phone numbers to determine which campaigns are working, though he also suggests finding a service that records those calls. Through recordings, a dealership can determine whether those who called each unique number were qualified or not and adjust its marketing accordingly.

Another way to measure ROI is to ask customers who come to a dealership’s website to request a free download, such as a store-branded boat buyer’s guide. To create one, Sellhorst recommends dealers think about what advice they’d give to a friend who was buying a boat in a different market and then write that down. That guide can then be branded with the dealership’s logo and information. Discover Boating also offers free resources that can be dealership branded, such as knot-tying guides and winterizing checklists.

“You’re giving them advice, and you’re setting yourself up; instead of being a salesperson, you’re being an advisor,” Sellhorst said.

As the website visitor must provide specific information, as determined by the dealer, to receive the free guides, the dealer gathers a lead from a customer who has already shown interest in the sport.

## Going it alone or seeking help

Marine Connection and BMC Boats are great examples of dealerships that are able to run their own marketing in house, but not every dealership finds it possible to take charge of all of its marketing efforts.

Knowing when to seek expert help can be just as important as understanding when to promote an upcoming sale or what content to put in an email blast.

“If a dealership doesn’t have anyone on the staff who really has a clue about marketing, get professional help,” Kenton Smith advised. “Avoid assigning this important task to a junior-level staff member or someone who may have interest but no experience, as this will set you up for failure. Honestly, marketing is too important to your dealership to put it in inexperienced hands.”



Marine Connection markets itself at five boat shows each year.

Experts can be hired to help create and implement an entire marketing plan, or they can be brought on when a dealership simply wants to run a few ideas by a marketer.

“A dealership working on its first marketing plan solo might produce a marketing plan document and then pay an outsider/expert to review it and provide constructive

feedback. This will allow a novice marketing team to go through the process and then validate its effort, while enjoying critical appraisal that might save time, money, or help avoid mistakes," Kenton Smith said.

She recommends dealers ask non-competing dealerships or local businesses for referrals. College and university professors may also know some area marketing professionals, or their students may be willing to take on the dealership's marketing efforts as a class project.

Sellhorst says dealerships should turn to an expert whose main commodity is their knowledge and experience, rather than a service provider that's trying to sell a product.

"I think the big thing is to work with an expert to help generate your strategy. When you look at turning to an expert, it's when you're spending a lot of money, and you have no idea what your results are, or you're not getting certain results," he said.

Fulton knows from her years at BMC Boats that marketing can be a challenging, time-consuming task that takes passion. Because of that, she says paying for marketing services would be appropriate for dealerships without marketing-minded people on staff.

"It's got to be the right person. It can't be just somebody who throws something together. Truly you have to be dedicated to it," she said.

Marine Connection has focused so much on marketing that it has a team of three marketing employees in addition to other store employees who help create and implement the plan. The dealership prefers employing its own marketing staff rather than relying on an outside vendor.

"We've always had an in-house team because we were able to deliver a message based on our company's values and strengths," Gyllenberg said.

No matter how a dealership gets the job done, what's important is that each business thinks about how it's reaching potential customers and if it is seeing a return on that investment.

"If you need customers, spend some money and get them in the door," Sellhorst said, "but I say spend it smart."

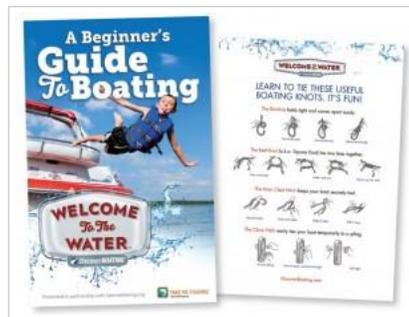
## Discover Boating offers free marketing resources

When creating a marketing plan, one of the more challenging elements can be finding content to deliver to prospective customers, so readily available — and free — resources can boost any dealer's efforts.

Because Discover Boating's goals include getting more people to enjoy boating and increasing participation, therefore increasing boat sales, the organization provides a variety of resources for boat dealers to get a jump on their marketing efforts.

"We've allowed dealers to take some of our content and put it on their site, the stuff that's applicable to them," said Carl Blackwell, president of Discover Boating and Grow Boating.

For their websites, dealers can use a Boat Loan Calculator, Cost Comparison Tool (comparing the cost of boating to other hobbies), Spousal Conversion Kit and Take Me Fishing Hotspot Map. Videos, including the popular "Good Run — A Boating Story" are also available. To add those, dealers simply copy code and embed it into their website (which a website programmer should be able to do with ease).

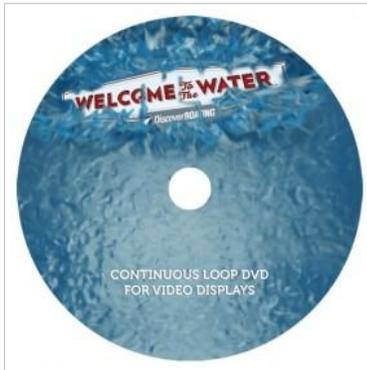


Physical tools include Welcome to the Water door window clings, bumper stickers, windshield stickers and a continuous loop DVD for in-store video displays. Discover Boating can also supply guides on winterizing and other boating skills for dealers to distribute.

For dealers who are looking to earn local airtime or editorial space, Discover Boating's website offers PR University, which provides tips for media interviews and more.

"That just tells dealers some of the things that they need to think about when they're getting interviewed. We keep the industry statistics up to date on that, so when people get asked a question, they have the ability to tell them the size of the industry," Blackwell said.

The organization also recommends dealers share any of its social media content. Discover Boating has amassed more than 675,000 Facebook likes, making it the third most popular Facebook page in the travel and leisure category. Posts include photos, videos, cartoons, guides and more that promote the boating lifestyle.



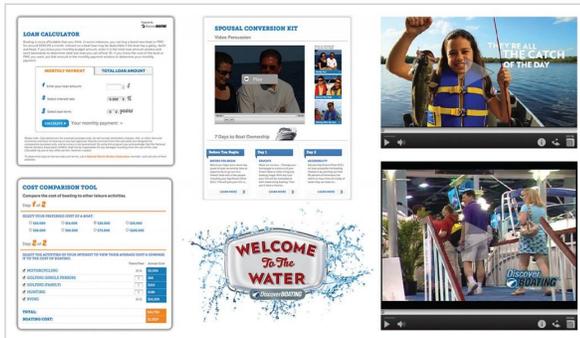
"We have a very ambitious social media campaign, and there we have the ability to use boaters and those who are interested in boating to be our evangelists," Blackwell said.

He recommends dealers use Discover Boating's Facebook page not only for sharable content, but also to tap into the already-gathered boating audience. If dealers are buying Facebook keywords as part of their marketing campaign, he suggests they consider adding "Discover Boating" to that list in order to reach local Discover Boating fans.

In addition to the resources Discover Boating provides, it also leads customers to dealerships by driving consumers from DiscoverBoating.com to manufacturer sites, which in turn bring those visitors to their dealers.

"We get them on our website, and so now we've gotten them aware, and what we strive to do on our website is to get them off our website and get them onto the manufacturers' [websites]," Blackwell explained.

In 2013, 2.6 million people visited Discover Boating's websites. The organization draws audiences there through targeted marketing efforts of its own, promoting the brand through online video ads and at movie theaters, along with other advertising media.



"We're able to go out there and target, pinpoint target, the type of consumers we want to reach," Blackwell said.

In 2014, Discover Boating plans to shift its marketing to deliver more in-depth messages. For example, it plans to pay for more sponsored stories rather than traditional banner ads. And an effort is being made to collect boaters' personal stories via video to share with its audience.

"We'll be able to tell our story through the mouths of consumers that have lived and experienced it, so that's going to be, in my opinion, a heck of a lot more impact than me doing it or somebody that's paid doing it," Blackwell said.

All of Discover Boating's efforts are made with a focus on increasing awareness and participation in the sport for the betterment of the entire industry.

"People don't wake up one morning and buy a boat," Blackwell said of the need for an organization like Discover Boating. "They have to see the value, or they have to see the fun or the rewards of boating."

### ONE COMMENT



**Matt Sellhorst**  
March 5, 2014 at 11:12 am

Liz great article and thank you for including me and Boat Dealer Profits in the story. Great advice from all the guest experts.

Reply

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