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[TradeOnlyToday](#) > [Columns & Blogs](#) > [Marketing Insight](#) > The consumer has changed and you'd better change, too

The consumer has changed and you'd better change, too

Posted on November 1st, 2010 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



In my 30-plus-year career in marine publishing, sales and marketing, I've worked with consumers in situations ranging from boat shows and special events to focus groups, video testimonials and customer service.

I've invested time and money to hone my skills in these areas. I've probably attended 750 or more professional development programs and read hundreds of books, articles and online white papers. I'm a zealot when it comes to taking the pulse of the market and staying on top of trends. It's my business, after all, and my clients expect me to help them take advantage of turning tides. If I'm going to stay relevant, I must aggressively engage on all levels.

With this in mind, I was particularly impressed by what I learned while producing a recent edition of Waypoints, the sailing industry newsletter I've edited for the last 12 years. Sail America executive director Jonathan Banks and I brainstorm themed issues at the beginning of each year and then match writers to columns and feature stories. Our October issue was titled "The Changing Face of Consumerism," and all three of the customized articles brought home truly significant lessons for today's marketplace that I feel compelled to share.

NMMA vice president and chief marketing officer Carl Blackwell wrote our From the Helm guest column and introduced a totally new buzzword to my vocabulary: "transumerism." He shared a definition from trendwatching.com:

"Transumers are consumers driven by experiences, by entertainment, by discovery, by fighting boredom, who increasingly live a transient lifestyle, freeing themselves from the hassles of permanent ownership and possessions. The fixed is replaced by an obsession with the here and now, an ever-shorter satisfaction span and a lust to collect as many experiences and stories as possible. Transumers are driven more by experiences rather than the desire to own."

Several years ago, when I was part of the marketing launch team of SailTime – the sailing industry fractional sale ownership organization – I got my first real glimpse of this yet-unnamed trend. I saw firsthand how many veteran sailors and newcomers alike wanted the no-hassle approach to boating at an affordable price. I believe transumerism represents a very real and important mindset shift that has been developing during the last decade.

Blackwell was quick to clarify that this definition doesn't conclude that transumers aren't candidates for boating purchases. "It means that ownership alone is not enough," he wrote. "Consumers today want to own AND experience," he wrote.

He pointed to events that bring owners and non-owners together for memorable experiences – events such as dealer rendezvous, Sea Ray's Aquapalooza and Summer Sailstice.

I agree wholeheartedly. As an industry, it's critical that we recognize the power of the boating experience rather than simply try to sell the boat. People don't buy fiberglass; they buy the places and the people and the things they can do and the feelings they experience. We should seek sales and marketing platforms that will allow people to enjoy firsthand what boating uniquely offers.

The sale is so much easier when people have experienced the wind in their hair, the sun on their faces, the smiles of their kids, the dog splashing in the water, the picnic, the romance, the sport, the throttle, the first landed fish, an afternoon with friends, dinner on the deck, the quiet lap of water on the side of the boat. That is what people buy ... they buy the dream and what boating allows them to experience.

Instead of just doing special events and shows in impersonal convention centers, we should mix it up – take the party to the water and get people at the helm. I can tell you I would never have bought a boat or a motorcycle had I not experienced firsthand the thrill and excitement of both. Through Discover Boating, our industry outreach program, we should seriously consider staging some major events in key metro markets where we can put on a first-class show and let people experience the many faces of boating.

I'm glad to hear from Blackwell that the NMMA is planning to leverage the power of current boat owners to invite non-owners to participate. I'm not sure exactly what this proposed marketing program will entail, but anything we can do to stimulate experiences will positively impact our industry's bottom line.

Waypoints' "Management Corner" column was written by John Spence, an author, speaker and management consultant with a very impressive business biography. He's made presentations to 300-plus organizations and has lectured at more than 90 colleges.

Spence's Waypoints topic was, "The Evolution of Customer Expectations." He focused on the need for companies to understand how today's consumers have changed in terms of what they expect – and demand – from the sales process. He believes purchases today are driven by three primary factors: quality, knowledge and service.

To meet the changing customer requirements in terms of quality, Spence says a company must now "build and deliver the highest quality products you have ever put into the market. Period." This is especially true, he says, when dealing with discretionary income and higher-end products such as boats.

As for knowledge, he says it is critical in making the sale, since today's consumers are better educated than any in history. His advice: "Be more knowledgeable than the best-prepared customer that walks through your door." Finally, he says, service reigns supreme. "It is my firm belief that whatever company does the best job of listening to the needs, wants and concerns of the customer ... and then builds their entire business around meeting those needs better than any other competitor ... this company will dominate the marketplace."

Marine businesses should seriously contemplate these three highly focused recommendations and ensure that quality, knowledge and service top the priority list. Management should clearly communicate these priorities and take responsibility for providing sufficient training so every employee understands the expectations.

My cover story, "Sales Strategies for Today's Sailing Consumer," included a lengthy Q&A with 20-year marine retail superstar Barrett Canfield of South Coast Yachts in San Diego. Barrett discusses how customer sales and buying attitudes have drastically shifted during the economic downturn of the last two years, creating new challenges – and opportunities – for retailers.

He has created four distinctive sales categories for these emerging buyers: "bottom feeder," the "conservative mature sailor," the "unaffected," and the "foreign currency sailor." In the article, he addresses the characteristics of each buyer profile with accompanying sales strategies. The don't-miss point: Buyers' attitudes have changed ... and so have the strategies required to persuade them to part with their coveted discretionary dollars.

He maintains that in 2008 and 2009, young families with kids in strollers literally disappeared from the showroom – a major concern, obviously, because this demographic represents our business future. The good news, however, is that he is now seeing renewed interest from this target market, as well as an uptick in financing inquiries.

"Getting younger people out on the water and hooked on boating should be a major part of our marketing campaigns," he advises. In addition, he suggests we focus on ways to get new boaters out on the water, ranging from boat charters and schools to dealer events and more, and then to stay connected with them through a variety of efforts, including Facebook, special events, free lessons, database management initiatives and more.

In conclusion, staying on top of trends is critical to our future. Doing business the way we've always done it and expecting different results is the definition of insanity. Our consumers have changed; we either change with them or miss the boat.

To comment on this article, or to receive a link for the entire issue of Waypoints cited in this column, e-mail Kenton Smith at wanda@kenton-smithmarketing.com. Kenton Smith is president of Kenton Smith Marketing (www.kentonsmithmarketing.com), and president of Marine Marketers of America (www.marinemarketersofamerica.org).

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