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Keeping Customers Engaged

Seven retention strategies in a time of long-lapse deliveries

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In the past year, we hustled like crazy to get those hundreds of thousands of new and used boats sold, serviced and delivered to meet historic consumer demand. As the 2021 buying season unfolded, dealers scrambled to arrange as much new product delivery as possible, while OEMs continued to battle supply-chain bottlenecks, unprecedented production delays and retail inventory shortages.

To keep afloat in the fall and winter, dealers aggressively prepared preowned inventory for resale purposes. Following unprecedented industry encouragement, the enlightened among us pivoted and prevailed, taking a cue from the home-building industry. Many adopted new strategies to present and presell the invisible.

And now, here we are with scores of confirmed new-boat buyers who are standing in the long and winding production queue, patiently awaiting their dream machines.

The new million-dollar questions emerge: How do we keep these customers tethered and excited, especially if the build-to-delivery period is lengthy or becomes further extended? How can we ensure that the dream we sold doesn't turn into a nightmare?

Here are seven marketing tips to address long-lapse customer retention opportunities.

Walk in Their Boat Shoes

This is a thought exercise to get you into the right frame of mind about the customer's situation. Start this exercise by reversing roles. Imagine that you've recently purchased a big-ticket item. You stepped up and made the investment. You are thrilled as you await delivery. A long wait ensues, and days slip into months. Is your enthusiasm waning? Have you heard anything from your sales professional? Has buyer's remorse begun to creep in?

If you truly care about delivering an excellent customer experience, particularly among those whose wait is far beyond the norm, you must step into their shoes to fully appreciate their situation and perspective.

Keep Connected

For manufacturers and retailers alike, communication often wanes after the boat is sold. In today's tenuous sales environment, communication must escalate to top priority. Failure to communicate is unacceptable.

The marketing team should develop a strategic communication plan to connect regularly with customers, especially those with boats on order or in production.

Besides populating social-media channels with posts, consider publishing a simple monthly newsletter that can be distributed to your targeted customer database. You can blast this newsletter to your entire list, or you can create custom groups with messaging directed to those with boats on order, or targeted by specific brands.

Find exciting things to share. Consider ways to engage and to keep customers connected and enthusiastic about their investment, the dealership, and the brand and manufacturer of choice. Provide boating tips, blogs and videos; share interesting boating news; host contests. Get creative.

The primary sales liaison from the dealership should remain actively engaged and closely connected to the long-lapse customer. Provide regular production updates and news regarding boat delivery timelines. Pick up the telephone and speak with your customer; refrain from always choosing less personal e-mail or text messages.

A word of caution: If your manufacturer communicates a production problem that negatively affects delivery, don't delay the inevitable. Be honest and forthright, proactively keeping your customer in the loop. While no one enjoys delivering bad news, develop a thick skin, be sincere and compassionate, and always be transparent. Even though your customer may not like the news, she will respect your timely follow-up and candor.

Sponsor a Factory Trip

If your customer's new boat involves a lengthy wait, arrange a site visit. Investing time on-site with the customer and allowing him to experience the factory and see boats in process — even if it's not his boat — can renew and recharge enthusiasm.

Plan with the manufacturer to have a welcome sign in the lobby with the customer's name, along with the selling dealership. The opportunity to meet, greet and shake hands with manufacturer representatives can strengthen the relationship and keep customers primed over the long haul.

If you can't manage a live meeting, consider producing a personalized video clip or video conferencing session with the manufacturer's rep.

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Host Events

If you can't get to the factory, bring the factory rep to the dealership, or to a boat show. Have a close-knit gathering with those affected by production delays. Let the rep share updates and answer customer questions.

I'm a big fan of on-site events. They don't have to involve heavy planning or major expenses. Serve some appetizers, have representatives from your company there, invite factory reps and consider sponsoring an appropriate clinic with an expert based on what you sell — all easy ideas with potential positive outcomes.

Another easy idea: Give a little gift at your gathering. Write a personal card thanking your customer for her business and patience, and package it to include a branded cap, shirt or other fun keepsakes to show some love.

The Dealer-Manufacturer Connection

I've worked both sides of the manufacturer and dealership front. While I fully appreciate the terrible difficulty manufacturers are facing right now, I submit that dealerships shouldn't be alone on the front lines in this customer-lapse labyrinth.

Smart manufacturers that recognize the challenge their loyal retailers are facing should seek ways to assist. Think about extra services you can provide to help dealers meet the emotional needs of their customers.

Consider delivering a steady supply of well-produced marketing materials, including product updates and flyers, social media graphics, product videos and teasers, articles or other coverage from boating publications, inexpensive merchandise and the like.

By working together, dealers and manufacturers will not only strengthen their own relationship during these tough times, but also will put their collective best foot forward to enhance the customer experience.

Go for a Boat Ride

Nothing speaks to a boater like boating itself. Want to be a real hero? Figure out how to get your customer on the water until her new boat arrives.

Consider hosting and underwriting a monthly charter in-season for customers on long wait lists. If you own or operate a boat club, provide temporary access with minimal cost to the customer. If you don't have a club, arrange a short-term program with a local operator for customers in the delivery queue.

Perhaps you could offer a monthly boat rental or discount coupon in-season? If you have a company boat, rotate out members of the sales team to host customers for an occasional spin, sunset cruise, dinner on the waterfront or fishing expedition.

Plan a group raft-up and ask loyal clients to host the long-lapse customers on their boats, especially on a boat of the same brand. Host a cookout, pick up the tab for fuel and create some customer matchups.

Celebrate and Promote

Every time you deliver a new boat to a customer, celebrate. Ring the bell like they do in Harley-Davidson dealerships. Have a little party. Shoot a video clip or take photos of the customer in front of the boat or at the helm. Post on social media and other marketing channels.

As customers see regular deliveries in process, it reminds them that boats are being delivered and that, one day, it will be their turn in the spotlight.

All seven of these customer-retention strategies share vital engagement and communication activities at their core. If you want to build long-term relationships and reap positive testimonials from customers who've had crazy wait times, you must focus your efforts on them throughout the extended boat-buying and delivery process.

Treat the new customer with the same level of respect, professionalism and courtesy you would desire and expect if the roles were reversed.

Let's get creative and get after it.

