

Alisdair Martin

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When the industry was forced to pivot in the early days of Covid-19, a very bright and industrious young professional worked tirelessly behind the scenes to lead and create innovative ways to promote and engage the boating public.



By Wanda Kenton Smith

At the time, Alisdair “Ali” Martin was president and CEO of TRMG, a print and digital media agency focused on international sporting events and consumer shows. While his impressive client roster included the likes of Formula 1, St. Andrews Golf and World Superbikes, his organization also supported the boating industry including the NMMA, Informa, METSTRADE and IBEX, among dozens of show producers.

Ali’s marketing savvy and prowess was put to the test under a glaring spotlight as he and his crew of six worked alongside show management to create the inaugural virtual Palm Beach International Boat Show. While the virtual show itself was a groundbreaking initiative, it was even that much more daunting considering the grueling six-week, 16-hour-day turnaround from concept to show launch.

The end result? A full-powered virtual show was promoted by celebrity Lenny Kravitz featuring 450 exhibitors with an online portal that allowed boaters to shop by product and/or service sectors. The show sported 100 brand microsites with searchable specs, videos and customization tools.

In terms of KPIs (key performance indicators), the show site generated 2.7k consumer registrations, 7.9m impressions and 60k sessions. Consumer feedback overall was positive, while industry results were mixed. Some exhibitors expected more, while others claimed the virtual show kept their business afloat.

Ali’s high energy, cutting-edge marketing

chops and tech smarts no doubt contributed to his hiring two years ago by the NMMA. He has since moved from his original role of VP sales and strategy to VP of business development, with responsibility for brand partnerships across the diverse portfolio of NMMA events and assets.

Boating Industry (BI): First, a little background. How did a chap from Cambridge, England, end up working in the boating industry and moving across the pond to work in the U.S.?

Alisdair Martin (AM): In 2000, I started working with the British Marine Federation to produce consumer-facing media for their Southampton and London International Boat Shows. I knew straight away that this was the sector I wanted to work in long-term. It ticked all the boxes for me: sporty, adventurous and fun. I’ve been shaping my career around the industry ever since.

My wife and I moved to the states in 2010. I had accepted an opportunity working alongside an international events company to launch the next in a series of prestigious, global foodie events in the U.S. Unfortunately, the event cancelled the week before we were due to travel, after we had sold our house and all our worldly possessions. Our first few months here were more of an adventure than we had expected! Luckily, I had a lot of experience working with international events and was able to leverage connections to start a small digital media business, TRMG, which I operated for 11 years.

BI: What’s your boating background?

AM: I didn’t grow up boating at all. My first real experience came through a freelance marketing project with Sunsail. They invited my wife and I to go on an all-expense paid Sunsail vacation, to go through their training program and then to write articles for them. I gracefully accepted – ha! It was a terrific experience.

Today, my boat of choice is a canoe. Each year I take a week-long solo canoe trip into wilderness areas to explore and adventure.



ALISDAIR MARTIN

BI: What do you enjoy most about the boating industry?

AM: I’ve been incredibly lucky to work at the top level of several different recreational industries. What I particularly enjoy about this industry is that the folks at the professional pinnacle of marine businesses are typically passionate boaters who maintain a holistic interest in the betterment of boating. Given how lucrative the industry is, it’s far less rapacious than most. We’ve managed somehow to maintain a true and proud sense of ‘us’ -- the boating community -- throughout the business side of boating. It’s quite rare, and it’s something we should all cherish.

BI: What do you believe is the biggest opportunity facing the industry today?

AM: The next generation of boaters are more likely than previous generations to have multiple passions. They want to be boating and skiing and golfing and traveling. The all-or-nothing financial and time commitment of traditional boat ownership might represent a barrier to their entry in to boating.

// PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP

As an industry, we need to fill the big gap between 'I've never been on a boat before' to 'boat ownership' with easy access to experiences that share the freedom and adventure of being on the water to the next generation of boaters.

BI: What's been your biggest professional challenge so far?

AM: In my (former) business, I worked mostly with international sport and high-end consumer product shows. In most sectors, the brands have a regular rotation of executive staff and frequently, shifting business models. The boating industry is the exception to the rule.

Most brands in our industry, by contrast, have more steady business operations that tend to retain senior staff for much longer. The same business formula that worked ten years ago still works just fine, so there isn't much motivation to evolve.

The underlying objective of my roles in marine has always been to bring cutting-edge marketing strategy into an industry that is deeply resistant to change. So, when the pandemic hit and forced so many businesses to tear up their old formula, I found myself well-positioned to serve the industry by bringing proven, modern alternatives to marine brands.

The biggest challenge I've faced is navigating the friction that those strategic shifts create in people. I'm often asking people to make uncomfortable decisions in a business practice where they don't have experience. Does the sales leader who developed the lead-generation protocol have the aptitude to embrace a new, mobile-first business practice? Is the marketing leader who's had the same professional boundaries for 20 years, suddenly going to defer to the superior expertise of a 24-year-old social-media guru?

Pushing the needle creates a lot of vulnerability; very often the changes that are required to reposition a brand for success requires that people break the customs and practices that they built their career upon. It's hard.



The only way I know how to address this challenge is the same old, stereotypical answer that's given in every training session ever: trust. It's more important post-pandemic than it ever was before. Be honest (even when it's hard), avoid spin (even when it benefits you), take responsibility for your mistakes, be consistent, be accountable. If you can develop and maintain trust with people, it makes everything easier.

BI: Besides vulnerability, an openness to change and the need to build trust as you've described, are there any other key leadership traits you believe are most critical today?

AM: The next five to ten years in the industry are going to be an incredibly transitional time. There is no doubt that the pandemic accelerated customer demand for more modern buying practices around boats and boating products.

If the most successful companies are going to be adaptable, agile operations, then the most critical leadership traits will be the ability to inspire change right throughout every layer of a team and bring everyone along on the journey.

BI: Speaking of journeys ... your thoughts about the 'customer journey' and its importance to our industry?

AM: The customer journey is the most important guiding principal to successful strategy. It sounds so simple and obvious but it's incredibly hard to stay true to. Stakeholders, partners, employees, and a hundred other factors influence day-by-day decisions and before you know it the customer is slipping down the priority list. I cut through all the fluff and stay focused on the customer.

BI: Any specific customer-centric recommendations?

AM: Absolutely! Empower the consumer to get 80% of the way through the journey to buy the product before they ever need to speak to a person. Give them convenient access to information that will help shape every aspect of their buying decisions as early as possible.

I think a comparable buying-model is the housing market. Picture the journey to buy a new home: would you ever go to an in-person viewing or speak to the sales agent if you hadn't already walked through the house online? Does the house match my budget, what are the specs, can I picture my family here, how much are the taxes, where are the schools etc. Apply the same logic. Ask yourself: have I empowered my

Family time is the best time!
Ali with wife Sarah, daughter
Charlotte and son Harry.



customer to answer every question about my product or service before they speak to my staff or see me at a show? If not, make it so! Then find the best delivery methods to get that content in to the hands of your would-be customer.

BI: How do you stay on top of your game?

AM: I'm very pro-active about seeking opportunities for continuous learning. I co-chair the national Neptune Awards committee for Marine Marketers of America, which recognizes the best and most innovative marketing campaigns in our industry. It's a lot of work but I read through and watch every submission so I can soak up what the brightest talents in our industry are doing. It's a great education.

I've done plenty of formal training sessions, but for me, the best ongoing professional development comes from the strong relationships I've developed with peers at other companies throughout the industry. These are the opportunities when we can have a proper chat and talk through ideas, sulk about our failures, boast about our wins and share honest feedback.

BI: Finally, as an emerging leader who has navigated a successful career in the industry, what advice do you offer young people looking to drop anchor here?

AM: First be sure that you have identified the type of work that energizes you. Don't seek a job in the boating industry just because you enjoy boats.

Second, seek a good mentor. Volunteer some personal time and ask your employer to pair you up with a mentor who is in role that you might



Solo time fishing and canoeing are Ali's favorite boating getaways.

pursue over time.

Finally, be brave and deliberate about reaching out and making connections in the industry. Never underestimate the value of building strong relationships, especially now that so many of us are working remotely. I'm a huge believer in building good relationships, so please reach out if you would like to connect. ●