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Biker tour yields three 'power lessons'

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Thanks to all who took a virtual ride on the 2016 Boaterz n Bikerz of America Hull of a Tour: Pacific Coast Rush. It was an eight-day, 2,000-mile boating and motorcycling extravaganza from Seattle to California's Big Sur, looping back to San Francisco. I blogged daily on the trip, thanks to the editorial perch provided by our media sponsor, Soundings Trade Only.

It was an awesome adventure, thanks to the phenomenal route planning of road captain Jim Krueger, who has been my partner for all three events to date. Every day had breathtaking moments — from the splendor of snow-capped Mount Rainier and Mount Hood to the sobering silence of Mount St. Helens. We rode many thrilling and twisting terrains and experienced other dramatic shifts, including temperatures that soared from a brisk 55 degrees to a sweltering 111, all in the same day.

We rode beneath towering redwoods along the Avenue of the Giants and cruised through iconic California beach towns. We saw slumbering seals and sea lions, navigated the soupy fog and thick smoke from fires in Big Sur and toured the grand Hearst Castle in San Simeon.

Our last day was an enjoyable jaunt through forest-dappled Skyline Drive in the Big Basin area of the Santa Cruz Mountains, where we maneuvered through hairpin turns and steep banks, with plenty of relaxing sweeps. Lunch was a treat at the fabled Alice's Restaurant, where, in fact, you can get almost anything you want.

A major highlight included our powerboating and sailing events, which offer the unique aspect of our ride. They served as tour bookends, staged at the beginning and as the last official event.

Our kickoff was a wonderful brunch cruise, hosted jointly by sponsors Regal Boats and West Coast retailer Alexander Marine USA. The Regal cruiser inventory was sold out, so we were treated to a scenic 2.5-hour launch on Lake Union and Lake Washington in Seattle aboard a 78-foot Ocean Alexander motoryacht. The dealership crew and Regal West Coast rep Kyle Mazanti were extremely hospitable, proffering up a feast and a cruise fit for kings.

Our San Francisco splashdown featured a "Sunset Sailabration" aboard a 48-foot catamaran, hosted by title sponsor Freedom Boat Club. We toasted our good times and set sail around the bay, passing directly under the Golden Gate Bridge and past Alcatraz, docking 90 minutes later at Fisherman's Wharf. What an awesome way to unwind, celebrate new friendships and wrap the big event.

Beyond the sheer excitement that is Hull of a Tour, I always find a major marketing message to share. Find three "power lessons" from the tour that can be applied to your business.

Lesson 1: Harness The Power Of Events

It is one thing to stay engaged on social media, but another altogether to provide an opportunity for your customers to connect and enjoy the boating lifestyle you champion.

One of the biggest challenges the industry faces is finding ways to motivate our customers to use their boating products more frequently.

If they don't cruise, you lose. The longer a boat sits in dry dock, the easier it is to write it off. Dead batteries and any number of assorted ailments befall boats that go unused. Neglect snowballs into a cluster of costly problems.

Don't minimize this dilemma. Part of your marketing strategy should include promotions that reward customers for using your products. Whether a multi-day cruise or a day trip, events simply are good for business.

Roy Parker, of Parker Boats in Orlando (now MarineMax), used to host annual Sea Ray Bahamas trips. His customers planned vacations around the dates. They outfitted their boats with new gear. Some bought new boats to shake out on the trip.

Roy's son Bobby is a successful Freedom Boat Club franchise owner, winner of Franchise of the Year in 2015. He understands the power of group events, having grown up with the Bahamas excursions.

He invited his Freedom Boat Club members to travel together to the Bahamas last year to enjoy day trips on charters he organized. Although he's not selling boats, he knows full well that those shared experiences create loyal members, and those members tell their friends.

Another FBC franchise owner, Lisa "The Botanista" Almeida, and her partner, Kevin Seelig, of Jacksonville and St. Augustine, Fla., also do a great job with events. They host boating parties on the Fourth of July and during football season, when they congregate to "boatgate." They anchor her fiancée's 90-foot houseboat to serve as the FBC event headquarters. Members ride up for the day, hang out, bring their friends (prospects) and talk all about it.

Jeff Husby and his team at Regal & Nautique of Orlando launched a St. John's River Run "customer appreciation event" two years ago. They rented a houseboat to serve as party central and invited customers and prospects to cruise up on their boats at their leisure on Saturday or Sunday for a free barbecue and goody bag. This year, they doubled their attendance.

Joe Lewis, of Mount Dora Marina, also hosts weekend and overnight trips with his customers. He and his crew plan a few annual getaways to popular Florida destinations.

Back in my day at Legendary Marine, we had all five retail locations create annual event calendars, with the express goal of getting customers engaged and using their boats. From fun scalloping trips to Blue Angels boating parties, from positive activities such as owners taking wounded veterans fishing to offering free boat rides for members of the military and their families, events drove customers to activity while promoting camaraderie and dealership goodwill.

Events help to break down the natural barrier between the sales folk and the customer. In addition, events motivate people to use and have fun with their product — along with providing opportunities to view other (new) product. Events promote friendships and — there is no doubt in my mind — they ultimately trigger sales.

On our bike trip, at least one of the 16 bikes was brand-new and bought specifically for this event. Another was a weeklong rental. A dozen bikes were shipped by private transport carrier across the country. And plenty of us spent big bucks on parts and gadgets, tires, trick accessories and service work. Point: The event stimulated spending. Your events can do the same.

Lesson 2: Sponsorships Work

During the 35-plus years I've worked in marketing I've been approached by hundreds of organizations seeking sponsorship dollars or support. Choosing the right type of sponsorship and partnership can help promote your message and enhance your brand.

I work with an organization today that supports virtually any legitimate charitable organization that asks. Because our organization is set up with boats in the water year-round, we'll provide a free boat ride or sometimes a half-day or up to a three-month passport, including free training, that can be auctioned or raffled to help raise funds for a good cause. For us, the opportunity to take someone boating delivers us a viable prospect while helping a deserving cause. We see this as a win-win opportunity. Each year we support more than 100 organizations.

Our Boaterz n Bikerz event yielded much the same. For a marginal investment, our boat sponsor will likely end up with at least a few new boat orders from a franchisee who attended our splashdown party and subsequently hooked up with the sales rep. Many people asked questions about Freedom Boat Club and how it works — prospects!

Several of us who enjoyed cruising on an Ocean Alexander shared the buzz through social media. And lots of folks tuned in daily to Soundings Trade Only to read my blog, which I also posted via link on my FB page, my group FB page, LinkedIn and Twitter.

Smart marketers will carefully evaluate and weigh sponsorship opportunities. You don't have to lay out a lot of money. Get creative and work on barter or investment options that have the potential to drive returns. Sponsorships have the power to pay dividends.

Lesson 3: Promote

I'm often surprised by the lack of positive communications accompanying special events. Companies often go to great lengths to host parties, but the only people who know anything about it are those who show up. If you're investing in events, don't forget to invest in marketing communications and PR.

Your group or company Facebook page is a no-brainer for posting updates and photos. Create cool memes and content designed for your Facebook friends to share. Providing simple sharing tools will extend your event's reach. Instagram is another social media option that takes full advantage of event imagery.

Eblast to your targeted invite list and host dedicated landing pages to share details. Tweet. Create a custom blog to promote and cover the event. Promote the blog and link on cross-marketing platforms. Regularly communicate with your customers via digital e-news.

If your event has broader community value, send out a press release to share the news.

In closing, if you're not planning events to engage your customers and taking full advantage of the marketing opportunities, you're missing the boat. Party time can be profitable on many fronts, so it's time get the celebration started.

Wanda Kenton Smith is president of Kenton Smith Marketing, president of Marine Marketers of America and chief marketing officer of Freedom Boat Club. To read any of the previous blogs from this year's Pacific Coast Rush, visit Soundings Trade Only and search for Hull of a Tour or email wanda@kentonsmithmarketing.com.

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