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Top Covid-19 Takeaways from Marine Marketers

Even within the pandemic's chaos, marketing opportunity abounds

WANDA KENTON SMITH · JUN 26, 2020

I've recently shared personal marketing recommendations and lessons learned through the Covid-19 experience. For this column, however, I surveyed more than a dozen marine marketers representing a mix of industry segments. What follows are my favorite takeaways from some of the brightest marketers in our business.

The Virtual Tour Sells

So says Mary Strauss, marketing director at Galati Yachts.

"For us, marketing success is defined as sales success. Our marketing programs must show ROI. While not a unique idea, we worked quickly to be among the first dealerships/brokerage firms to promote and offer virtual tours. We created a dedicated landing page explaining how to request a virtual tour promoted via email, paid search and retargeting. We also shared our marketing plan and web analytics with our listing clients so they were reassured we were doing everything possible to keep their boat in front of prospective buyers.

"I think some people were skeptical that we could sell a boat virtually, or sight unseen; we actually sold several that way. We then promoted those sales in our monthly newsletter to demonstrate [that] selling yachts virtually was happening and very doable. I believe virtual showings will be a new way of doing business ... whether just previewing yachts to narrow down the selection or the entire buying process."

The Show Must Go On

Alisdair Martin, CEO of TMRG — the media team behind boat shows and events for the National Marine Manufacturers Association, Informa, the International Boatbuilders' Exhibition & Conference and more — says businesses must find a way to keep brand awareness high and continually promote products and services.

"The NMMA's Northwest Sportshow in Minnesota canceled a couple of weeks before it was to open. We quickly offered the option to host a Virtual Sportshow, and the NMMA staff agreed in an effort to support exhibitors. We created a simple model to provide virtual attendees access to as many of the products and experiences of the real show as possible.

"The Virtual Sportshow proved a huge success with 10,000-plus unique visitors. Three experts responded to live audience questions on topics including boating, fishing and the outdoors. We hosted 100 virtual seminars. The online shopping directory allowed consumers to search by sector/product/name, while the promotions room housed show specials (free to all exhibitors). The most popular area was the virtual booths. Exhibitors saw a huge audience that kept their businesses moving during one of the most challenging economic times in recent history."

After the Palm Beach International Boat Show was canceled, TMRG worked with Informa to create a virtual event that began on the original show's opening date, and that included virtual tours, video walkthroughs, chatbots and 3D renderings. The company used "an easy-to-navigate platform featuring a balance of boats, products, services and education. Boats were the stars of the show, while the docks area drew the greatest draw."

Martin sees virtual shows as a significant means to launch the industry out of the Covid-19 slump, and says in-person shows will become better, with physical changes such as wider lanes and one-way aisles as well as digital changes. The process of buying a boat will likely begin before the show doors open, as customers make short lists, view specs and negotiate prices.

"The final and most exhilarating piece of the puzzle? Seeing the product in the flesh and reaching a final decision," he says. "That will happen on-site."

Champion Social Media

At Sea Tow Services International, president Kristen Frohnhoefer and marketing director Jenny Waters created an infographic in late March as a public service. The title: "Social Distancing While Boating."

"We shared it with our members and partners, and made it available for others to distribute," they say. "We wanted to be part of the solution, to remind boaters that they can still enjoy their favorite outdoor activity while doing it responsibly. It has since been shared by numerous state boating associations, on the Discover Boating Covid-19 resources website landing page, by hundreds of marinas and marine retailers nationwide, and shared thousands of times on social media.

"While intended as a public service and not a marketing initiative, the infographic proved highly impactful for Sea Tow. Boaters and marine industry partners appreciated that we took on the topic, made a resource available and were promoting responsible boating. Our social media posts were the highest performing posts in the history of our social media presence. We initially became the go-to entity on the topic and were asked to participate in online events and media interviews."

Web traffic is up — take advantage So says Boats Group vice president of marketing Courtney Chalmers. "We saw traffic and engagement rebound quickly in April, [and] leads are also showing signs of recovery after initially slowing in the wake of the declared global pandemic. In fact, more people are actively looking for boats now than a year ago, and current traffic more closely resembles midsummer volume than spring.

"A closer look at the data from April and May reveals that visits have increased an average 32 percent year-over-year, despite an initial dip the week of March 15 when shelter-in-place orders began. Further, boat-listing views have continued to recover, growing at an average rate of 55 percent year-over-year. Leads have followed a similar trend, increasing 106 percent year-over-year on average in April and May.

"We launched three new value-add products within 30 days to address the need for our customers to conduct virtual showings and offer no-contact boat delivery. These include Schedule a Virtual Showing, Price Drop Badges and Local Delivery Badges. Adoption of the new features was immediate and has continued to steadily grow. Those listings that have added the new features are seeing higher click-throughs and lead volume, signaling that consumers find them useful.

"We also launched an Industry View to share with our customers and industry at large. It provided a view of the consumer funnel (traffic, boat detail views and leads), as well as more in-depth view of lead performance by state and by boat class. It was reshared and used by our customers in their marketing communications to consumers, and by industry association leaders with their membership base.

Embrace Digital Transformation

The pandemic has rewired companies around data and digital services, says RB Yacht Marketing owner Romina Bompani, who advises clients to keep rethinking the way work gets done.

"In addition, we should move our marketing plans beyond branding and communications to provide business solutions that address people's needs," Bompani says. "Companies need to take on a new leadership role, connecting multiple disciplines to offer programs and experiences that make a difference in our communities and people's lives."

NMMA director of consumer marketing Sander Rosen agrees that satisfying the general need for information is a key role that companies must adopt. The NMMA responded to that need on both the trade and consumer front and has seen "exceptionally high engagement" on everything from waterways access to stimulus packages. The NMMA pivoted quickly to produce a digital replacement for the American Boating Congress, and saw nearly 900 participants engaging with lawmakers.

"For boating consumers, we noted especially high traffic to discoverboating.com due to our organic efforts. Consumers searched not only access, but also researched the boat-buying process. In May alone, we saw triple-digit jumps in traffic, with some days seeing as much as 128 percent spikes year-over-year."

Stay Engaged, Keep Evolving

Cruising World publisher Sally Helme says companies need to remember that consumers are still out there, wanting to hear from their favorite brands.

"Boating is important to them, probably even more important in times of stress because it is a healthy, family-friendly outlet that consumers feel good about," she says. "Keeping marketing going when times are tough is a critical defensive strategy. Hold on to your market share, and look for opportunities to increase it when your competitors run for the hills.

And above all, be creative as national and world events continue to evolve, says Mark Kellum, owner of Canal Street Creative.

"Marketers can't afford to become complacent," he says. "Coronavirus has taught us that the market can be a quickly changing roller coaster and we must be prepared for the dips and curves ahead. As we emerge from Covid-19, we need to watch, listen and continually learn, and be ready to respond."

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