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Marketing Strategies for 2021

WANDA KENTON SMITH · UPDATED: JAN 8, 2021 · ORIGINAL: JAN 8, 2021

Marine marketers I've spoken with during the past several months are all asking: What is your top marketing strategy for the upcoming year? It's a question that's harder to answer this year than in previous years.

We're coming off a record year of boat sales and engagement in 2020, but those records were set in ways that many of us couldn't imagine, let alone anticipate, as the year started. Now, with many long-standing marine marketing events and traditions still out of play as the Covid-19 pandemic wears on — but with vaccines coming soon, and the potential for a resulting change in consumer habits during the second half of 2021 — what's a smart marketer to do?

I've identified six red-hot priorities for your consideration.

Deliver an Exceptional Boating Experience

Our industry must focus on providing an exceptional boating experience for our customers, particularly those who took delivery of their boats during the buying frenzy of the pandemic. We need to be sure those new customers are not simply delivered, but instead are thoroughly pleased with the product and services. We also need to make sure they have been properly trained so they are comfortable, confident and safe at the helm. Achieving these goals will require a major investment in staff and training. There is no time like the present to follow up with every customer who bought a boat in 2020.

Deploy Retention Strategies

We need to remain vigilant about ongoing customer communications by deploying well-thought-out retention strategies. Continually working to develop positive relationships that lead to highly satisfied, happy customers is the lifeline to future sales. Especially while we remain handcuffed from hosting rendezvous or customer parties and events, we can make a concerted effort to connect and engage with our customers regularly.

And talk about a bargain: It doesn't cost a dime to call your customer. Forget the impersonal text, email or survey. I'm talking about an old-fashioned, friendly, two-way conversation. How would you feel if you received a personal call from a sales professional you worked with who simply wanted to wish you a Happy New Year and ask if there was anything you needed? Who asked how pleased you were with the products and services you received? I'm suggesting a sincere effort to connect, express thanks for the business, and ask how you can be of service.

A recent industry study revealed that many marine retailers never communicate with customers following the sale. This represents casual indifference and a tremendous missed opportunity. It's also a crying disgrace that reflects poorly on the entire industry. Sales managers should require accountability for post-sales communications, and provide sales training to get the job done.

Update Communications Tools

Marketers should regularly update their customer and prospect database, and have a Customer Relationship Management system that can be used to create customized messaging. Ongoing e-blasts, newsletters and announcements, along with targeted digital campaigns, should be regularly executed to keep your brand and product top of mind. Every marine marketer also should be investing heavily in video. Is your company an excellent storyteller? Do you address and answer your customers' most pressing questions? Do your videos educate, entertain and inform?

Social media channels also require constant attention and expert nurturing to attract and engage customers. How well is your social program performing? How can you improve? And, when was the last time you updated your website? Is its information timely and accurate? Take a deep dive into your site analytics to understand not only basics such as traffic and page views, but also all the many other key performance indicators that can provide invaluable insights.

Have a Boat-Show Strategy

Prior to the pandemic, boat shows were often the primary staple to sales. Exhibitors tended to rely on show promoters to handle event marketing and drive traffic, with the hope that qualified buyers would appear at their booths. I have long advocated that exhibitors do their own supplemental marketing to attract buyers to their booths, to maximize their show investment.

For 2021, many in-person shows are canceled — but exhibitors can still look for opportunities to maximize their investments in virtual shows that have real potential to bring in business.

Several show producers introduced virtual shows in 2020, and the savvy producers drew crowds and engaged buyers, providing navigable venues to connect prospects to exhibitors. I'll be watching to see which show producers find new ways to entice and attract qualified buyers in 2021 too, by delivering unique and beneficial customer-centric experiences, some of which we may not even realize are a possibility right now.

I'm also more than curious to know what kind of long-term punch this year's show cancellations may deliver. I understand and respect the rationale to cancel, but retailers now figuring out how to market and sell on their own may not invest marketing funds in virtual shows going forward. MarineMax, for instance, has already announced that it is leaving shows to produce its own digital marketing programs. We all should be watching to see what works, and what doesn't, on this new digital boat-show terrain.

Maintain Brand Presence

In the heyday of pandemic-driven consumer demand, when the industry was selling everything it could build, many marketing plans were tossed. Budgets were ratcheted back. While those choices may have paid off in the short term, the sales bubble won't last forever. Every company owner needs to invest time now with his leadership team, define goals for 2021, brainstorm accompanying strategies, and assign applicable budgets. While it's great to remain fluid and respond to changing market conditions, having your marketing team operating with a clear focus and a shared vision is paramount to success.

As you consider 2021 media opportunities, analyze the plethora of marketing platforms and opportunities. Give serious consideration to one-on-one calls with media representatives and show producers. Request custom proposals based on your goals and objectives. Ask hard questions. Share concerns. Understand the types of analytics the media will deliver to measure campaign success.

Media professionals always rise to the occasion by developing exciting programs to meet your goals — helping you to discern which of your media (and boat show) providers is most committed and capable. Schedule regular check-ins with your media providers and leadership team to analyze and discuss results, make adjustments and reinvest.

Invest in Yourself

You must be your top marketing strategy for 2021. This advice sounds unconventional, but if you are to remain relevant, then you must invest in yourself. You must keep learning, face your fears, stretch outside of the comfort zone, take risks. You must have personal vision and passion.

Ask yourself: What about today's marketing frightens you? What intimidates you? What is keeping you from being on top of your game? What technology skills do you need to brush up on or learn? What areas of new marketing knowledge are you lacking?

Candidly reflect on where you stand, and determine where you want and need to grow as a marketing professional. Invest the time to create a strategic plan for your success. Make yourself your most important priority. The more you learn, the more confidence you will gain, and the more value you will bring to yourself and to your organization.

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