



MARKETING

Wanda Kenton Smith

<< INSIGHT

Selling the experience: How a taste of Hawg won me over

How would you like to take a non-boating couple and move them into a sale of two boats ... in just two months time?

My husband and I just bought two hot new Harleys. My experience through the referral of a friend and working with an absolutely awesome Harley dealership has application for the marine industry.

Mainship VP Jim Krueger took me for a sweet ride on the back of his Harley after an all-day strategic planning session. We rode down a spectacular stretch of A-1A from St. Augustine to Daytona with the beach and a dazzling sunset as a backdrop. I felt a sense of euphoria — almost an out-of-body experience — where every cell in my body was recharged!

We cruised through the spectacle that is Bike Week, with more chrome and leather assembled in one place than I'd ever imagined possible. As I gawked, I was surprised to find that most of the bikers were just ordinary people out for fun and a good time. At the end of the ride, I was absolutely convinced this was something I wanted to do. I had to ride.

Finding No. 1 As an industry, we need to find ways in which to motivate our boat owners to introduce their friends to boating. I firmly believe that if we can develop a strategy to have boaters introduce their friends to the boating lifestyle, we increase our odds of converting non-boaters to ownership.

After my experience, I advanced the process by visiting the local Orlando Harley dealership. I was greeted by two friendly gals who manned a Learn to Ride desk. The dealership has developed a customized three-day program that includes a mix of classroom, video and on-bike training. When you successfully pass the course, you earn your motorcycle endorsement. I signed up for my husband and myself, and within a week I'd received two contacts from the dealership ... one from the GM who congratulated me for signing up for the class and welcoming me to the Orlando Harley family, and a customized e-mail that featured several bike specials, upcoming events and activities, contact information and more. Wow — I was impressed!

Finding No. 2 As an industry, we're missing the boat when it comes to the importance of marketing boater education and connecting it to sales. As a nonbiker who didn't even know where to find the brake or clutch levers, the

systematic, hands-on approach offered by the dealership program allowed me to build basic skills and confidence while learning the rules of the road. For \$199 I learned everything that was necessary for me to gain a motorcycle endorsement at the dealership.

While we have no mandatory licensing requirements in boating, having educational programs linked directly through the dealership seems like a no-brainer. There are plenty of existing programs out there — the sailing industry has sailing schools and certified instructional programs through the American Sailing Association and US Sailing. There are Power Squadron courses. We should link these programs directly at the retail level, and then market and promote them through the dealership.

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I asked Orlando Harley owner Anne Deli, the former vice president of global branding for Harley corporate and a former Madison Avenue ad exec, how the company markets its Learn to Ride class. Besides its Web site promotion and a rotating highway sign on busy Interstate 4, much of her traffic comes from word of mouth.

Another spoke in the wheel was my salesman, Butch Workman, an automotive pro who matched his sales skills with his own biking passion. He sensed my raw enthusiasm and he invested in me.

I asked him a million questions and he patiently answered every one, never making me feel stupid. I visited the dealership a dozen times and he enlightened me more with every visit. On his own, he dug up some related materials he thought would be helpful. He encouraged me, never once pushing me toward a particular product.

We openly discussed the pros and cons of buying new vs. used. I looked at Harleys and competitive trades. I couldn't test anything until I had a license, so there was plenty of time for debate and discussion. In the process, Butch transcended from being a salesman to a trusted and valued advisor, a friend who I believe cared about my success.

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Finding No. 3 Care about the customer's wants and needs, and you'll maximize your opportunity to earn the sale. Spend the necessary time listening to what is important. Go above and beyond by sharing helpful literature or information. My skepticism disappeared once I was convinced Butch was genuinely interested in helping me find the right bike for my anticipated riding lifestyle and budget. He reinforced that caring attitude by following up after the sale. Honestly, I have never been happier to part with my hard-earned cash than I was at the conclusion of this sale. That's exactly how we should want our boat buyers to feel.

Another great thing about the Orlando Harley dealership is the way they promote the biking lifestyle. The physical framework of the historic factory is super cool, matched by a dazzling display of bikes, a large parts and accessories department, plus a retail presence that embodies everything from jewelry and sunglasses, to jackets, T-shirts, boots, gloves, hats, helmets, backpacks, totes ... even pullovers and collars for the dog. Deli has quite the touch on the retail front and knows how to move the product, operating airport Harley stores in Orlando, Milwaukee and Charlotte.

Finding No. 4 What can we do at our dealerships to create a lifestyle approach to boating? How much time and attention is spent on merchandising? The vast majority of boat dealerships I've visited over the years pay scant attention to merchandising or creating a stimulating environment that really motivates sales. Usually it's a few T-shirts jammed into a dusty corner, maybe a tube or two hanging on the pegs. Creating a lifestyle environment at the dealership will help stimulate sales, plus provide a new profit center if merchandised properly. From music, to gear, to sportswear and deck shoes, we've got the goods. We just have to use them.

Finally, the Orlando Harley dealership does a great job of embracing newcomers. Besides the ongoing weekly e-mails, we've also been invited to attend a new owners' dinner where new buyers meet one another and the dealership management team.

When we bought our new bikes, we received a free membership into HOG, the Harley Owner Group, as well as information on the local chapter. Deli and her well-oiled machine are constantly innovating ways to stay connected with customers, hosting charity rides, auctions, barbecues, seminar programs and more ... a free bike wash with the Hawaiian Tropic girls and a night ride is in the offing. She also encourages staff to become familiar with customers on a first-name basis. As part of the buying process, you work with the sales person as well as with representatives from F&I, merchandising and accessory/after-market sales and delivery.

Finding No. 5 I just can't emphasize enough the importance of regular communications with customers. Send a simple e-blast featuring new and used boats, a quick maintenance tip, upcoming events promotional calendar, etc.

Some boat dealers host rendezvous, fishing tournaments and cruises which are great. We need more of these events, coupled with ongoing fresh and fun activities that keep your owners coming back for more. I love the idea of the new boaters' dinner and ensuring that your key dealership players know the customers by name.

For comments on this column, e-mail wanda@kentonsmithadv.com.