

A Marine-Marketing Snapshot

A new survey reveals what top industry pros think about media strategy, lead generation, retaining boaters

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After two years of unprecedented growth, and with economic uncertainty looming on the horizon, marine marketers are focusing on digital as well as print efforts, and customer engagement — but with a wary eye on continued supply-chain issues, inventory shortages, inflation, fuel prices and more.

I know this because I conducted a confidential survey that sampled top business-to-business and business-to-consumer marine industry marketers. The respondents represent various sectors, ranging from boat and engine manufacturers to retail dealers, gear and accessories suppliers, associations, boat clubs, media and advertising agencies. While admittedly a small sample, this research provides insight into the thoughts and concerns of marine marketing leaders.

Top Findings

When asked if their 2022 media spend was more, less or equal to their company's 2021 media spend, 29 percent of marine marketers cited "more," another 29 percent said "less," and 41 percent maintained the previous year's budget. More than three quarters of those surveyed — 76 percent — expected to stick with current budget allocations through year's end, while 12 percent planned to increase spending. Another 12 percent of respondents were uncertain.

Another question asked where marine marketers are investing their marketing dollars. Not surprisingly, 100 percent said they were investing in established digital and online advertising platforms, and in social media advertising. What was unexpected was the 94 percent who are continuing to make strong investments in print advertising.

This may be because of the marine industry's strong, loyal consumer audience of core boating faithful. The fact that many print media companies have survived is a testament to the strength of the boater who hungers for great content, and the investment many of our more progressive media partners have made to transform and enhance their arsenal. These investments include

digital, social and print channels from which advertisers may orchestrate effective integrated campaigns.

Other leading media sources cited sponsorships and promotions, public relations and SEO, which generated 76 percent of the media spend. Boat shows earned 71 percent of the media investment, and “other” events scored 65 percent.

There was a steep drop by survey respondents investing in TV, outdoor, radio and YouTube advertising.

Customer and Prospect Engagement

I have long championed the critical importance of ongoing customer communication and engagement. I’ve been especially vocal about the need during the pandemic, which NMMA says delivered 830,000 first-time boat owners into our boating family. While inventory constraints and service limitations remain an industry-wide challenge, I firmly believe that continued communications with the prospect pool should be a priority. Going dark on valuable prospects allows more savvy competitors to steal your thunder and future business.

One of the brightest spots in the survey findings was the 47 percent of marine marketers who have strategically increased their customer engagement activities in 2022, followed by 35 percent who have maintained the status quo. A little less than 12 percent engaged with customers only on an as-needed basis. The great news: 100 percent had communication strategies in place and deployed.

Biggest Marketing Challenges

One question that generated a lot of response was an open-ended invitation to share the three biggest marketing challenges for the latter half of 2022.

A common woe is the dilemma of whether (or how much) to invest in brand advertising and promotion in a period that is clearly compromised by a glaring lack of inventory, continued supply-chain issues and long lead times on new orders.

Other major challenges included lead and web traffic growth, and the ability to convert leads to sales; the dried-up used boat market; a threatening drop in consumer confidence, including the impact of spiking fuel prices and fast-rising product prices; a slow start to the season up North; general hiring challenges, including attracting and retaining skilled marketing talent; and website and SEO management.

A bevy of other concerns included how to choose distribution among channels; navigating inflation in advertising rates; managing robust event costs in a period marked by unanticipated increases; how to prove return-on-investment outcomes; how to protect data and email opt-in

rates; how to dodge changes in an unstable social media state, including ad targeting rules; how to reignite interest in boat shows; and how to deal with technology issues and platform integrations.

A comment that I found particularly interesting was the new challenge marketers face when they have to juggle virtual and in-person live events. In some cases, the workload grows as the marketing staff has contracted.

Current Prospects and Leads

When marketers were asked to describe their current prospect and lead-generation activity compared to 2021, the results were decidedly mixed.

The largest segment, representing 31 percent, said prospects and leads were strong but slowing as we approach the third quarter. Nearly 19 percent said prospects and leads were flat, while 12.5 percent reported leads declining. Combined, the results showed 62.5 percent of the survey pool reporting flat or declining lead-generation activity.

In fact, only 12.5 percent reported prospects and leads remaining robust and on par with 2021 activity, while 6.25 percent reported greater leads today versus 2021. More than 80 percent of respondents answered this question.

My take? Time will tell if this is a temporary cooling tied into inventory constraints. Perhaps it may represent the not-unexpected slowdown of new boat buying prospects who have resumed pre-Covid lifestyles and other recreational activity choices. It may simply represent the natural righting of a fast-moving ship.

The more important concern for us all is the need to focus on retaining and delighting the hundreds of thousands of new boat buyers so we can keep them in the fold. If we fail to do so, we may witness an epic dumping into the used boat market, a situation that would have a profound impact on new boat sales, prices and profitability.

Economic Concerns

I also asked respondents to share whether they believe the recreational marine industry will be hurt by current economic conditions. Their top concern was the growing rate of inflation, which scored an 87.5 percent response, followed by escalating gas prices at 75 percent. The overall state of the economy and negative media coverage were also concerns among half the respondents.

Less-significant indicators included a tightening of lending and financing availability, lack of environmentally friendly technologies, and distrust of or disappointment in U.S. government leadership.

I'm grateful to the marine marketers who took time to participate in this survey. I'm fortunate to work with many capable marketing colleagues throughout all sectors of the industry. Together, we

are stronger. It's been a wild and crazy ride the past two years, and we're all still standing — while preparing for more twists, turns and curves ahead.

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