

Anne Dunbar

Show Director, The International BoatBuilders' Exhibition & Conference (IBEX)

When it comes to the ability to pivot on the big stage like a rock & roll diva, Anne Dunbar is the queen of cool. As Show Director of the International BoatBuilders' Exhibition & Conference (IBEX) since 2013, she's demonstrated uncanny resiliency the past few years, first steering through the uncharted and rough waters of Covid-19 and most recently, navigating her team through Hurricane Ian that forced a last-minute show closure in 2022. Through all the



By Wanda Kenton Smith

stressors, Anne outwardly maintained a beacon of composure, all while ensuring timely communications with the show's exhibitors and more than 4,000+ registered show attendees.

Boating Industry (BI): Before diving into the challenges you've faced and overcome, tell us about your boating background.

Anne Dunbar (AD): I grew up on and around boats in Fairfield, CT. My dad started buying boats for our family when I was about 10 years old. We joined the Black Rock Yacht Club and a series of sailboats followed, and with that, sailing lessons which evolved into sailboat racing. Every summer we were on the water all over Long Island Sound.

In 2018, my husband Andrew and I both got our U.S. Coast Guard 50-Ton Captain's License.

BI: How long have you worked in the boating industry ...and how did you transform your passion into a fulfilling career?

(AD): It's hard to believe, but it's been about 30 years! After graduating from the University of Colorado, I drove to Long Beach, CA to teach sailing at the Alamitos Bay Yacht Club. At the end of summer, I had to find a real job and a member asked me if I wanted to work the Long Beach Boat Show. My first 'real' job was giving away subscriptions for *Soundings* at the show. When I returned home, I

called and asked for a job. They hired me to sell advertising for the Southern California territory and my career in the marine industry had begun!

I worked a couple of years for *Boating Industry*, and then Carl Cramer of *Professional BoatBuilder* magazine made an offer which included working for him on IBEX, which I've been doing now for about 20 years.

I've managed to survive two ownerships changes and relocating the show to four different cities. My first job was selling exhibit space in 2002 and from there I handled all the marketing. When the show moved to Louisville, Ky., convincing everyone to attend was one of my biggest marketing challenges! In 2013, the owners at that time – NMMA and *Professional BoatBuilder* magazine – asked me to take on the role of show director.

BI: What does the show director role entail?

AD: I work with a talented staff of a dozen people and together, we create a dynamic show experience that brings the marine industry together to inspire innovation and accelerate growth. My responsibilities include all areas of IBEX planning, from financials to overall event strategy. I continually develop and evaluate new ideas to improve the value and quality of the show experience to ensure both exhibitors and visitors consider IBEX the most valuable three days of the year.

BI: Besides IBEX, are you involved in other marine industry and/or community initiatives?

AD: In June of 2022, I was elected president of IFBSO, the International Federation of Boat Show Organizers, an organization of the world's leading boat shows. Its mission is to help member organizations by providing a forum for the exchange of ideas and cooperation among members.

I'm participating in the *Soundings Trade Only* women's mentor program and am mentoring two wonderful young women. When I look back over the years of my career, there are so many amazing men and women who advised and helped me, so I embrace the opportunity to give back.



Anne Dunbar

Outside of marine, I'm on the Board of Directors for Spread Compassion, a private foundation whose mission is to spread compassion by offering monetary assistance to hard-working families and veterans who are struggling financially due to unexpected life circumstances. We also assist organizations that support abandoned or animal shelter dogs.

BI: Let's shift to your recent experiences that no doubt tested your leadership skills to the max. When the industry was first faced with Covid-19 in 2020, you were among the first forced to cancel your show and to pivot.

AD: The hardest thing about the Covid situation was none of us had any idea what we were dealing with. When you work running events, you are used to dealing with unexpected issues and challenges, but a dealing with the pandemic wasn't in any playbook. The decision to cancel in 2020 was shocking, but the safety and well-being of our exhibitors and our visitors is what matters.

Looking back the decisions seem so logical, but at the time they were happening, it was so incredibly difficult and stressful.

BI: What business lessons did you learn during Covid-19?

AD: One of the most surprising lessons we learned

from having to cancel IBEX in 2020 is that virtual shows will never replace the value of real face-to-face interactions. Gathering in-person matters and is critical for connection and commerce in every industry. Live shows have returned with a vengeance because people crave live connection and real experiences. Humans want to see other humans, and they want to see and touch products.

Our other big AHA! is that in addition to having a live show, we have developed a unique online community that is hungry for more information. We launched 'IBEX 365' which is our online, year-round platform that hosts webinars, conversations and experiences. Our website traffic, social media community and email metrics growth over the past three years have exceeded expectations.

BI: On the heels of the pandemic, Hurricane Ian created havoc in 2022 for Team IBEX, forcing last-minute cancellation of the show.

AD: IBEX 2022 was a worst-case scenario for any event team, and what made it so stressful was the very short timeline. I arrived on site at the Tampa Convention Center on Friday, Sept. 23, four days before IBEX was to open. It was business as usual; the show was in full set-up mode.

During our Saturday morning meeting with the TCC, our on-site service providers, and the City of Tampa, all insisted we had nothing to worry about and no one was concerned. Still, we asked about evacuation plans. By noon, the forecast changed dramatically.

We scheduled a meeting with our board of director for noon and 3:00 pm that day to assess the situation. An email with clear messaging was distributed to manage the now-increasing emails and phone calls, and the same information was shared on our website and social media platforms. We all agreed we had to communicate as much as possible and to be transparent, knowing that more than 4,000 pre-registered visitors and 650 exhibitors were heading to the airport to travel to Florida!

We communicated we would make the decision about cancelling the event no later than noon on Sunday, Sept. 25. Our aggressive and honest communications made a huge difference to many people who were trying to decide what to do. Although we hoped the path would change, it did not, and after a very



difficult meeting we made the call and sent out the cancellation announcement.

It was clearly the right decision, but an extremely stressful few days. I'm grateful to have a solid team and a supportive board who helped me navigate that situation.

BI: Your team really pulled together and was recognized recently by your owners: the NMMA and RAI Amsterdam. Tell us about that.

AD: Having survived the cancellation of IBEX in 2020, the Delta variant in 2021, and the cancellation last year due to Hurricane Ian – I consider getting through the past three years an achievement. I don't think my team, or I, have fully recovered from the challenges we have faced since 2020.

BI: As you consider your 30-years in the business, what have you enjoyed most?

AD: I am the poster child for living the boating lifestyle, so I am completely happy when I am on or around boats. We own multiple boats, both sail and power, and we use them all, so working in this industry is a perfect match for me. I get paid to go to boat shows, AND talk about boats and boating. Being responsible for creating IBEX and bringing our industry together each year to share ideas, best practices, showcase what's new and what's next, and being part of the process that inspires positive change and building better boats is extremely gratifying. The connections, conversations, and ideas inspired by IBEX each year matter, and I am honored to be leading the team responsible for creating the platform for all of this to happen each year.

BI: What do you do for fun?

AD: We are outdoor people and love the seasons. In the summer, we spend as much time as we can on our boats and cruising the coast of Maine. This past year, we visited 16 islands and coastal towns, and it was incredible. During the winter, we're skiers and love snow shoeing right out our back door.

BI: What's a mantra you've adopted that has no doubt served you well the past few years?

AD: My favorite is: "I accept." This mantra is extremely freeing if you take an honest, deep breath and lean in to truly *accept* whatever is happening. Once you accept, all the stress and drama fall away, and you can focus, be present and move on. ●

The family that plays together, stays together! Anne, husband, two daughters and pup spend time together in the great outdoors.

