

# Boating Industry

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**30 WOMEN MAKING WAVES** AS NOMINATED BY THE  
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# women making waves



**INDUSTRY VOICES**  
**INCLUSIVE MARKETING**  
**PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP**

# Susan Bonivich

Senior Dealer Business Manager, Volvo Penta

As *Boating Industry* celebrates the distinguished Women Making Waves in this edition, our Profiles in Leadership shines the spotlight on Susan Bonivich, Volvo Penta's Senior Dealer Business Manager responsible for business relations with the Cobalt 20 Group, OneWater/SMG and the U.S. western territories.



By Wanda Kenton Smith

Susan grew up around creeks and streams in Waynesboro, VA and at a young age, discovered a passion for fishing. Post college, a colleague taught her to water ski on the shores of West Virginia and she spent countless weekends camping, fishing and skiing on Lake Moomaw. Her first boat purchase was in 1995 - a SeaRay 28' Sundance cruiser - and she spent every opportunity boating and enjoying the great outdoors. Little did she know at the time that she would eventually hook up a great career in the boating industry championing her active lifestyle of choice.

In 1998, Susan was working as a consultant for an elevator company when she heard from a former colleague that Volvo Penta in Chesapeake, VA was hiring. She was interested in returning to the area and decided to apply for the full-time position of buyer in the parts and accessories department. She was hired and the rest, they say, is history. Through her drive, dedication, hard work and tenacity, Susan rose within the ranks and has forged a highly successful and rewarding 25+ year career.

Besides her contributions at Volvo Penta, she has earned distinction within the broader marine industry. She is an inductee in the Boating Industry "Women Making Waves." In 2016, she was singled out and honored as the Darlene Briggs Marine Woman of the Year by the MRAA Foundation and Boating Industry magazine. In 2021, she won the National Association of Manufacturers STEP Ahead award. Besides these recognitions, she generously gives

back through volunteerism and is actively engaged in the Marine Retailers Association of the Americas Dealer Week Committee and the Water Sports Industry Association's Tow Boat Committee.

### **Boating Industry (BI): How did you land your first job at Volvo Penta?**

**Susan Bonivich (SB):** During my interview with Volvo Penta, I told them I had replaced an outdrive. I commented how it would have been much easier if we had an alignment tool and how I had spun the props out. By demonstrating that I at least knew something about a sterndrive, I landed the job.

### **BI: Who encouraged your professional development and growth at Volvo Penta?**

**SB:** Senior VP Randy Phelps. Anyone who worked with Randy would agree he was the best of the best. He came to me one day and said there was a job opening that he wanted me to apply for. It was a sales job. I said, "What? Why, I could never do sales!" He looked at me and said the words that launched my career in the marine industry: "You will be great at it. You know why? Because you have been on this side of the desk and you know what people need and want. You have empathy for them."

### **BI: How did you learn to sell a highly technical product?**

**SB:** When I started the new job, my new boss was Mark Heller, Director of Sales. He had started out in NY and had been with Volvo Penta for 30 years. He, along with some of the engineers and application guys, were the ones who taught me the technical aspects of engines. He retired several years ago, and I continue to carry the work ethic he always modeled for me and others.

### **BI: What were the challenges you faced in the early phases of your marine industry career as a professional woman? And how did you overcome those challenges?**

**SB:** Honestly, 20 years ago there were very



Susan Bonivich

few women salespeople in the industry. In the early days of my career, I would have meetings with dealers, and I was the only woman in the room. For the most part, the only women I saw at the dealerships were receptionists or accounting clerks.

Given my personality and determination, I just never gave up. I would continue to stop by dealerships and talk with the men making the decisions. One customer comes to mind ... I went to see him seven times, and finally he gave Volvo Penta a chance with our engines. From that day forward, he's never looked back.

### **BI: What are your major areas of focus today in your business activities?**

**SB:** Keeping Volvo Penta growing in the marine industry. Keeping dealers informed of new product changes; sales training; problem solving; attending events; and calling on new Volvo Penta dealers.

### **BI: What have you enjoyed most about your career in the boating industry?**

**SB:** The people; they are like family and friends. We all have a great respect for each other.

### **BI: What are you most proud of in terms of your contributions/achievements at Volvo Penta?**

**SB:** The trust and friendships I have built with my customers and colleagues.

**BI: What leadership traits do you feel are most needed by those working in the marine industry today and why?**

**SB:** Honesty, because that builds trust. Respect, because that builds trust. Faith in your people, because that builds trust. Trust builds success.

**BI: What has been your key(s) to success in carving out a successful and enduring marine industry career?**

**SB:** My willingness to not give in, and my friendships with other women in the industry.

**BI: Who have been your mentors, and how did they inspire, teach and encourage you?**

**SB:** First is Marcia Kull who is retired and loving life! She worked at Volvo both in sales and legal. She was an inspiration to all the women at Volvo and carried the torch for our group. She would organize events like women's fishing trips. Most of the ladies had never fished before, and we experienced it all: flats fishing, deep sea fishing and fly fishing.

Next is Ann Baldree, VP Sales at Chaparral Boats. Ann is classy and represents all of the women in the industry. If you added all the characteristics that make up that perfect person, it would be Ann. She is intelligent, smart, charming, gracious, kind, and giving.

Adding to the list is Joan Maxwell, president of Regulator Boats. I have not known Joan that long, but I had the opportunity this past year to spend some time with her at a boat show and listen to her speak at an event. She totally moved my heart.

Those who know me, know I will call and say, "You have been on my heart." This means I need to listen to or reach out to you. So, Joan was put on my heart. She made me think about how lucky I am to be in this industry where I connect with such wonderful people. She is a testament to faith in both God and people. When I think about truly good people, she is the person who pops into my mind, and I aspire to emulate her generosity of spirit.

Last, but not least is my good friend Tony Kelleher, VP of Customer Support and Training at Volvo Penta. Tony has been with me through the saddest parts of my life, like death in my family, to the happiest times, including celebrating my accomplishments. We've spent many memorable times with our customers discussing how we can continue to grow and improve the business, as well as celebrating their accomplishments.

Tony has talked me off the ledge when it comes to managing both up and down the corporate ladder. He always has the time for his employees and genuinely cares about people. He asks about their families, and he knows about our customers. Everyone in the industry who knows him is truly grateful to have him as part of their marine family.

**BI: What advice do you offer young women considering a marine industry career?**

**SB:** You are smart and don't forget it. If you want this, stay with it because it is a rewarding career.

**BI: How about women currently working in the marine industry who have long-term aspirations?**

**SB:** Some days are hard, but you have each other. Feel free to pick up



the phone and ask someone for help. Seek out an engineer who wants to teach you about products. Find the people who want to see you succeed and avoid the ones who don't.

**BI: Your advice for young people desiring a career in the marine industry?**

**SB:** You must dedicate the time. If you are not willing to dedicate the time, you need to find a different career path. This job is not a job, it's a lifestyle that becomes part of you because our customers use our products outside of business hours.

**BI: What is the biggest challenge you see facing the industry in the short and long-term?**

**SB:** Short term: what is the economy going to do in the next six months? In addition, will we still continue to have parts shortages?

Long-term: How are we going to sustain the boating industry? Who can afford boating? Are the middle-class boaters going to return, or have they been permanently priced out of the lifestyle?

**BI: When you're not working, what's on your agenda for fun?**

**SB:** Fishing! Cooking, being outside and hanging with my friends and family.

**BI: Your top business book and author?**

**SB:** My foundation author is Dr. Norman Vincent Peale and his Power of Positive Thinking. My dad made me read it, and it's the best book a woman could have.

My favorite lines: "Formulate and stamp indelibly on your mind a mental picture of yourself as succeeding. Hold this picture tenaciously. Never permit it to fade." This is important because we always tend to go towards the negative when things are not going our way. We think it's our fault, and we are not very forgiving of our own mistakes.

The most recent book that influenced my business mindset was 212 The Extra Degree: Extraordinary Results Begin With One Small Change, by Sam Parker and Mac Anderson. It confirmed my philosophy of not getting upset when encountering obstacles; instead, go that extra step to achieve success.

**BI: Finally, any words you live by?**

**SB:** "Treat others the way you want to be treated." I always remember my dad telling me to "Do the right thing!"

Also: Find the thing that makes your heart happy ... the marine industry and its people have been mine! ●