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Boating's diverse future begins to take shape

Posted on June 12th, 2012 Written by [Wanda Kenton Smith](#)



I must admit I felt a sense of validation when I reviewed the executive summary of the Recreational Boating Leadership Workshop held in early April. As you know, this was the second meeting of the retooled Grow Boating group that came together initially in December 2011, now scaled down to a more manageable group of 40 participants that represented a mix of industry sectors.

Based on the original survey results of that much larger initial group, six of the highest-ranked areas of focus have been identified and prioritized for development during a three-year period. I have personally tackled four of those six topics through the years and have heartily championed two.

I often felt like the Lone Ranger, frustrated that the industry leadership just didn't seem to understand the opportunity associated with these potentially powerful initiatives. As you might imagine, I'm feeling quite like the Cheshire Cat at the moment. We might be late to the dance, but we're finally grooving to the right beat.

The top-ranked priority out of that second Chicago gathering was development of the marketing and message campaign. I really like the fact that the committee has tasked itself with improving "stakeholders' understanding and support of Discover Boating and Welcome to the Water."

To this day, many in the industry have never heard of Welcome to the Water and have no clue about the marketing tools available. An industry-focused educational campaign is critical if we hope to get everyone aboard and working together and to leverage all of the available tools to maximize our reach and return.

I don't believe we can possibly overcommunicate to the industry. Industry partnership, in conjunction with better coordination of industry media, makes perfect sense, as does delivering the message through a variety of targeted events and gatherings. The old rule of thumb in advertising: three times in before the message sticks. So we have to hammer the message into every pocket of the industry and make it easy to understand and resource the available support materials.

1. Here I get to do cartwheels. Finally we will have a youth initiative, which is the second top priority the task force established. I have long believed we were missing the boat because we have perpetually targeted the aging white male demographic, our staple of old. I've addressed the need

for us to introduce our sport to kids and to understand how much power and influence they wield on the family's leisure time and budget.

I have shared the awesome buying power of kids and the size and scope of that financial impact. I have watched in amazement as these youngsters led their mom and dad to the boat show booth, pointed out the tricked-out \$90,000 wakeboard boat they wanted and, within an hour, walked away with it. I've complimented the ski and wakeboard sector, which has engaged and embraced the youth market. This niche is youth-savvy and the rest of us can learn from its experience.

I have also shared success stories from the sailing sector — how its youth sailing programs have developed lifelong sailors. Community, club and college sailing programs provide excellent case studies.

I've also begged our industry to develop sports figures and celebrity role models who can inspire and motivate youngsters.

Here's my point: if we don't create and find ways to develop young boaters, we have no future. It's that simple.

My understanding is that this task force group will focus on promoting youth boating programs and developing tool kits for schools and youth organizations, while educating industry segments on how to develop youth programs in their respective markets. We'll also inventory existing programs at the local level.

In addition, there is a focus on developing a youth and parent marketing/engagement arm as part of Discover Boating. I like the idea of piloting test programs and supplementing them with best practices so we learn firsthand and can share what works. All of this represents a good, healthy start.

However, I would hope the initiative also will undertake youth focus groups so we understand the perception issues associated with boating. I also encourage us to reach outside our market and learn from successful youth programs in other sports. And no doubt, accessibility to boats and boating among youngsters is an obvious issue that has to be considered.

The third area of focus is affordability. Not only must this group develop an affordability marketing message for different segments, complete with a "how-to guide" for public consumption, as is planned, but we also need to ensure that we best position the value of boating and the unique return on investment it delivers.

No one in his or her right mind buys a boat because it makes financial sense. People buy the boating experience and lifestyle because of what it delivers. In my estimation, that is what we have to nail down at the pinnacle of the affordability messaging.

Fourth on the list and most exciting for me: We're finally talking diversity. To quote: "The diversity group's priority actions were to change the industry mindset to appreciate and understand diversity as an enormous business opportunity; and develop and implement a cross-industry effort to reach out and provide minorities with exposure to the boating lifestyle and boating experiences."

Hallelujah! This has been among my chief marketing messages for 20-plus years. I and a few others have worked hard to raise awareness of the fast-changing U.S. demographic, but it seemed the message always fell on deaf ears.

I've addressed the buying power of affluent African-Americans, Hispanics and the gay and lesbian

communities and the enormous opportunity it represents. Perhaps now, with an industry leadership stamp of approval, we can finally move into the future with more gusto.

It appears from the report that much of the initial focus here will be on researching data in order to quantify potential while developing a multiyear plan, followed by promotion and outreach. Once again, I recommend focus group activities within these targeted markets.

We also must identify minority boating groups that are already in place and tap them for participation and feedback. I'd also love to see some test market programs on a small scale, and to learn whether there are case studies in any minority marketing activities within our industry. There are organizations in place that educate and assist us. We need to tap their knowhow in this critical conversation.

I firmly believe the focus on youth and diversity markets will bear fruit.

The final two committees are education and advocacy/accessibility, both of which are worthy topics but do not require marketing commentary from this camp.

In conclusion, I am stoked by the progress made since the initial meeting in December. I was concerned that we might be riding a slow boat to China, but I'm cautiously optimistic that we seem to be heading in the right direction. I've been waiting for this for a long time and I can't wait to see the more youthful, multicultural mix of boating's future begin to take shape.

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