

NOVEMBER 2007 WHITE PAPER

Boating INDUSTRY

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eProfitability

Developing the right approach to your online business.

- How to convert a Web lead into a walk-in customer ●
- 5 keys to better online customer service ●
- 7 strategies for increasing online sales ●
- Managing your 24-hour showroom ●
- Tips for a steady supply of leads ●
- When opportunity knocks ●
- What is eMarketing? ●

Boat Trader
www.boattrader.com™

TRADERMEDIA

Lori Stacy

Vice President Trader Media
Boats, RV, Aviation and General Merchandise

Dear Colleague,

For more than 30 years, Boat Trader® has shared in the rising and receding tides of the marine industry with dealers and consumers. This year has shown rougher seas than those in the past, but the dealers who were well-prepared have taken the opportunity to hone their skills and run their businesses in a manner that will produce revenue and market share growth where none was believed to be possible.

Boat Trader is pleased to partner with *Boating Industry* magazine and sponsor this e-White Paper, developed to share expert advice, tips and best practices from some of the industry's leading companies.

Boat Trader remains dedicated to the success of the marine industry and is committed to providing guidance and statistics to each and every business. Your growth will help the industry succeed and ensure more consumers enjoy boating. We are confident that the information contained here will draw us closer to that reality.

If you are interested in more information regarding these best practices or other information, please contact us at 877-354-4069.

Sincerely,

Lori Stacy
Vice President
Boat Trader®



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Solutions for online results

The holiday season is right around the corner, and already, record numbers of shoppers are *not* showing up in malls and stores around the country. Instead, they're staying at home, clicking their way to an anticipated \$33 billion, according to an article in the *Arizona Republic*, in online retail sales – up some 22 percent from last year.

Each year, consumers are spending more and more money through Internet shopping, overcoming any reservations they may have once had about divulging credit card information to someone else's server. Retailers, according to a study conducted by Shop.org and Forrester Research, are catering to these consumers by improving their Web site design and performance issues, improving the efficiency of online marketing and enhancing cross-channel integration.

On the marine front, boat dealers have increasingly voiced discontent over what they perceive as shrinking show room and boat show visitors. The culprit? In their minds, the Internet.

And perhaps it's true. The Internet, as noted by Duane Spader in the first of the following articles in this e-White Paper, is being used for most consumers' educational purposes, especially when it comes to big-ticket purchases such as boats. But the reality is, those consumers – in most cases – must still visit the show room or the boat show in order to make the purchase.

So it stands to reason that the real problem with any perceived decrease in traffic or sales may be found in the average marine dealer's approach to conducting business online. The presentation and execution of your Web presence today is just as critical as that at your brick-and-mortar store. And the average marine dealer's understanding of that is just now coming of age.

As dealers throughout the industry are pouring an increasing amount of their marketing dollars into developing that understanding, *Boating Industry* and Boat Trader thought it a perfect time to deliver, through this e-White Paper, an impressive list of expert advice, tips, ideas and best practices for you to study and learn from.

We hope these solutions will deliver winning results for you in the coming year.



Matt Gruhn
Editor-in-Chief
Boating Industry magazine

Confirming knowledge

How the right sales process will help you capitalize on today's Web-savvy customers.

BY DUANE SPADER, WITH MATT GRUHN

FOR MANY long-time dealers who have been slow to embrace the opportunities of the Internet, let me just tell you: I can relate. Admittedly, I was hesitant about jumping into the world wide fray too quickly, and for years I cautioned anyone who would listen to be careful about jumping too far too fast.

But that was several years ago. And if you're not online and taking it seriously by now, you're most likely in a long, slow decline toward extinction.

I don't enjoy making such daunting statements, but it's true. For today's savvy dealers, the Internet is becoming, if it hasn't already become, one of the primary marketing tools available.

I've been around long enough to liken the Internet revolution to other forms of media that have risen to dominance in marketing. Most notably, there was television advertising, attracting more sophisticated, forward-thinking businesses away from radio and newspapers back in the 60s and 70s. I built my dealership on making that transition at the right time. Now, the Internet, and all of its interactive power, is justifiably taking marketing power away from television and away from boat shows.

But the Internet and its effect on our businesses also remind me of the influence toll-free numbers had on dealer sales in the recent past. In fact, their impact on our sales force and our sales processes has been strikingly similar.

And unfortunately, for those dealers who don't "get it," those impacts have been quite negative. Just consider all the complaints of how the Internet customer is difficult and may be slowing floor traffic or boat show traffic. Think about how often we hear the woe-is-me stories of customers who are better educated than our sales reps in both product knowledge and price ranges.

First of all, I don't believe that the Internet is slowing traffic. And second, why is it a bad thing that customers are educated on what they want to buy? It's not the customer or his knowledge that's the problem; it's the sales person's lack of understanding of the customer's buying sequence and his or her lack of a professional sales process that probably is the primary problem.

We teach in our courses that there are three distinct phases to the buying process: education, confirmation and purchase. The education phase is typically bolstered by marketing efforts, and these days, the Internet is the first place people – in all age brackets – turn for that education because they can obtain it at their own pace and time

They can find more details, more specs, more reviews, more comparisons online than any advertisement or boat show could ever offer them.

But then customers don't just remove the next two phases of the buying process, especially the confirmation phase. They still need to confirm what they've learned, so they use the showroom and the boat shows to do that. But they often first seek confirmation from dealers who have gained their trust and respect through the use of the Internet and its educational opportunities. And they only show up at your dealership if you earned that.

They can find more details, more specs, more reviews, more comparisons online than any advertisement or boat show could ever offer...

Confirming
knowledge
CONTINUED
ON PG 6

Confirming knowledge CONTINUED FROM PG 5

Once you've got them into your dealership, helping them through the purchase phase is often easier. That is, if your sales processes are prepared for it.

What we find, unfortunately, is that these knowledgeable consumers put our salespeople out of their comfort zone and into what we call the stress zone. This is where the sales person feels pressured by the consumer's knowledge, and they often try to sell only on price. At that point, the customer really takes over the professional control of the sale.

It doesn't have to be that way, though. In fact, if your sales people are trained to listen well enough and follow a professional sales process, the customer will tell them exactly how they should be sold. A good salesman may say, "Wow. You know more about the boat you want than I may know. Tell me how you learned all this."

Then, instead of taking them out to the lot and walking them through and educating them on 40 different boats, the salesperson needs to find out why they have come to the buying conclusion they have and capitalize on it. Fully one-third of the entire buying process may have been done through the Internet before the salesperson gets involved. When a major portion of the sales process – the education phase – already is completed, it doesn't get much better than that, especially when the customer gets what he wants, the sales rep gets the sale, and margins are kept thanks to a professional sales process. However, it all starts with a good Web site.

The key is, though, that you have to do a good job online in order to capitalize on this shortened buying cycle. Your goal should be to develop a relationship with people viewing your site online. Provide them with the information they're looking for and then respond to them in a timely fashion. They can find the information just about anywhere, but if you're the one that develops the relationship with them – if you're the one that becomes their expert – you're the one they most likely will turn to in the confirmation and purchase stages. It's not easy with or without the Internet, but it's far more difficult without a professional sales process in either case.

[Duane Spader is the founder of Spader Business Management, a training and consulting company based out of Sioux Falls, S.D. Spader hosts 20 Groups, conducts a number of classroom training programs, and consults with and coaches dealers in a number of industries. You can educate yourself at \[www.spader.com\]\(http://www.spader.com\), 800/772-3377, or \[info@spader.com\]\(mailto:info@spader.com\).](#)

BEST PRACTICES



FOR MORE INFORMATION...

Don Bandemer of Chapman's Sports Center understands the needs of potential boat buyers and truly incorporates this knowledge into his online marketing strategy.

As the company's sales manager, Bandemer takes photographs of his own inventory to use in his online ads, rather than using manufacturer photos. He photographs each boat from every angle to ensure that his ads provide an adequate graphical representation of what he has to offer.

"Customers like seeing the actual boat that is for sale and not pictures out of a brochure," he says. "Remember that [the consumers] are shopping on the Internet. They want to know the boat as well as they can. I try to make it possible for anyone to shop my boats from their living room. I do this by making the product that they see on the computer as close to what they would see in the showroom as possible."

He also tries not to inundate consumers with a lot of unneeded information. Instead, he asks himself what his customers typically want to know about his boats and incorporates those specifications into his online ads. He also writes his own descriptions rather than using the descriptions provided by the manufacturers.

"I realize that what I do takes more time and effort, but my hard work really pays off," he says.

Bandemer's ads rarely result in inquiries for more information. Instead, the e-mail and phone leads he receives are typically from buyers that are ready to start the buying process. He continues to receive positive feedback from customers regarding his online advertising. He has yet to have anyone tell him that his ads were missing details of any kind.

"The people who see my ads feel like they know my products before coming to my showroom," Bandemer says.

This allows him to quickly develop rapport with new customers. Being able to connect with customers as rapidly as he does helps him transition into the buying process smoothly. Bandemer proves that it is too late to wait until a consumer makes contact with a dealership to start meeting consumer expectations.

To be successful today, boat sellers must anticipate the needs of the customer and ensure that any marketing efforts meet those needs.

— Kati Huber, Boat Trader

Tell your 'story' online

To build trust and respect, sales reps should sell themselves, then the dealership, then the product. Use your Web site to help.

BY DAVID PARKER, PARKER BUSINESS PLANNING

Web sites are like boat shows, where every dealer is on an even playing field. And, like it or not, the use of the Internet for selling is here to stay, so we should make the most of it.

Dealer Web sites seem to range from "I have got to have one, so let's throw something up there" to "high-tech wonders." The best Web sites communicate the dealer's story in a way that effectively drives the customer to contact the dealership, either by phone, email, or best of all, a personal visit.

Since the goal of a Web site is to motivate a customer to contact the dealership, the next question is, how well do we handle the contact from the customer? If a customer waits days for a response to an e-mail inquiry, you are "missing the boat." Today's customer expects to be contacted in a few hours, if not minutes.

The latest technology can send e-mail inquiries directly to a PDA so you can respond with a live contact almost immediately, either by phone or email. And that live response is significantly better than a canned response. A dealership that is not heading in this direction will be falling behind in the not-to-distant future.

For a customer to buy a large ticket item such as a boat from you, you'll need to develop a relationship with the prospect. Any long-term business relationship is built on trust, respect and professionalism. And a dealership can start the process of building this relationship by telling its "story" on its Web site.

The selling process consists of several very important steps that should never be overlooked. The salesperson needs to sell himself or herself first, then the dealership, then the product and lastly the price – in that order. Communicating the first two of these steps is done very effectively in story format. Stories can communicate a lot of things at once, either good or bad, so give significant thought to how you will tell your story.

Here, then, is how you make the sale:

Sell the Salesperson by telling their "story" Include photos and a bit of personal history, such as how and why they got into boat sales. Perhaps the salesperson likes to hear customers tell you how much fun they had together as a family last weekend. Or perhaps he/she likes to help people create memories for a lifetime. The Grow Boating Web site has a video called "Good Run" that tells the story of boating's memories very well. You can view it by going to: <http://www.growboating.org/marketing/advertising/viral/goodrun.aspx>. This video can be linked to your Web site as well.

In addition, it's helpful to include a sentence or two on why the staff likes working at the dealership. Don't forget this step, as

customers like to do business with satisfied employees. It gives them confidence that management is reasonable and stable and that the salesperson will be there the next time they return.

Sell the Dealership by telling its story Here's the place to give a bit of the history of the dealership, how and why the business was founded and why the owners like working there. One salesperson tells his customers, "You know why I like working for this dealership? When I first started with this company I was docking a boat prior to it's delivery to the customer, and I scratched it while backing it into the slip. The dealership owner happened to see it and simply said to get the scratches fixed before the customer takes delivery." What was unstated but communicated in the story is that this owner had integrity. The salesperson liked being associated with people like that, which implied he had integrity also.

Sell the Product Listing new and used product in inventory on your site is essential, especially with used. Be sure to include at least five pictures or more for all used and brokerage boats. With new boats, links to manufacturers' Web sites typically also work well. Just make sure when the prospect leaves the factory Web site they are brought back to yours.

A payment calculator is also helpful so prospects can get an idea of what their payments will be. Other nice features, if you are a marina, can include a link to www.weather.com, Web cams of your location and each slip so the customer can see their boat in the water anytime they want.

There are several different ways you can get your Web site up and running. You can use one of the industry companies such as Channel Blade or Marine Web Services, who typically charge a monthly fee to set up and host your site. They tend to be rather robust in their offerings and turn-key in their approach. Or you could use a company like "Joomla" that provides templates for do-it-yourself Web site setup. It is a bit like using Microsoft Excel only for Web sites. These are much less expensive than the marine industry-specific companies but take more knowledge of how to build and operate a site.

In building your site, it's a good idea to look at the Web sites of *Boating Industry's* Top 100 Dealers for great ideas of what to have on your Web site. Don't forget your site a great place to start telling your "story" and begin building the trust necessary for successful sales at your dealership.

David Parker is president of Parker Business Planning, a consulting and 20 Group hosting company that specializes in the marine industry. You can contact David at 407/843-8808 or www.parkerbusinessplanning.com.

Translate online leads into real sales

Use proper nurturing to turn Grow Boating leads into lifelong customers.

BY THOM DAMMRICH, NATIONAL MARINE MANUFACTURERS ASSOCIATION

One of the most critical components to success of our industry's Grow Boating Initiative is bringing new people into recreational boating. Throughout the last two years we've worked diligently and been successful at moving the needle, making more Americans aware of the great benefits of the boating lifestyle.

We still have a long way to go, however. There are tens of thousands of new customers that have raised their hand and said, "I'm interested," and now it's your job to transform these boating prospects into boat owners.

To make this process as easy as possible, we've created the Discover Boating Lead System, (DBLS), through which contributing boat manufacturers and Marine Industry Certified Dealerships can directly access consumer leads generated through the DiscoverBoating.com Web site.

The prospects in the DBLS have specifically requested contact by a manufacturer or dealer, which signals they are ready to learn more and are thinking about buying a boat, if not already closer to making the actual purchase decision.

Lead management, like that provided by the DBLS, is a process of nurturing and communicating with sales prospects, with the ultimate goal of converting them to new, satisfied customers. A dealership's sales pipeline and ability to hit revenue targets all begins with good, solid lead management. The DBLS gives dealers and manufacturers the guidance and tools necessary to develop a plan aimed at nurturing prospects over time, eventually transforming them into boat owners.

It's important to remember that many prospects generated via DiscoverBoating.com are new to boating and therefore require several touch points and follow-up activity. And our Grow Boating research indicates that, on average, the time between first considering buying a boat and the actual purchase date can take up to three years to complete. By giving these prospects the information they need to make a decision, you can shorten that cycle.

In 2008, we need to work on improving our ability to nurture budding consumer interest over longer periods of time in order to convert "interested" parties into actual boat owners. In the past, we've suffered from a lack of enthusiasm in these longer-term prospects, instead choosing to focus on the consumer ready to buy "right now." I understand the need to make sales today, but we also need to build a pipeline of future customers. Failure to cultivate those whose buying horizon is a little longer may alienate some of the best future prospects we have.

To do this, dealerships need to consider assigning someone the task of cultivating longer-term prospects, setting up future prospects for the months and years ahead. This helps create a pipeline of customers and a dealership's ability to transform long-lead prospects into boat owners and lifelong customers.

We understand there is some skepticism regarding the longer-term Discover Boating leads, particularly given the consistent, steady follow-up many of them require. But the fact of the matter is these leads are real; they are genuine, potential customers that, given the proper nurturing and information they need to make an informed decision, can turn into customers not just once, but several times over and hopefully for life.

Many dealers are already starting to capitalize on these leads. Dealers that get out of the gate first and pursue these leads are the ones who will benefit most, leaving everyone else asking, "Why didn't I do the same thing when I had the chance?"

Here are a couple classic success stories that illustrate the value of taking Discover Boating leads seriously:

- Dealers from Indiana and Colorado told us the Discover Boating leads saved their summer; that they were among the best leads they received.
- A Marine Industry Certified Dealer at the GE Dealer Council Meeting said he has one sales person who took the incoming Discover Boating leads seriously and worked them with care. In one month, he had achieved \$1,000 in extra commission directly attributable to his work with those leads. Word spread quickly, and the principal at the dealership now has all of his salespeople wanting to pursue these leads.

We encourage all manufacturers and dealers to visit GrowBoating.org and download the DBLS Management and Best Practices Guide, which can be found under the "Marketing" section of the Web site. The guide provides great suggestions on how to handle incoming leads and move them through the buying cycle until they purchase.

Discover Boating leads are a major piece of the overall industry plan to get more people interested in boating and buying boats, and long-lead customers are too important to ignore. Discover Boating prospects can be sold if you work them with an understanding of their needs and horizon time for buying.

Thom Dammrich is president of Grow Boating Inc. and the National Marine Manufacturers Association. Get more information www.grow-boating.org.

5 keys to better customer service

You have a Web site; now make it generate sales.

BY VALERIE ZIEBRON, VRZ CONSULTING

Let's be honest. Almost every marine dealer has a Web site these days.

Evidence of this was clear at a seminar I attended recently. Nearly 100 percent of the more-than-100 dealers in the room shot up their hand when asked whether or not they had a site. Of those who did have a site, however, only a few of those hands – those connected to entrepreneurial minds – could say they were using the site to create increased sales or to maximize service efficiency or parts profitability.

Sure, it may take extra time and effort to fully invest in the potential of your Web site, but these dealers were realizing impressive results for very little to no extra cost.

The following 5 items were the keys to their success:

1. Following up with prospects. Their sales leads, especially at events like boat shows or open houses were followed up with the same day that the prospect looked at boats. The customer returns home to find an e-mail (and a photo of the boat) from their sales professional. Some sales people even try to get a photo of the customer with the boat. At the end of an event day it is easy to be 'too tired' to take this extra step, but it really increases the closing ratios for some happy, albeit tired sales staff.

2. Adding a shopping cart feature. This can usually be done for prices starting at a couple hundred dollars, but can cost up to a couple thousand dollars depending on who you have do it. The convenience that this provides, allowing customers to shop for parts and accessories without ever leaving home, means that your online location becomes equally important as your physical location, and your reach can extend well beyond your state line, adding bottom-line dollars to your parts department.

3. Offering service scheduling online. This can be a tremendous value to both dealerships and customers. It's interesting to note that many of these appointments are scheduled after normal business hours, making you available 24/7 for your customers. It is best to have it set up so the customer provides information on the boat, themselves, and a complete list of the items they want serviced. This info should automatically be sent to a service professional's e-mail or to a dedicated fax in the service department so an appointment confirmation response can be sent quickly to the customer once parts and tech availabil-

ity have been verified. Offering pick-up and drop-off service is another plus that some of these convenience customers are happy to pay for.

4. Checking service status online. Some stores have taken point No. 3 one step further and are allowing service customers to check on the status of their boat's repairs online. This can help cut down the number of phone calls coming in to the service department and allow some flexibility in customer communication.

5. Increasing CSI focus. It is important to note with all of these examples, that computers and Web sites don't create customer satisfaction and profitability; people do. Have you ever heard someone say something like "someday, when we build a new dealership, we will be able to get high CSI," or "someday when we have the right computer system and Web site, the dealership will be organized"? Even in print these excuses don't work as a get-out-of-responsibility-free card. A state-of-the-art facility or a cutting-edge computer system can certainly help you enhance what you already have, but it is rarely the end-all solution.

Many years ago, I was working as a service advisor for a very nice modern shop. One day the computer system broke down. All of management stood around contemplating the crisis. Should we shut down for the day? Finally a technician asked, "why not hand-write the work orders until the computers are back up?"

That was an interesting day. Sure it took extra time and that required more time with the customer to collect information that was once available with the push of a button. We were not as convenient as we normally were. But some customers really seemed to appreciate the extra attention and time spent connecting with them.

Good old-fashioned customer service will never be replaced by technology. So before you search down the latest and greatest in anything, make sure you are not trying to make up for inadequacies in customer service but rather genuinely trying to enhance what your people are already doing well.

Valerie Ziebron has delivered more than 3,000 presentations and has worked with more than 500 dealerships to create powerful training courses. You can reach her at 313.506.8069 or www.valerieziebron.com.

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7 strategies for increasing online sales

Tips for turning your Internet department into a sales powerhouse.

BY KELLY O'CONNELL, THE KELLY O'CONNELL GROUP

As we enter 2008, marine dealers are facing a number of tough questions regarding their online presence. Is the Internet as powerful as we all hear? Are potential customers really doing as much online research as we're lead to believe? Do we need to develop a more structured Internet department?

The answer to these questions is, "yes," in all cases. And to help you manage your online presence a little better, here are seven key strategies to turn your Internet department into a sales powerhouse today.

1. Get your inventory online. The fact is, more than 90 percent of customers will visit a dealer's Web site before ever calling or visiting the showroom. So, should you have your entire inventory online? Absolutely.

2. Dedicate people to handle leads. The one key element to making the Internet work for you is something we call "timed response." Many dealers say they respond to leads within a couple hours, or even 24 hours. When you develop a proper Internet department you will need to have dedicated people to respond to the customer's inquiries within *minutes*. Timing is critical to capitalizing on online leads.

3. No auto response. Forget the auto response e-mails back to your customers. That might work in other businesses, but not in the marine business. Because the marine business is such a relationship and lifestyle sale, your goal should be to have personal service and personal responses directed to exactly what the customer's questions and desires are. You want your dedicated Internet people to send a personal response immediately.

4. Get them on the phone. Yes, the Internet is a powerful tool, but we still need to get the customer on the phone to start the process of relationship selling. One of the keys to pulling off successful Internet sales is to train salespeople to leave the keyboard alone if the customer includes a phone number. Our goal as a dealership is to turn an Internet lead into a sales call. Once the salesperson can get the customer on the phone, they have a greater chance of setting the appointment and getting the customer into the dealership.

5. Tracking the leads. You will never succeed with your online business without proper tracking. We want to track how many leads come in; how many leads are converted to phone leads; how many of the leads are turned into a scheduled appointment; how many of the appointments show up; and finally, how many of those appointments are converted to sales. Seeing real results in these areas every month will take the guesswork out of identifying the areas you can improve on.

6. Management involvement. Use our 24-hour rule. If a lead comes in and then does not respond within 24 hours to the salesperson's personalized e-mail, it's time for a manager to get involved. The manager should send a personalized e-mail to the customer or make a follow-up call on behalf of the dealership. Make sure you maximize efforts on every lead within 24 hours to ensure you never leave a lead unattended.

7. Expect less. Every training company will say, "If you do this, you will see huge results." That's easy when you're trying to sell someone an Internet department, but truth be told, it's not the fastest sale in our industry. Be prepared to put in 90 days of focus and work with your people before you start seeing results from online leads. The Internet takes time and focus from a dealership management team in order for it to be successful.

8. Updated inventory. One key to pulling this off is to always update your new and used inventories online. Whenever you bring in a new or used unit, send an e-mail to all the prospects you've generated. Remember that upwards of 90 percent of people are flexible on what they end up purchasing in regard to certain equipment and color, etc. Update your Internet customers in an effort to get a secondary response, and often times that can result in an appointment.

Slow the process down and manage it daily, and I guarantee you will build a successful department that will help your dealership grow now and in the future.

Kelly O'Connell is president of The Kelly O'Connell Group Inc., a dealer sales and management training solutions company. For more information call 888-587-7555 ext 102 or visit them online at www.kellyoconnellgroup.com.

Internet intelligence

There are dozens of routes dealers can take to find success online.

BY LISA YOUNG, *BOATING INDUSTRY MAGAZINE*

REPRINTED FROM THE NOVEMBER 2007 ISSUE OF *BOATING INDUSTRY MAGAZINE*.

So you have a Web site. Big deal.

It's time to start actually doing something with your Web presence instead of letting it sit there and maybe updating your site once a month.

What further proof do you need than the increase over the last several years of buyers walking into your showroom armed with hours of Internet research? This trend is only growing, of course. My 16-year-old brother and legions of his peers (your future customers) barely remember life before the Internet, which has become such a part of their daily lives they may not know where to turn without it.

Becoming more active online isn't a go-big or go-home scenario; there are dozens of routes dealers can take, and no right or wrong way to do so, as long as they are engaging their customers instead of standing on the sidelines.

Updated content is a key driver in keeping people interested in a Web site. Web experts note there is a difference between updating a Web site and updating content. New content should be added as often as possible and practical, whereas the cosmetic features of a site should get a minor facelift every six to 12 months. Inventory should always be kept up to date online. And the homepage should be fresh. Experts recommend all Web content be reviewed every three to six months.

Another one of the first steps in becoming more active on the Web is fully utilizing what's already available. Many dealers use Web solutions providers such as Channel Blade or Marine Web Services to develop their Web site.

Both companies have a basic template that includes an events calendar, a feature that few dealers bother to post their events on. So start doing so and include as many details as possible.

Not only will this entice online visitors to pause longer on the site, but it will also draw more foot traffic into the store for the events from people who didn't hear about it through other advertising.

As *Time* magazine noted in naming "You" as its person of the year for 2006, "You control the Information Age. Welcome to your world." Consumers are in the driver's seat, and the road is open for marine businesses to dive in and give their Web viewers more ways to interact not only with the dealership, but also with each other.

Consumers
are in the
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The most one-dimensional way to engage your Web visitors is through starting a blog. Yes, you're busy, but there has to be someone at your dealership who wouldn't mind spending 15 minutes of his or her day or week telling the world a little bit about what you do.

Whether it's purely informational or purely for fun, entries (and ensuing comments) allow consumers a chance to connect with your business on a different level, in addition to giving them a reason to stop by the

Updated
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interested in a
Web site.

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Internet Intelligence

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site regularly and participate.

Adding a forum to your Web site also offers a more dialogue-friendly approach to building a boating community. Sure there are numerous such outlets available on the Web, but yours could fill a much-needed niche surrounding your community. Service techs could take some time for shoptalk. You could promote your next big event and reminisce about those passed.

A forum also allows for user-generated content, the root of Web titans YouTube and Wikipedia. Your customers are proud of their boats and the adventures they take in them. You could also give them a medium to share their pictures, stories and videos.

Speaking of videos, it wouldn't hurt to post some on your Web site: a tour of your facility to familiarize people who haven't been, a highlight reel from your latest customer getaway, a showcase of your top boats.

It's certainly not the experience first-hand, but it can give potential customers the courage to take that next step and walk into your showroom. While you're at it take advantage of YouTube's free posting and upload some of your video there.

AND A COUPLE OF NOTES ON THE BUSINESS OF USING THE WEB.

First of all, track Web statistics. Web solutions providers should be able to provide this information, from what IP addresses visited the site to how long they stayed on what pages and everything in between. The same can be done for click-thrus on Web advertisements.

Statistics suggest far less than 10 percent of leads generated from the Internet turn into sales. This shouldn't and doesn't have to be the case. Processes and procedures for Web lead response should be in place with a single person in charge of forwarding, upon receipt, inquiries to the salesperson responsible. Sales people should be given a specific time frame allowed in which to reply to the lead. Communication is key to better lead turnaround in this area.

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BEST PRACTICES

BP FOR LESS INFORMATION...

Kyle Damron, sales rep at Hilltop Marine, has found success in intentionally leaving key details out of his Internet ads.

"My boss often gets mad and asks why I would leave out such a key detail," he explains, "and I tell him that by doing that I keep the phone ringing."

Damron recognizes the strength of Internet advertising knowing that a good portion of his dealership's incoming leads come from BoatTrader.com and boats.com; however, he also realizes that the Internet will never replace the power of a strong sales force. Damron believes that his online marketing efforts are responsible for initiating the incoming calls. He knows that his dealership's sales staff will be able to close the leads that he is able to procure.

Damron advises that he has to walk a fine line in that he needs to provide enough details to catch the interest of consumers while at the same time leaving enough out to make the consumer want to call the dealership to find out more.

Another significant part of Damron's online success involves including dealership information at the bottom of each online ad description. By doing this, he alerts consumers to other aspects of the dealership including other inventory available, which allows him to keep consumers interested even when the ad viewed did not meet the needs of the person viewing it.

This extra information encourages consumers to browse the rest of Damron's inventory and/or make inquiries directly to the dealership. Again, Damron knows that if his advertising can make the phone ring that his sales staff can make the sales.

— Kati Huber, Boat Trader

Stats suggest less than 10% of leads generated from the Internet turn into sales. This doesn't have to be the case.

Managing your 24-hour showroom

How the proper online system can impact your bottom line.

BY DAVID BINGHAM, BOAT TRADER

In a recent blog, I posed the question, “Are you running your online store like a brick and mortar store?” The post generated a series of responses, but I would like to take the discussion a step further as the industry continues to fight economic battles on several fronts.

Tighter home lending markets coupled with a dramatic increase in fuel costs makes consumers think twice about purchasing a boat. Though the used boat segment is less affected than the new boat segment, such a lean market creates a more competitive landscape overall.

So, how can we capitalize on every opportunity and resist the urge to batten down the hatches and take cover from the storm? Those who take advantage of a tough market and aggressively pursue market share will maintain their position as leaders; for ideas on how you can do just that, use these concepts to become one of the market share winners.

To begin with, there are several components of managing your online inventory that tend to be overlooked and undermine the effectiveness of a 24-hour showroom. These include the number of ads online, effective ad creation, and developing the value of your dealership.

Remember, your online showroom is no different from that in your brick and mortar store – units in the store, unit placement, and curb appeal of your dealership versus the dealership down the street are what matter. As we move full-steam ahead into the digital age, it is important to manage online stores just as efficiently as one would his brick and mortar store.

With an average of two leads for every 10 boats listed online, the average boat dealer will see 582 leads from advertising with niche classifieds like Boat Trader. But the average dealer tends to list just 75 percent of its inventory online, putting them at risk of missing out on 145 leads annually.

So, how do these missed leads impact a dealer’s bottom line? Let’s take a look at the following example, which excludes services associated with finance and insurance, parts/service, rigging or ancillary:

Conservatively, if a dealer typically closes an average of just one of every 10 leads he receives, in this scenario of 145 lost leads, he has missed out on the opportunity of closing 14 sales. Assuming the average boat sells for \$25,000, the dealer is missing out on \$363,000 annually.

These numbers are staggering, but there are very simple solutions to help you capture those missed leads. The most successful dealers take advantage of every opportunity to inform potential buyers, providing them with detailed descriptions, multiple photos, and access to the complete inventory ... and not just on their own Web sites, but across the Internet. The major online classified portals such as BoatTrader.com, YachtWorld.com, boats.com, Usedboats.com and iBoats.com all offer unlimited inventory listings and multiple photos, so take advantage of the services offered.

Consumers begin the search for that perfect boat with preconceived notions and personal preferences, everything from the type of boat to the addition of a Garmin GPS on board. Would you ever

Your online showroom is no different from that in your brick and mortar store.

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bring a customer into your store and talk about the boats without letting them see, touch, and experience the boat? Of course not. So, the more detailed descriptions and photos each listing includes, the more likely you are to capture all possible search combinations.

Data from the Boat Trader Black Box reveals that the intensity of ads' descriptions is directly related to the visitors generated. In other words, ads with more detailed descriptions and keywords receive a higher volume of click-throughs.

Price is another very common search variable for consumers, and many dealers fall into the trap of using "Call for Price." Online consumers demand convenience and efficiency, so when they are presented with multiple ads with varying prices, they will sort by increasing price. "Call for Price" ads receive dramatically less response because they display at the bottom of price-sorted search results.

Now think about you brick and mortar store: The MSRP is presented on each boat, and the shopper is not required to speak to a sales representative to learn that information. If that same consumer wants to discuss extras and negotiate the price, then he seeks out a sales representative.

The same concept holds true for your online showroom. Manufacturer contracts prevent you from advertising anything other than MSRP in almost all cases; however, it is acceptable to list the MSRP price and note in the ad description that the price is the MSRP price. Most consumers understand that pricing and packaging varies with each dealer and will call for more information.

Lastly, it is important that you understand how to show the value of your dealership through effective branding campaigns. Very few dealerships take advantage of this opportunity in print or online, but branding is the foundation of attracting new customers, driving a higher margin, and communicating with long-time clients.

Your dealership's branding campaigns should differentiate you from the competition without using price. The dealers that integrate a well-thought-out branding campaign with overall advertising will experience as much as 60-percent increases in response to their listings.

As I mentioned in the beginning of this article, the new boat market is as unyielding as it has been in years. With an expected reduction in new unit sales, each lead is even more valuable.

The competition is fierce, so the question is, "Where will you be in 2008?" Will you be leading the way, or will you be following the competition? The answer is as simple as educating yourself on the ways consumers are shopping today and mastering traditional and online media to provide the results needed to grow your business in 2008 and beyond.

David Bingham is General Manager of Boat Trader and Yacht Trader magazine. For more information, check out BoatTrader.com or call 877/354-4069.

BEST PRACTICES

BP QUICK RESPONSE

Jarrett Bryzek, owner of International Yacht Network, is no stranger to Internet advertising. In fact, 95 percent of his advertising efforts involve online media.

He brokers boats across the country and finds that it is more effective for him to market all of his yachts nationally rather than a few of yachts regionally. Bryzek's ambition is to match buyers with sellers. It does not matter to him where the buyer is located, especially since his brokerage owns its own shipping company.

IYN advertises brokered vessels on a number of sites — BoatTrader.com, boats.com, YachtWorld.com, iBoats.com, BoatingBay.com, and a few other classified boating sites. Ads for his vessels also appear on Yahoo and Craig's list.

Bryzek instructs his brokers to anticipate and answer questions that consumers may have about the vessels they broker. He noticed that once his brokers began doing this that the number of incoming leads actually decreased. However, the leads he receives now are more qualified, which caused his closure rate to increase substantially. "Five out of ten leads," he says, "turn into sales."

The key to Bryzek's success may be that he responds to all incoming leads within hours of receipt. All leads are filtered through him first, and then he disseminates the leads to his brokers.

After business hours are over, he continues to be on the lookout for the arrival of new leads. Bryzek is determined to address leads as soon as he can to keep from losing the potential buyers to a competitor.

"People inquiring about my brokered yachts have something that I want: their money," he says. "I'm going to do anything in my control to ensure that I get it over another broker."

All of us could stand to learn something from Bryzek. His speedy response to leads allows him to continue to succeed even when the market is not favorable.

— Kati Huber, Boat Trader

What is eMarketing?

And how is it better than your grandfather's marketing?

BY KEN ROHMAN, THE AVALA MARKETING GROUP

"What's that you say? eMarketing? Well, that's just the same as regular ol' marketing but done over that Internet thingy... right?"

Yes and no. Simply put, eMarketing refers to the application of marketing principles and techniques via the Internet and other electronic media such as cell phones and PDAs. And there's a big difference between traditional marketing and eMarketing. Over the past few years marketing's "electronic cousin" has developed into a standalone discipline with its own benefits and objectives.

eMarketing gives even small companies a truly global reach. It's fast, adaptable, easily measurable and – relatively speaking – it's cheap. More and more often, eMarketing is being used to develop leads and manage customer satisfaction by delivering quality, convenience and customized interaction. At its best, eMarketing can help create "customers for life."

But let's back up and talk a little about how the Internet has changed the present dealer network. In the past, customers came into a dealership at the point of interest, looking for information and just beginning the buying process. Now, by the time they enter a dealership, most customers believe they know everything they want and are all the way through the funnel to the point of sale.

So the question is: How does today's dealer make a connection with his or her customer before they walk through the door? The answer: eMarketing.

A Compelling Web Presence

The Internet offers many eMarketing tools, the most familiar of which is the Web site. By now, we all know that a dealership Web site acts as an online extension of the business and should present a clear, valuable and consistent message. It's often the initial point of contact with consumers, and it needs to make a good first impression.

As a leading provider of interactive strategies and customer relationship management for the marine industry, we have developed a series of best practices for maximizing Web site structure, including:

- Make sure your URL/domain name has a clear correlation to your business.
- Include your dealership logo, accolades, location and hours of operation.
- Update your content frequently, especially boat inventory and pricing.
- Use high-quality photographs, plus exciting graphics and detail.
- Double check that the site loads properly on all browsers.

Finally, and most importantly, the site must be able to capture visitor data and convert it into sales leads. This can be accomplished through required registration, a request for the information, entry into a sweepstakes, subscription to an online newsletter, etc.

Building Customer Relationships

What is the number one reason dealers don't get a customer's e-mail address? They forget to ask for it. This is a huge missed opportunity.

E-mail marketing is without question the lowest-cost, highest-return marketing channel available today. A competent creative associate or outside agency can create an e-mail campaign template in a few short hours. Add in some copywriting time, and your dealership has a series of targeted e-mails that pro-

...a dealership
Web site acts
as an online
extension of
the business...

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How to convert a Web lead into a walk-in customer

Three ways you can succeed at responding to Web leads.

BY BOB MCCANN, CHANNEL BLADE TECHNOLOGIES

I often go mystery shopping on the Web on behalf of OEMs. I get to see the good, the bad and the ugly in terms of lead management and follow-up, and I use that evidence to help Channel Blade dealer clients implement best practices and stay away from major deal breakers.

For example, I once submitted a request for a price quote to 10 dealerships representing the same brand. The results were astonishing. First, I only received four responses. Second, only two of them answered my question and last but not least, one of the two sent me a 10-paragraph e-mail of endless rambling – seven days later. Would you still be interested at this point?

I've compiled three tips for you to ensure you don't fail to capitalize on a Web lead the way these dealers have.

1. You snooze, you lose.

More than 60 percent of prospects research their purchase online, visiting as many as seven Web sites. In this context, your Web site can be a powerful sales-driving tool.

When a customer walks into your dealership, you stop whatever you're doing and make sure not to leave them hanging. Web leads should be given the same prompt, undivided attention. It's just another way of talking to customers.

In this case, it is especially important to be responsive because you're competing with other dealers online. The good news is that most of them will not respond. In fact, nearly 60 percent of online leads go completely unanswered, so this is your chance to shine.

When you receive an e-mail inquiry, respond promptly. I'm talking about measuring response in minutes – not hours. I suspect you wouldn't make a customer wait in your lobby for more than a few minutes without saying hello. Why treat Web leads any differently?

Start by setting a Web lead response goal of 120 minutes and implement a plan of action to reduce that number over time.

2. Save the e-Pitch and get to the point.

It can be tempting to start selling a boat or

negotiating a deal using e-mail but beware. Research shows that there is a 50 percent chance that the recipient will misunderstand your intended message.

E-mail is an effective tool for initial information gathering, but once prospects have initiated contact, you should pick up the phone to further engage and get them through the door. When you're on the phone with a prospect, he or she gets to hear your words, as well the pitch and volume of your voice, which both carry attitude and tone.

When you write an e-mail, your hear the tone in your head, but no matter how many exclamation points and upper case letters you use, your prospect doesn't hear what you're really saying. Are you helpful or pushy, subtle or bold, casual or formal? Chances are that your attitude and tone are lost in translation. When all is said and written, the odds are your message didn't get across or worse – the prospect misunderstood you or is frustrated because all he or she wanted was a simple answer to a question.

Your e-mail response is an "electronic handshake." Thank the customer for inquiring, briefly and directly answer questions and set the stage for a phone call. If the inquiry includes a phone number, mention that you will call them to answer any further questions they may have. In terms of time frame, I suggest specifying a general time of day on the date you send the e-mail, such as "this morning, afternoon or evening," based on their preference if they've specified it in their form. If the inquiry doesn't include a phone number, indicate your interest in calling them to further assist them and offer your direct line as an alternative.

If you want to fully leverage the power of the Web, always respond to inquiries, be prompt and to the point, and create the opportunity for a phone call to get

When you write an e-mail... chances are that your attitude and tone are lost in translation.

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What is eMarketing?

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vide direct communication to your leads and customers throughout the year.

Taken a step further, an electronic Customer Relationship Management campaign contacts your leads and consumers at regular intervals – between 10 and 15 times annually – and it's not always to pitch a promotion. eCRM touch-points can be invitations to special events, birthday or holiday cards, service bulletins, e-newsletters and other value-added communications.

The bottom line is that happy customers are the lifeblood of future purchases. They typically remain customers longer, buy more often and refer more of their friends than do those who are dissatisfied. An ongoing campaign to existing owners is the most effective way to ensure that they will become lifelong customers.

The Future of eMarketing

With the arrival of mobile technologies, eMarketing has stretched even further. Projections indicate that by 2001 some 540 million households worldwide will have broadband Internet access. At the same time, 3.4 billion (that's billion with a "b") cell phones and PDAs with interactive capacities will be in use – nearly seven times the reach of computers.

Short Message Service is a means of sending and receiving text messages via cell phones. You can use it to notify leads and customers of special promotions, receive requests for more information, send service reminders and more. Think "texting" is limited to your 14-year-old daughter and her BFF? Think again. The technology is already being utilized by marketing powerhouses like Coca-Cola, Starbucks and BMW.

Like it or not, we've entered the 21st century, or in some cases been dragged into it kicking and screaming. Consumers have already embraced the online communications environment. Harnessing the eMarketing tools that can create customer relationships and extend the brand experience is the key to succeeding in the new consumer-centric marketplace. Don't let the digital boat buyer pass you by.

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prospects in the showroom for a scheduled appointment. The good news is that you can leverage proven, affordable lead management solutions to automate portions of the sales process and foster customer relationships. At Channel Blade, we find that successful dealers – small and large – rely on these easy-to-use processes to do the heavy lifting and generate Web-based, incremental traffic and sales.

3. Keep your ears open, listen effectively and ask engaging questions.

Once on the phone, you have two goals: begin building a relationship and secure an appointment at the dealership. Most people think they're good listeners when, in fact, they mostly pay enough attention to be able to phrase their comeback remark – a sure way to annoy your prospect right off the bat.

Listen intently to the words as well as the pitch and volume of the voice. That way, you can read between the lines and respond to any concerns or desires. When answering prospects' questions, be direct and to the point with your answers. When the time is right, ask open-ended questions to engage them. Get them to talk about their motivations, boating experience, family size, extra-curricular activities, likes and dislikes of their present boat and any other models they are considering. Use these hot buttons to create the desire to take the next step and visit your showroom.

Bottom line, profitable businesses treat their Web site and resulting leads as gold – especially in challenging economic conditions. There is no magic, one-size-fits-all formula, but there are affordable solutions from industry-leading providers that can help you increase sales and profitability.

If a quick e-mail or phone call could yield a single buyer from the 60 percent of leads that go unanswered, wouldn't you invest the time to put these ideas to use? Once you have prospects on your turf, impressed with your quick response and helpfulness, you have the upper hand and a much greater chance to turn them into customers

[Bob McCann is the director of education at Channel Blade Technologies, an online lead management solutions provider. You can reach the company at \[www.channelblade.com\]\(http://www.channelblade.com\) or 866/233-8300.](#)

Tips for a steady supply of leads

Creating an inviting, pleasant place for prospects to visit is only the first step in succeeding with your online presence.

BY DREW MCFADDEN, IBOATS

Marketing your dealership on the Internet and fishing have a lot in common.

Both fishing for the first time and putting your dealership on the Web are typically easy and inexpensive. But as anybody who's drowned a few worms can tell you, getting consistent results isn't as simple as baiting a hook and throwing it over the side of the boat.

Likewise, simply putting up a Web site for your dealership and calling it done is the Web marketing equivalent of taking your boat to a random spot off shore, dropping a line over the side and hoping you'll catch something. Sure, if you sit around long enough you may get a bite, but I wouldn't count on that strategy to fill the cooler on a regular basis.

Conversely, a pro angler can tell you what he's fishing for before he leaves shore, hit his mark, and come home with a full fish box on a regular basis. So what's the difference between the pro and the regular Joe? Knowledge, experience and equipment – but you have to have the first two before the last one will do you any good. It's the same with Internet marketing. Do it right and you'll have a steady supply of good quality leads.

If you'd rather stack the deck in your favor, here's what you'll need to be consistently successful when fishing for good Internet leads. First you'll need an online presence, which means you'll need a well-designed Web site.

Your online site can be just as important as your brick and mortar store because it is the first introduction to your business for many of your future customers. For this reason you want a site that presents your business in a clean and professional manner. Your site doesn't necessarily have to have all the bells and whistles, but it does need to be an inviting, pleasant place for a prospective customer to visit.

A poorly designed or executed Web site sends

prospective customers several messages about your business, and none of them are good. It says you are a small business with limited resources, you're amateur or new to the business and that you wouldn't be a pleasant place with which to do business. If you wouldn't be as proud to show a customer your Web site as your showroom, you've got some work to do.

Next, you've got to get people to go to your Web site. You can have the best Web site in the industry, but without traffic, it's useless, kind of like a million dollar fishing rig with a rank amateur at the helm. Therefore, when talking about Internet fishing, you need to know something about Search Engine Optimization (SEO) and Search Engine Marketing (SEM).

SEO is the art of designing your Web page so it is attractive to search engines for the types of search terms that lead people to what you are selling. Among other things, this includes such simple strategies as making sure your site's Title Tags and Header Tags contain appropriate information – including words such as: boat dealer, the names of the brands you carry, the city and state you do business in, the types of services you offer, etc. There are more complex SEO strategies as well, such as cross-linking with other relevant sites.

SEM is the practice of buying key words from search engines so that your ad will show at the top of the Sponsored Links when somebody searches for a specific term (for instance, "pontoon boats"). Done right, this can be a very cost-effective way to drive traffic and leads. Done wrong, this strategy will, at best, be ineffective and at worst expensive, as well.

To do it right you're going to need a healthy budget (\$100 a month won't make a dent), plenty of time for learning the system, setting up your account, developing your keyword list, testing and refining, and building the infrastructure to

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track your results and measure effectiveness.

You're not alone if SEO and SEM sound a little daunting. They are the knowledge and experience components of your successful Web marketing program, but not everyone has this knowledge or experience – or the time and resources to gain the knowledge they need.

That's how I feel about fishing. I love fishing, but with the demands of career and family I don't have the time, energy or resources to devote to building the knowledge or the gear stash required to be successful every time I go out. So I rent the expertise and hire a guide, ensuring a catch almost every time.

You can do the online equivalent of hiring a professional guide by listing your boat inventory on Web sites other than your own, such as iboats.com or BoatTrader.com. Sites like these have SEO and SEM staff with years of experience and multi-thousand dollar SEO and SEM budgets that attract huge quantities of people to their sites.

Listing your boat inventory with them virtually guarantees that you'll be "on the fish." And when you're on the fish you want as many lines in the water as possible, so listing with multiple sites is a sure-fire way to improve your catch.

Whatever you do with your site, make sure you reference the tips on page 23 of this e-White Paper to maximize your success.

Last but certainly not least, when you do get a lead (and you will), make sure you respond quickly (within hours, not days); respond with the info the prospect asks for; and respond in the manner (phone, e-mail, etc.) the prospect requests.

Happy Fishing.

Drew McFadden is VP, marketing services at iboats.com, an online new boat research and classifieds site that also offers such services as dealer Web site design and hosting. You can reach the company at 800/869-1686 x132 or www.iboats.com/dealers.



BEST PRACTICES

SUCCESSFUL MANAGEMENT

With more than 95 percent of the boats sold through his dealership involving the Internet to some extent, John Bradshaw, sales manager of Orion Marine, is a huge advocate of Internet advertising. He has been selling boats since the late 1960s and understands the difference that the Internet has had on the boat buying process.

"Today's buyer is more educated because of the Internet," he says.

The Internet has contributed significantly to Bradshaw's 2007 sales by allowing him to reach boat buyers not just in Michigan where he is located but also all over North America. In 2007 alone, Bradshaw has sold four boats to buyers in Canada, including one buyer who drove more than 1,500 miles to pick up his purchase.

According to Bradshaw, no single venue is the be-all and end-all of online marketing. He advises that having a mixture of online media is the secret to his Internet marketing success.

"I have been in advertising quite some time," he explains, "and I have found that utilizing a media mix is the key for any successful marketing strategy."

Currently, he promotes his new and used inventory via BoatTrader.com, Google, his manufacturer's Web site, and his own dealership Web site. Bradshaw manages his dealership's Web site himself. The advantage this gives him over a Web site maintained by a third party is that he is able to update it hourly, which ensures that his site always reflects his current inventory load.

In similar fashion, he keeps his BoatTrader.com inventory up-to-date. He realizes that every minute counts, as the consumer looking for the exact boat that he just received could be searching online at that moment, and he does not want to take the risk of losing that sale to another dealer. Bradshaw also knows the importance of removing an ad as soon as the boat is sold. Consumers become frustrated when inventory listed online is no longer available.

He has also incorporated a link on his Web site that allows consumers to opt into a mailing list that sends out alerts whenever he updates his pre-owned inventory.

"Sometimes I'll get a call within hours of making changes to my Web site," he says. "People will call in saying that they have noticed that I've changed the price on a boat that they had been eyeing for awhile."

This simple strategy has led to several sales that, otherwise, he might not have made.

There are several lessons that can be taken away from Bradshaw's online marketing strategy. Dealers should extend their reach on the Internet by focusing on more than one market. Consumers use a variety of sites when researching boats for sale; therefore, dealers must be located on as many sites as possible in order to maximize its reach. Also, dealers should make certain that the inventory they have listed online reflects the inventory they have in stock. Finally, dealers should look at creative ways to attract the online boating consumer's attention.

— Kati Huber, Boat Trader

When opportunity knocks

Three attitudes to avoid when considering your Web presence.

BY TAMARA DAILEY, MARINE WEB SERVICES

When opportunity knocks, one has to be ready to answer. In 2007 most dealers have answered the call of the Internet, but there are still those who do not see the value in an online presence and Internet lead management. Why have some dealers embraced the value of the Internet while others either lag behind in technology or stand steadfast in their decision to market their business offline?

According to statistics, average consumers are using the Internet to shop for boats. A recent comScore survey of boat buyers found that 63 percent of consumers were found to compare boats online and research at least seven sites before entering a dealership. The survey also found that 66 percent of buyers know what they are looking for when they enter a dealership based on their web site research.

Just two months ago, *Boating Industry* magazine looked into the marketing efforts of boat dealers throughout the country and reported compelling numbers for Internet marketing versus traditional methods. According to the report, the dealers increased their online spending by 47 percent in 2007. That's in addition to the 39 percent who maintained their current level of spending. Television and newspaper only experienced a 10 percent increase. Radio only experienced an 11 percent increase.

An October survey conducted by eMarketer, an independent Internet marketing firm, seems to only support these statistics, finding that 29 percent of search marketers found that print advertising was hard to gauge and 35 percent felt that is was of low value. The research goes on to say that 34 percent of search marketers felt that Search Engine Optimization and Pay-Per-Click advertising provided the strongest return on investment.

But what about those who shun statistics and do not invest in online spending? According to a survey of Internet specialists from Dominion Enterprises, a leading media and information services company serving the wide ranging needs of the real estate, apartment, automotive, specialty vehicle, employment, and travel industries, the reasons dealers reject the internet vary but can be summarized into three basic positions. They:

1. Are satisfied with their sales and/or customer base or have a basic Web site;

While some dealers aspire to be sales-generating powerhouses, there are those who just want to run a profitable business.

"Some dealers are in an area where they either have no competition," says Cleta Goode, a Dominion Enterprises sales professional, "or just don't care about their marketing as long as their businesses are profitable."

"Some dealers are not interested in going above and beyond," adds John Ryneska, a fellow Web services professional. "Most Web solution companies offer services far beyond a basic graphical Web site. But if a Web site isn't dynamic, doesn't generate leads, or doesn't show up on the search engines, it's almost as if it isn't even there – which defeats the point completely."

Dealers with basic Web sites may just want to cater to customers who are shopping for basic boats in a basic showroom.

According to the report, the dealers increased their online spending by 47 percent in 2007.

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2. Don't want to hire additional staff to maintain the Web site or handle increased leads

Today's Web solutions generally do not require "heavy-lifting." Understanding the diverse population of dealers ranging from independent, family-owned dealerships to chain operations, some Web services companies have created solutions that can be maintained without vast Internet knowledge and that organize leads in a manner that even the smallest dealership could manage.

"Some dealers see the value in a Web site, but simply are not interested in incurring additional cost," says Shannon Held, another Dominion Enterprises Web consultant. "They see Web sites as costly and think more about their additional hiring expenses versus the opportunity. But even with our simplicity, some dealers just are not interested in handling the additional traffic generated from a successful Web site."

3. Lack of trust or understanding of the Internet concept.

After conducting business for years with traditional marketing methods, some dealers feel that moving their marketing dollars to the Internet is not necessary since other mediums have worked for so long.

"Some dealers simply do not believe in the concept of the Internet and feel that it won't produce consistent results," says Ryneska. "You can show some dealers statistic after statistic, but without embracing the research or concepts, dealers are not going to adopt Internet marketing into their sales strategy."

In 2007, almost 40 percent of dealers are still using newspaper and radio spots for advertising, so there is still a strong belief in traditional advertising methods.

While some dealers remember the days of working without a fax machine, today they wouldn't dream of doing business without one. So while there is a learning curve with any form of technology, the Internet is here to stay.

Nick Bakker of Bakker Marine in Hawley, Pennsylvania agrees that understanding and embracing the Internet is key to marketing his business.

"Our Web solution is easy to use and has provided our dealership with sales and leads with minimal effort," he says. "Even when we cut advertising costs earlier this year, we recognized the importance and the value in keeping our Web site."

Regardless of a dealers' stance on the importance of the Internet, the opportunity is out there. Statistics prove that dealers who want to get ahead are answering the call and taking strides toward the Internet. Will you answer the call?

[Tamara Dailey is Marketing Manager for Marine Web Services, an Internet-based lead generation company and web solutions provider that serves more than 2,500 dealers. She can be reached at 757/351-7594 and via e-mail at tamara.dailey@marinewebservices.com. Please call and visit www.mwsdemo1.com for a demo of MWS products and services.](#)

TIPS TO CONSIDER FOR YOUR WEB SITE:

PRICING:

- Include a price whenever possible.
- Follow manufacturer guidelines for new and new/non-current boats.
- Always include a price on pre-owned.

PHOTOS:

- Know that photos are the most important merchandising element.
- Multiple photos drive high-quality traffic.
- Provide a combination of interior/exterior shots and show a variety of angles of the boat.
- Consider using multiple photo opportunities to promote your dealership.
- Include signage in some shots.
- Take advantage of multi-image space to insert your dealership logo or sales contact's photo.

BOAT DESCRIPTIONS:

- Use the boat description to make inventory stand out online.
- The more detail you provide generally translates to more leads.

INVENTORY:

- Pay close attention to your online inventory accuracy.
- Update listings frequently.
- Remove boats from the site when they've been sold.
- Include 100 percent of your inventory online.

SPECIAL OFFERS:

- Use listings to promote special offers at the dealership.
- "Internet Specials," "Manufacturer Rebates," "Internet Customer Bonus," are all proven traffic generators.

DEALERSHIP PROMOTION:

- Don't limit listings to just promoting boats.
- Include dealership hours, slogans and awards.
- Don't forget to promote parts and service and financing as they apply, as well.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, PLEASE CALL 877-354-4069

Boat Trader[®]

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