



# Wooing First-Time Buyers

by Matt Alderton

Boat shows are full of would-be boaters who want to get their feet wet. Here's how to turn those browsers into buyers.

The golden glow of sunlight on water. The smell of sea breezes and sunscreen. But most of all, that buoyant, stress-free sensation that comes with being on the water.

A unique combination of sport and serenity, boating's best moments take place amid waves, wind and wildlife. But that first flush of love typically starts in the middle of an exhibit hall.

"Letting someone see, feel and touch a new product is the best way to sell it to them—that's why people go to boat shows," says Lew Shomer, executive director of SISO, the Society of Independent Show Organizers, in Santa Monica, California. Because they've never owned a boat, first-time buyers, in particular, will respond well to tactile browsing at boat shows. "Sure, you get a lot of tire-kickers, but even someone who's been kicking tires for 10 years eventually decides it's time to buy."

Indeed, boat shows are teeming with prospective boaters who dream of one day becoming captain of their own ship. Many boat shows take place in the depths of winter, so it's important to focus on selling the boating lifestyle first and products second.

"You get a lot of people at boat shows who dream about owning a boat but haven't yet convinced themselves that right now is the time to buy one," says marketing consultant Steve Miller, author of *How to Get the Most out of Trade Shows*. Whether you're working a trade show or a consumer show, "as an exhibitor, you've got to get into that prospect's mind and join the conversation. It's your job to say, 'I'm going to help you live the dream.'"

## Once Upon a Boat

Although they might not have the seductive powers of a river, lake or ocean, boat shows can nonetheless

be perfect for introducing first-time buyers to the boating lifestyle, suggests Corrin Arasa, president of New York-based marketing agency e2. The reason: Boat shows facilitate storytelling, which is a core component of "experiential marketing," or marketing that seeks an emotional instead of transactional response. That's the kind of marketing that works best with first-time buyers—they want to know not only how large a boat is and what it features, but also how it can be used and why it will improve their lives.

"People relate to stories, but they don't necessarily relate to facts," she says. "It's a much more powerful way to gain mind share than just talking about a product's features and benefits."

Because it helps buyers—especially new ones—envision themselves using products, experiential marketing has been shown to positively impact both brand awareness and purchase behavior. This form of marketing can increase attendees' intent to make a future purchase by up to 50 percent, and inspires 24 percent of active non-customers to discuss the exhibitor's product with peers, according to an Advertising Research Foundation study.

"Creating an experience for the visitors that is relevant to and reflective of positive brand attributes is as important as the cognitive-related tactics typically associated with exhibiting, such as demonstrations, presentations, sampling, graphics, availability of collateral, knowledgeable exhibit staff, etc.," the study concludes.

Exhibitors can help connect with first-time buyers on an emotional level by transforming

# 50%

The amount experiential marketing can increase a boat show attendee's desire to make a future purchase.

# 24%

The amount of people who aren't even your customers who will discuss your brand because of experiential marketing.



# Discover Boating

Turning browsers into boaters requires equal parts inspiration and education. NMMA's revamped [discoverboating.com](http://discoverboating.com) offers both in spades. With comprehensive information on boating activities and destinations, case studies and testimonials from blissful boaters, and interactive guides to boat purchasing and ownership, it's an exhibitor's one-stop shop for winning over newcomers. To leverage it at your next boat show, consider setting up kiosks at your exhibit where first-time buyers can browse the website, watch the goosebump-inducing short film, and share the "Spousal Conversion Kit" with skeptical partners.

potentially stale exhibit halls into colorful boating experiences. "People buy on emotion," Miller says. "They buy because you paint them a picture."

## Feeling It

Following are five tactics exhibitors can use to connect with new boaters on an emotional level:

### 1. Make satisfied customers your salespeople:

The most qualified people to sell the boating lifestyle to first-time buyers are the boaters living it, Miller says. He recommends inviting one's happiest past customers to boat shows as volunteer salespeople so they can tell prospective boaters firsthand about how much they love their boat and all the accessories that accompany it.

Past customers may also be able to put things in perspective for new buyers who have questions or hesitations about taking the next step. For example, "If you're talking to someone who says, 'Man, I'd love to have a boat, but I've heard they're a lot of work,' you can turn to the customer who's working in your booth and say, 'I'm talking to Steve and he's worried about the upkeep. What's your experience?'" Miller points out.

### 2. Build environments, not exhibits:

While many exhibitors have wall-to-wall boats in their booths, first-time buyers are more likely

to be enticed, and less likely to be intimidated, by an environment that's more "sensory" than "sales." As such, Miller suggests downsizing to make room for a pleasing setting—resembling a marina, perhaps—that screams "boating" rather than "boats."

Ultimately, it comes down to staging. Populating boats with props like toys, food and fishing gear, for instance, can show first-time buyers how the boat can be used for family time, entertaining and recreation.

"It's like selling a house," Shomer says. "A house that has furniture is going to sell much more quickly than a house that's empty because very few people can imagine themselves living in an empty house."

### 3. Show, don't tell:

First-time buyers respond well to pictures because they need to envision their life as a boat owner before actually purchasing a vessel, Miller says. He recommends decorating one's booth with photos of customers using their boats and accessories, with written testimonials beside them.

Another way to lure newcomers to the lifestyle is to appeal to their emotions. "Hire a professional photographer and put up a green screen to tell the story of a beautiful summer day out with the family," Arasa suggests. "Then, set up a kiosk where they can upload the photo right to their Facebook

page or their Twitter account so people can see it. A green screen is a great way for people to envision themselves having memories."

### 4. Talk about people, not products:

Whether they use props, photos or good old-fashioned conversation, exhibitors should focus more on customers' stories than their own. That way, prospective buyers are more likely to see how boating can improve their lives—by reducing stress, increasing quality family time and making it easier to enjoy pastimes such as fishing and waterskiing.

"You need to reframe the conversation from being about the product to being about the customer and whatever it is they're passionate about," Arasa says.

One way to engage first-time buyers in storytelling is to create a contest, asking people to share something like their favorite childhood memory of being in, on or around the water. If you do so prior to a show, you can showcase the best tweets, Facebook posts or YouTube videos right at your booth.

"Any time you show people how your product can help them re-create memories with their family based on nostalgic moments, it's really effective," Arasa says.

### 5. Create a community:

For most exhibitors, a boat show is the first in a series of touch points with first-time buyers. This is why it's important to continue selling the boating lifestyle after the event.

To establish a community of new and existing boating enthusiasts that transcends the exhibit hall, Arasa suggests creating a Facebook page where customers can interact and talk about their passion for boating. Inviting show attendees to join your online community can be a great way to educate first-time buyers about the benefits and costs of ownership.

"When it comes time to make the sale, you've already built a relationship, and they have an army



of online community members they can turn to for advice," Arasa says.

Continue to build face-to-face relationships, too, by inviting prospective boaters to live events such as barbecues and open houses. "The majority of online conversations are about offline experiences, so you want to do both," Arasa says.

Few first-time buyers are ready to make a purchase on the boat show floor. Therefore, no matter what tactics are used to engage them, the goal typically isn't harvesting the crop; it's planting the seed.

"The purpose of marketing is to be on the mind of the prospect when the person is ready to buy," Miller says.

That might be next week, next month or next year. It might even be a few years after that—though the average boat sale occurs about three and a half months after a person attends a show. When the day eventually comes, though, exhibitors want to make sure their prospects remember the joy they felt the first time they were on their new boat—even if it was parked in the middle of a convention center. 🍷

*Sell the lifestyle first—and you very well could end up selling a boat, and all the engines, electronics and other accessories that go with it.*

## SHOW AND TELL

Among consumers "highly influenced" by a boat show, the top reasons for attending were:

First-Time Buyers	Repeat Buyers	
50%	57%	To view new boat models
41%	40%	For fun
29%	43%	To compare prices
21%	41%	I go every year
28%	28%	To actually shop for a boat

Source: 2010 Boat Show Purchase Influence Report, Foresight Research