

# The PERFECT PLAN

If you want results, don't put off mapping out your show strategy.

BY DON SADLER

Boat show season still seems a long way off—but now is the time to start crafting your action plan. Whether it's launching teaser sales campaigns or ordering exhibit materials, you need to get moving.

"Exhibiting is nothing more than marketing in miniature," notes Margit B. Weisgal, principal at Sextant Communications, an exhibit management and training company in Baltimore, Maryland. "Every facet of a business marketing plan should also be present in an exhibit marketing plan."

#### Learn From the Past

Advance planning helps you get the most bang for your boat show bucks, says Douglyss Giuliana, co-owner of Advantage Yacht Sales in Newburyport, Massachusetts. His team's exhibit marketing plan starts with a detailed pre-show checklist.

"It seemed we were reinventing the wheel over and over again, so we created a standing checklist of all the things we need to do to prepare for a show: what materials to order, when to order them, what to pack, prospects we want to meet with, etc."

This checklist is separated into seven categories, with examples of each listed as follows:

1. **Pre-show prep** (ordering boat batteries, rugs and stickers, scheduling boat cleanings and powerwashing)
2. **Marketing materials** (brochures, inventory worksheets, price sheets with show specials)
3. **Booth decorations** (greeting table and chairs, closing table and chairs, planter boxes, lights, flags and banners)
4. **Boat decorations** (table settings, towels, rugs, books, flowers and shorepower cords)
5. **Other materials** (cleaning supplies, name tags)
6. **Provisions** (water and snacks)
7. **Final prep** (changing your voicemail message, placing an "office closed" sign on the door)

"We tweak the list from show to show," Giuliana notes, but at least they're not starting from scratch. "It's about making sure we are bringing the items we need and don't forget something in the bustle of show prep."



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### Making Contact

No exhibit marketing plan is complete without pre- and post-show contact strategies. Advantage, for example, uses a combination of three media to get the word out.

"First we send an email announcing the show to our entire database," Giuliana explains. "This is followed up with postcards mailed to a more selective list of warm-to-hot prospects, which are followed by two more emails. Then salespeople make phone calls to their best prospects to invite them personally to the show."

As a postcard doesn't allow much content with its limited size, it should include specifics about the show location, dates, highlights and a mention of what you will be exhibiting.

While the first email provides the same sort of details, the second one should focus more on the products that will be at the show, as well as the other exhibits and educational opportunities that may prove interesting to prospects.

"The second email is intended to build excitement about the show to get people interested in attending," Giuliana says.

The third email is just a short

reminder of the boat show dates and location sent a few days before the event.

To identify the right prospects ahead of time, Murray Yacht Sales in New Orleans, Louisiana holds open houses. Each customer's potential determines whether or not he or she secures an invite to an upcoming show.

"At a national show, we want to talk to a very targeted audience from our region, maybe only a few dozen people over four days," says owner Stanton Murray. "But locally, there may be hundreds of prospects, so we have to quickly identify the good ones. It's a totally different qualification strategy, and we plan it out ahead of time."

**National show:** First qualify by a prospect's location. (You don't need to spend time talking with a prospect from New Jersey if you are selling boats in Texas.) Prospects from your region who travel to a national show have a very high likelihood of becoming customers, even if that means at some point in the future, Murray says. They also tend to travel with friends who are buyers. "Prospects from your region at national shows are worth getting to know," he says.

**Local show:** Polite but short questions are needed to find buyers at local shows. "What do you think of this model? does not get you very far down the sales funnel, considering most people at a boat show like boating," he points out.

### Reach for the Stars

With a strong contact plan in place, exhibitors should set quantitative objectives for each show they attend.

"By setting goals that are specific and measurable, you have something tangible to shoot for so you can tell if you're winning or losing during the show," Weisgal says. "Most boat show goals are sales-related. But this doesn't necessarily mean you'll write orders



Tom Sawyer

on the show floor. I consider a show 'sale' or 'close' to be any action that moves you forward toward a successful conclusion."

For each show, Giuliana and his team set what they consider to be realistic goals for sales orders and lead generation, as well as stretch goals.

"Our realistic goals might be to write sales orders for two to four boats and generate 20 to 25 warm-to-hot leads," he explains. "And our stretch goals might be to sell six boats and generate at least 30 warm-to-hot leads."

All plans should be designed to help the team accomplish three tasks at the boat show, Weisgal adds:

1. Close sales with hot prospects.
2. Move warm prospects down the sales pipeline.
3. Meet new prospects you can add to the sales funnel.

### Before and After

Too many exhibitors spend thousands of dollars and devote months of planning only to leave promising leads hanging. To make the most of your investment, establish follow-up procedures for you and your team well before the show, Weisgal says.

"Mark your calendars for follow-up phone calls and create a standard form staff can use to report back results, along with a deadline," she says.

The Advantage team plans follow-up events about a month after the show to revisit prospects. "For example, after the Newport Boat Show, we plan to have a demo day in Boston, where prospects can try out boats on the water close to home," Giuliana says.

Going in armed with a plan not only ensures your booth looks great, but that you'll get the ROI you expect. Dig in now, though, because before you know it, you'll be on the floor. ☑

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## LET STATS SHAPE YOUR PLAN

Knowing how attendees learn about boat shows and make buying decisions can help you develop your exhibit marketing plan. Here are some tips from Ron Hein, executive vice president of Foresight Research, which published the *Boating Industry Marketing Communications Influence Study*.

- The top four media through which buyers are made aware of boat shows are radio, TV, newspapers and the Internet. "So plan your pre-show marketing strategies accordingly," Hein advises.
- Boat shows are the second-most popular source for brochures, with 41 percent of attendees picking them up. "Have current brochures printed up, and bring plenty with you to the show," he says.
- Almost half of new boat buyers attending a show say they intend to purchase a vessel or make a decision at the show. "People come to boat shows to make up their mind," Hein says, "so make sure you're well prepared to help them."