



Boating Industry Magazine

12 tips for boat show success

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The following are techniques employed by some of the highest performing boat show exhibitors in the industry.

1. PLAN AHEAD

Boat show success is strongly tied to preparation: taking the time to plan ahead, deciding which approach best fits your company's style, paying attention to the details, and making the most out of the time you spend at the show. Many of the best exhibitors have a standard form or check sheet they use for show prep that can be customized for individual events, saving them time and stress. One dealer created a master checklist for preparing for its boat shows. The master list is amended one to two months before each show with specifics for that event and relevant to the strategy the dealership lays out. Another credits its checklist with consistently getting the dealership in and out of shows faster than any other dealer of its size. As part of its planning, a third dealership uses a computer layout program, along with data from past shows, to create a floor layout tailored to each show it attends.

2. GUIDE YOUR STAFF

Many exhibitors create a boat show manual. Although adaptable for individual events, a manual can document an entire series of standard operating procedures personnel should follow when planning and participating in any show. For example, one dealership's manual covers everything from show meeting times and topics to pre-boat show preparation requirements, from uniform regulations to pricing policies and from follow-up procedure reminders to a full run down of the dealership's show selling process.

3. TAKE GOOD NOTES

Successful exhibitors typically make the time to take good notes at the show. In fact, one dealership holds a staff meeting on the last day of the shows it attends to discuss potential changes and best practices, competitor pricing and displays, and to record all facets of its production.

4. TRAIN YOUR SALESPEOPLE

Another facet of the preparation process involves working with salespeople to make sure they are ready and able. Some dealerships have their sales team watch sales training videos, brush up on selling techniques, review pricing and strategy, and conduct role playing in the weeks leading up to show season.

5. HOLD MEETINGS

Daily sales meetings during the show are good motivators. One dealer holds meetings an hour before the show opens each morning to cover the previous day's performance, as well as any issues that came up, and to give goal, spiff and contest updates.

6. GET THE MOST OUT OF YOUR SHOW

Given the expense of participating in boat shows, some of the best exhibitors put plans in place to make sure they get the most out of the show in all areas. For example, most dealerships use co-op funds from the manufacturers they work with to offset the cost of boat shows. Booth space is one of the top-cited beneficiaries of these programs. But some dealers make sure items such as flags, shirts, bags and other accessories get thrown into the mix and are covered by those funds.

7. TRACK YOUR ROI

While it's difficult to track the true return on boat show investment, some dealerships are making headway in the area, conducting show cost analyses after every show, taking into account all sales made at the show and separating those made at the dealership as a direct result of the show. In addition to initial boat show costs, the analysis should include overtime payroll, hotel expenses, meals, parking, special signage, fuel expense and the cost of radio advertising.

8. CONSIDER STAFFING

The best exhibitors consider how the people representing their business at shows will determine visitors' impressions of how their business is run. Many dealers call in extra sales support for shows, including professional sales help. Some turn instead to seasoned customers, while others have strict policies barring the practice. Regardless, the most successful exhibitors ensure the people representing them are well prepared, want to work as a team and uphold the image they want to project at the show. One dealership, for example, starts its boat show staff lineup out with a full-time team of set-up experts, which manages the company's show presentation and leaves no detail unchecked, even down to how boat lines and cords are presented. Staffing greeters (or designating someone from your staff to be the greeter) is a worthwhile move many top dealers make. They can ensure that all visitors are given a friendly "Hello," can help control traffic flow and are a useful source for pre-qualifying potential buyers. Some multi-location dealers draw on all the salespeople from their locations to form boat show teams to properly serve customers, especially during peak times. Another tactic for growing the salesperson pool is working with other dealers across the country.

9. CONTROL THE TRAFFIC

The best show strategies typically involve good planning in regard to booth location and traffic flow. After a disappointing show, one dealership decided to move its booth from one end of the show hall to the other to be closer to its main competitor and found success. Another planned its boat show marketing and display around the Discover Boating campaign and opted to move entry-level boats to a booth across from the

Discover Boating display. Accessibility is another ever-present issue to consider. Many dealers have developed dock or step systems to allow their visitors easy access to their products.

10. ENTERTAIN VISITORS

Taking extra care of visitors is a successful tactic for many exhibitors, from creating a video game area for kids and teens to play wakeboard games to setting up a visitors' tent with plants, a cooling fan and water to entice customers (and shopping parents) to stick around their booths longer. In short, the more interactive a booth becomes, the more traffic dealers can attract. And of course, the more traffic, the better the opportunities for making additional sales.

11. PICK A THEME

Many exhibitors find success developing a theme for their booth to get attendees excited about what's happening there. One dealer uses 2,000 pounds of sand and a replica of a local bridge to remind passers-by of the dealership's most popular boating destination. Being the literal giant in the room certainly doesn't detract attention. Another dealership uses an archway entrance to its show booth that stands more than 12-feet tall. A third uses a rocket launcher to display a boat vertically. Truss systems featuring graphics or elevated boats also stand out. Set the tone of your booth according to the sensibilities of your client base and the message you want to send. The energetic atmosphere a watersports dealer might project with music, lighting, video and a spinning boat wouldn't jibe with those visiting a high-end yacht dealer, for example.

12. PROMOTE YOURSELF

Many dealers have found promotions have the ability to drive traffic to a booth in droves, generate leads and create a sense of urgency to buy right then and there. Branded giveaways make subtle advertisements, from apparel and fishing rods and reels to temporary tattoos. It also makes sense to note what consumers need and want at the time of the show when deciding on a promotion. One dealership, for example, launched a "Boat Free this Summer" campaign with a free gas card, three months free of payment and "Trade Up Sale" promotions to entice buyers. Another dealership has a "Wheel of Boating." After purchasing a boat at the show, a customer spins the wheel and wins whatever prize in the envelope they select. Prizes range from depth finders to water toys to dinner gift certificates. Other dealers partner with suppliers to give away everything from televisions to diamonds.