5 MARKETING INSIGHTS TO HELP DRIVE BOAT SHOW SUCCESS

Actionable Takeaways from Discover Boating's Marketing Campaign Test & Learn Initiative

Winter boat show season is one of the industry's most important opportunities to connect with prospective buyers and drive sales. To help manufacturers, dealers and exhibitors make the most of the season, Discover Boating is sharing five insights from its 2026 test and learn program, which tested different marketing approaches across select markets to better understand what drives consumer awareness, interest and action.

Through the testing initiative and Health Score Index (HSI), Discover Boating is building a clearer picture of evolving consumer trends and the most effective ways to reach and engage potential boaters. The findings offer practical takeaways manufacturers, dealers and exhibitors can apply to their marketing efforts ahead of boat show season.

1. Stay Visible: Advertising Can Boost Website Exposure

What Discover Boating Learned: National testing showed that markets with active paid media presence generated at least 22% more website traffic compared with markets without advertising. Optimizing your campaign audience and objectives (geo-fencing, interests, conversions) can increase efficiency of exposure up to 50%.

Put It to Work: Maintaining an advertising presence matters. Consider running targeted advertising campaigns leading up to and during boat shows to stay visible, promote featured models, inventory and special exhibit experiences, and encourage consumers to visit a show or dealership. You can also leverage Discover Boating's free boat show marketing assets to help promote your participation and drive attendance.

2. Find Consumers While They're Researching: Advertising Can Increase Online Converting Power by More Than 75%

What Discover Boating Learned: Reaching users while they're actively researching boating opportunities is paramount to driving new business. Discover Boating's national testing found that markets with a paid media presence generated more than 80% more digital conversions—online actions that signal consumer interest and engagement—compared with markets without advertising.

Put It to Work: Use highly targeted digital advertising across platforms such as Meta (Facebook and Instagram), YouTube, Google Search, and X (formerly Twitter) to reach prospective buyers while they are actively researching boats, watching reviews, comparing brands, and planning their next on-water experience. Deliver model-specific messages, showcase available inventory, promote local dealerships, and highlight upcoming boat shows through audience targeting, retargeting, video advertising, and search campaigns. By connecting consumers with the right boat at the right moment, you can shorten the path from consideration to showroom visit, test ride, or purchase inquiry.

3. The Right Message to the Right Audience Can Increase Website Visits

What Discover Boating Learned: Discover Boating's national testing found that enabling dynamic creative features on paid media platforms like Meta (Facebook and Instagram), TikTok, YouTube and Google increased website visit rates by 28%. These features use platform technology to automatically select and deliver the most effective combinations of existing ad images and messages with relevant consumers, rather than generating new images or messaging.

Put It to Work: Give advertising platforms a variety of existing images, videos, messages, and calls to action that reflect the different ways consumers enjoy being on the water, such as fishing, watersports, family cruising, relaxing at the sandbar, entertaining friends, and weekend getaways. Platforms like Meta (Facebook and Instagram), YouTube, Google Display, and TikTok can then automatically test and match these creative assets to audiences based on their interests, online behaviors, and engagement patterns. For example, an avid angler may see fishing-focused content, while a family-oriented boater may be shown images of cruising, swimming, and spending time together on the water. This dynamic optimization helps deliver more relevant advertising experiences, improving engagement, lead quality, and campaign performance.

4. More Than 65% of Searches End Without a Click: Make Content Work Harder.

What Discover Boating Learned: Consumers are increasingly finding answers directly through search engines and AI-powered tools without visiting a website. According to a recent report from Search Engine Land, 68% of Google searches ended without a click to another website. This shift means manufacturers and dealers need to offer content that's helpful and engaging while also being easy for AI agents and large language models (LLMs) to find, understand and surface in their responses.

Put It to Work: Make your website content clear, accurate and easy to navigate for both consumers and AI-powered search tools. Use straightforward headings, descriptive product information and FAQs that answer common buyer questions. Keep boat specifications, dealership details and other key information current so AI tools can more easily identify and reference your content when consumers are researching boating options.

5. Boating Participation Is Healthy: Remains at Pre-Pandemic Levels While Other Hobbies Lag Behind

What Discover Boating Learned: Discover Boating has been closely tracking participation in out-of-home hobbies (golf, wellness, RV) since the pandemic. The findings show boating remains in a healthy position, with participation holding steady at 2019 levels while other recreational activities are still working to recover.

Put It to Work: Keep enthusiasm high and amplify your boat show marketing by leveraging Discover Boating's boat show promotional content across your own social, digital, and email channels. Use these assets to drive your customers, followers, and prospects to the show and, ultimately, to your exhibit. Showcase the boating lifestyle, highlight hands-on experiences, and help answer common questions that build consumer confidence. By making boating feel accessible and achievable, you can increase booth traffic, create more meaningful conversations, and engage high-potential buyers as they take the next step toward boat ownership. Have a new product launch, demonstration or special activation planned? Share your plans with the Discover Boating team in advance to explore opportunities for additional exposure through show marketing, social media and PR.

Explore more consumer insights, boat show promotional assets and industry resources to help inform your marketing efforts at b2b.discoverboating.com.