**Make the Most of Your Slow Season**

***By Valerie Ziebron***

Quiet is supposed to be relaxing, but when you are inside a dealership during working hours and there is no foot traffic and no phones ringing nothing could be more pit-of-the-stomach unsettling. As dealers are pushing through slower times, business as usual is being replaced by some crafty innovation and reallocation of marketing resources.

   If you want different results you must take different actions and sometimes this means switching up job descriptions. It is critical that all members of the dealership staff understand that their role is actively tied to the selling. Selling service, sales, accessories and F&I must be done by everyone from the support staff to upper management. An example of this kind of creative best practice came from a dealer who was not sure what to do with his staff during a slow spell. He saw his tech cleaning his bay trying to look busy with no available work orders so he told the guy to put on a clean t-shirt with the dealer logo on it, grab a stack of business cards and head down to the local dock to help people unload and load their boats. They have used this 'customer service approach' to help answer questions, lend a hand and educate customers about their boats and proper operations. It doesn't matter if you send a tech or a salesperson. Any available staff can help start a new customer relationship. Customers that learn something are more likely to like and trust you. This leads to more sales for all departments.

    In order to get your staff comfortable with selling you want to create as many learning opportunities as possible. "We have a 15-minute training session every day," says Alan Lawson, general manager of Outdoor RV and Marine World in Greer, S.C. "I'll pick one feature or a competitors and explain it. Then the staff will present a feature.. We all learn from each other."

    One of the most inexpensive ways to stretch you reach and marketing dollar is to spend some time on the Internet. More dealers are getting serious about their presence on the Web using not only their own site, but also using blogs, chat rooms and social networking sites like Facebook.

    Free print marketing is also possible by getting to know your local sports and outdoors writers who provide articles for your local papers. They have deadlines weekly to provide fresh stories, and you can become a source that they can count on to provide quotes and event information. Having your dealership quoted in these stories can build awareness and credibility.

     Both the internet and local paper examples can be assigned to staff members who are interesting in taking these unusual assignments on. You might be surprised to learn who at your dealership spends hours on the Internet after work or who has always enjoyed writing. Allocate these jobs to people who enjoy them and you are likely to get better results from your marketing, and extra employee satisfaction as a bonus.

      Not all marketing can be done for free, so when it comes to spending dollars you have to look closely at the return on your investment. Most studies show that it costs far more to attract a new customer than to keep an existing one. Applying this concept would suggest that our marketing dollars would be best used on generating sales from our existing, profitable customers. It is important to include the guideline of "profitable" for these existing customers since some customers tend to cost us more than they bring in. Tough times are bad times to cater to squeaky wheel customers who take all of the grease.

     Taking a good look at your customer database allows you to come up with properly targeted promotions. What is the average boat age of our customer? How do most of our customers use their product? What events would appeal to the majority? What accessories create the most buzz? We hear a lot in the media about consumer confidence, and the truth is it changes drastically area to area. Get a pulse on your customers' confidence and the areas that are most important to them. Would a free gas promotion draw them to action or a local charity event?

      I've heard it said that the only people who like change are wet babies. This may be true, but changes that dealerships make now in the form of new approaches and tactics learned during a down market coupled with perfecting our business process so they are as efficient as possible will propel dealers forward with increased CSI and profitability when the market turns.