**Open Up to the Benefits of an Open House**

***By Valerie Ziebron***

Hosting an open house can provide tremendous value to the dealership through increased traffic flow and the generation of potential leads and future sales. They also give dealers the opportunity to attract new customers and build goodwill with existing ones. Yet planning and carrying out a successful event while maintaining daily business operations can be daunting. One dealer lamented, "It's like high school all over again. Will they come? Will they like us?"

   The fear of failure can give reason to pause, but Craig Freeman of Barrier Island had some excellent advice to help overcome it. "You have to be realistic about your expectations," he said. Even if you don't sell one boat, nothing bad ever comes from holding an open house. The dealership gets cleaned up, you get to be involved with your customers and sell fun."

   Freeman is not a stranger to hosting events. "We try to do an activity every quarter from open houses to turkey fries, BBQs or even a GPS- based scavenger hunt," he said. "It's important to keep the fun and education of boating going year round."

   Clarifying the objectives for the open house is vital, and it's likely your goals will change from year to year. Ask yourself these questions:

- What is it you'd like your customers to know, or understand about your dealership?

-Have you made any changes you would like to communicate and possibly have your customers spread the word about?

"Our customers may know about our sales department but not be as familiar with what we can do in service and parts," said Josh Person of Central Marine Service. "At our most recent open house, we gave people a tour of what we called our 'repower center' and even showed off customers' boats that had recently been repowered. Events allow us to put ourselves in front of as many customers and potential customers as possible."

   But how do you get the boating public to find out about your open house? Marketing your event is a must, along with reaching out to your existing customers. Traditional advertising through radio, print and direct mail is still popular. However, more and more emphasis is being placed on social media and online marketing. "We market our events with radio and social media," said Jeff Lloyd of Barrier Island. "Believe it or not, Craigslist works really well. Just putting something on Craigslist that says 'here we are and this is what we sell' gets our phone to ring."

   Hosting your event at the same time each year or even tying it to an annual event can also help you grow your attendance. Most dealerships find that the attendance grows each year they do it- so don't give up. Take notes of what worked and what didn't and the next one will be better positioned for success. One of the most important goals of any open house should always be the successful capture of quality leads. Having the entire team trained, excited and equipped with lead cards is so important.

   "Everyone from each department put his sales hat on for our open house," said Llyod. "We ended up with some really solid leads, and now it's up to us to follow up and turn those leads into sales." Person agrees. "The real way to judge return on investment is what effect we have long-term. If our phones are ringing and people are stopping by weeks and even months after attending the event, our effort was worth it.

   Open houses can be much easier if the responsibility is spread throughout the dealership. Legendary Marine recently issued a challenge to it's team. Each department was charged in creating its own customer appreciation event. This was a great teambuilding event for the departments, which were very competitive and generated creative ideas. Another way to make things easier and more affordable is to turn to your manufacturers for help.

   "We utilize Yamaha and boat manufacturer co-op at every opportunity," Person said. "We count on those funds to be able to do things we wouldn't normally be able to do."

   In addition to co-op funds, Yamaha can also help with banners, signage, large blow-up motors and even professional anglers to sign autographs, teach clinics and gain free press coverage and publicity. Yamaha District Marketing Managers can be a great resource for these details. Make sure to contact them well in advance of your event to find out how Yamaha can help.

   "The event is what you put into it," said Person. "The grassroots effort of every staff member from techs to sales is key. Having buy-in from everyone makes it a success."

***\*For more about hosting a successful open house, please go to YMU online and view the Symposium Series "Open House Success" training schedule.***