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## Rise of Internet and social media stirs up fundamental shift in boating's 'business as usual'

BY STEVE ROSENBERG

**R**emember all that talk about what will happen when technology catches up with the marine industry? Back in 2000, the Internet as we understand it today had been around for a while, but its impact on our daily lives was still in its formative stages. There were a few start-up portals trying to blaze the trail to an effective mix of information, influence and inventory. Retailers were staking their claim with websites and experimenting with the first rudimentary online lead-generation tools.

We all knew the information superhighway had to hit water eventually, but few could have imagined the exponential acceleration of the past few years. Guess what? It's time to sink or swim.

The first step for a customer who wants to buy a boat is no longer getting in a car to spend the day driving around to different dealerships checking to see what's available. That trip may still be made at some point, but not before a buyer first spends time online researching which dealerships it makes the most sense for him or her to visit. So it's vital that marine businesses make their online interactions with customers as pleasant and trouble-free as they would if that person walked onto the lot for the first time.



## WELCOME TO YOUR NEW FRONT DOOR

“The front door is not where we say ‘Hello’ anymore,” explains Brad Parker, general manager of Florida’s Parker Boats. “Ninety-nine percent of the people who walk in the door have already done their research online. We need to say ‘Hello’ to them beginning with a positive experience on our website.”

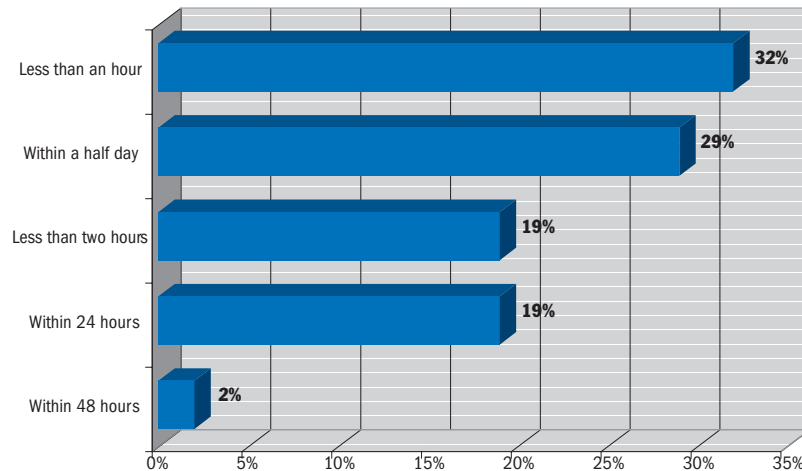
### The changing landscape

You can count on one hand the number of years since Facebook, YouTube and Twitter helped us understand the impact of community and put the “social” in social media from a business perspective. The concept of connecting people via the Web, of course, goes back to the days of bulletin boards, Classmate.com and MySpace, but the speed at which these newer networks grew organically is mind-boggling.

And can anyone argue that, for better or worse, Google perfected the art of product research and eBay distilled consumer product sales to its finest, if imperfect, proof? Even tools such as e-newsletters have helped drive traffic in the showrooms, service bays and switchboards now that more customers have access to speedy Internet connections and easy-to-access devices.

“When we first started, the information superhighway was such a new thing, we saw it as a way for manufacturers and dealers to create a nice conduit for consumers to easily get product information via the Internet,” said Chuck Lewis, founder and president of Channel Blade. “Coming from the automotive industry, we jumped into the marine business about

## WHAT IS YOUR TARGET TIMEFRAME FOR RESPONDING TO ONLINE LEADS?



The information on the graphs is in this story comes from a 10-question lead management survey of 260 marine dealers that Boating Industry conducted at the end of August. To see the full results, please visit the Web Exclusives section of [www.boating-industry.com](http://www.boating-industry.com)

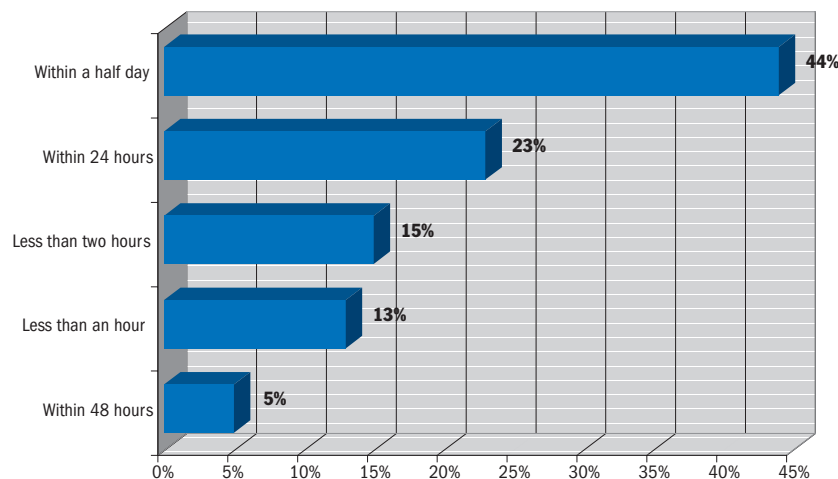
10 years ago and really pioneered the first interactive dealer sites with a call to action and real-time inventory. We started conducting lead generation through the Internet to get people through the door with a make and model of current inventory.”

With each passing year, the combination of technology and education (on both sides of the closing table) has led to more efficient lead-handling and response time. As an ever-increasing number of leads were being generated by cost-effective Internet marketing strategies, behaviors and attitudes began to change in the showroom.

While a salesperson on the floor will always value the person-to-person touch point of a phone call or walk-in, some consideration has to be given to what compelled the consumer to take that “buying action.” And, according to Lewis, the acceptance and assimilation of Internet-based technology is just “phase one.”

“I would put some of the more-savvy marine dealers up against any auto dealer when it comes to seeing the potential that currently exists and what is in store for us in the future,” Lewis said. “They are the epitome of the entrepreneurial spirit and they know that the Internet will continue to transform our industry. And where we’re going next is going to be really fascinating as we continue to incorporate social media and find better touch points with owners and prospects. Where cars are a commodity, we can take advantage of the social element of boating and fishing in reaching buyers and refining our messages.”

## WHAT IS YOUR ACTUAL RESPONSE TIME (ON AVERAGE) TO ONLINE LEADS?





## WELCOME TO YOUR NEW FRONT DOOR

### The leading source of leads

In fact, the consumer interaction with a retailer has come full circle, with buyers potentially becoming better educated on a variety of competitive brands than a salesperson may be on their one brand. The buyer is coming into the dealership armed with more information, confident about where the price point should be and, in many cases, ready to buy. Dealerships unprepared for that situation could find themselves with a lost sale.

With as many as 95 percent of all leads now being generated by Internet-based marketing efforts, recognizing this paradigm shift in consumer knowledge and behavior will be critical as the cycle of research to retail continues to get shorter and shorter.

“The Internet is driving all the initial contact from the customer to the brands, regardless of the brand type, whether it’s a \$2 million boat or a it’s a \$20,000 boat,” said Steve Pizzolato, founder and president of Avala Marketing. “The Internet is by far the single source where people go to learn about, become educated on, and get motivated by the types of brands they may be interested in. Not only do they go to the manufacturer’s site, but they also go to third-party portals, they go to blogs, they go to social sites to really learn about the brand before they decide to engage with a dealer.”

### Participate in your conversation

With such high stakes, it’s more important than ever to engage consumers when and where they may be seeking out information about products, brands or service. And while presenting the right message at the right place at the right time is fundamental to any marketing initiative, a powerful new point of consideration has emerged.

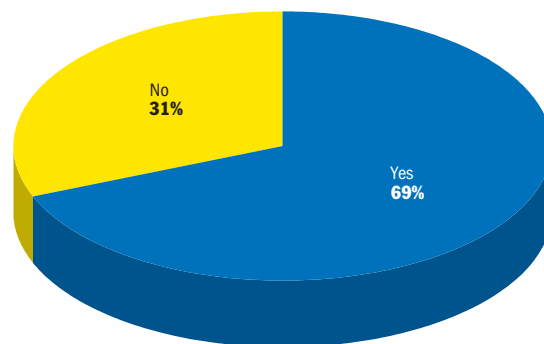
Now your message is only part of a much-larger conversation that reigns over how it is received and experienced by an entire community of like-minded buyers. Gone are the days of the one-way street of pushed information. Influencers of all attitudes and opinions are just waiting to praise or, more likely, punish those who ignore the power of this sometimes not-so-brave new world.

“Typically when you’re in high-consideration categories like boats, people are going to go for their first source of information online,” says Avala Marketing’s Director of Internet Strategy, Tom Kasperski. “It’s important from a reputation-management standpoint that brands are out there and they’re managing their reputation, be it through search vehicles or SEO as well as through social media. All of us in the social realm are always bouncing off ideas and

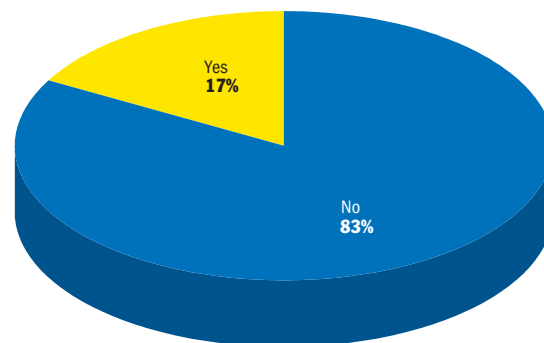
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*Steve Pizzolato, founder and president, Avala Marketing*

### DOES YOUR DEALERSHIP HAVE A LEAD MANAGEMENT PROCESS IN PLACE?



### IS YOUR SALES STAFF’S PAY PLAN TIED TO THE LEAD MANAGEMENT PROCESS?



asking our friends about purchases and what they think about certain brands. So it’s very important to have a presence out there and be monitoring what people are saying about their brands.”

But even if you’re on the right track and are keeping up with what folks are saying about you, are you really using that information optimally? Since the blogosphere is moving at light speed toward a conversation rather than a group of individuals sitting around waiting to hear about how great your product or showroom might be, how about taking the first step toward “getting it” and begin by listening? The most effective marketing, after all, is helping buyers find exactly what they want to buy. If the conversation is going on anyway, why not make the most of the “insider” information and shape your message accordingly.



**WELCOME TO  
YOUR NEW  
FRONT DOOR**

## Internet Experts

### The increasing importance of optimization

**A**t a time of tight resources and lean staffs, you want to be able to reach and attract prospective buyers as cost-effectively as possible. Fortunately, online marketing presents a great opportunity to do just that.

One of the top ways to attract customers is with a well-crafted website that utilizes search engine optimization (SEO), organic methods of improving visibility and search engine marketing (SEM), paid methods of improving visibility.

Search engines use algorithms called "spiders" to comb through websites, scan content, match it with the search terms and determine the site's ranking.

Because of the complexity of search engine science, companies such as ARI/Channel Blade have developed tools for helping dealers create and maintain attractive websites with optimized content, images, coding and more. By using the right tools, dealers can spend more time focusing on their core mission - selling boats.

#### The importance of SEO

The design of your website must address a number of elements for the site to achieve a high search ranking. First, its content must be relevant to your business and location.

Your homepage is the front door to your dealership with extremely valuable real estate and dealers must remember this when crafting their content. You need to include text



**Jason Corgiat** is the manager of Search Engine Marketing for ARI/Channel Blade, a company that provides marine businesses a full suite of technology enabled solutions.

that is rich in keywords because it will improve your search ranking.

Links are also fundamental to your search ranking. You can increase your rank by linking to and from other boating-related sites. You can also increase it through meta tags. This term refers to the background information, coded into HTML, that describes a page's content. It is important to remember that both links and meta tags should accurately reflect the content of the site and be closely tied to keyword terms. If you have meta tags identified within your code that are not in the content of your website, then those words will be ignored by search engines, defeating the purpose of including them.

To ensure a site's content is searchable, it must have searchable text. Search engines cannot analyze the content of images or video on your site. That is why meta tags must be used to describe what is in an image or video. The same is true for Flash-based animations and graphics. Even though

Flash can add excitement to your site, dealers must weigh its advantages against its downsides - namely that it will not be catalogued in a search.

#### Adding SEM multiplies results

SEM, or pay-per-click online advertising, is effective in driving traffic to the dealership website. In fact, using SEM in combination with SEO can be as much as 500 percent more effective than either one alone.

Paid search results are based on a combination of the dollars spent on the program and the site's performance in SEO. This is why it's best to look at a program holistically.

SEM or pay-per-click programs can become costly, quickly. Working with a vendor who understands the complexities of SEM programs will help you overcome some of the beginning challenges, thus increasing your ROI.

It is usually best to start your SEM efforts with one product, which enables you to refine your messages and keywords on a smaller scale at first. Once you see success from target marketing that product, you can expand your SEM program into other brands and products - reinvesting the profits of your SEM program.

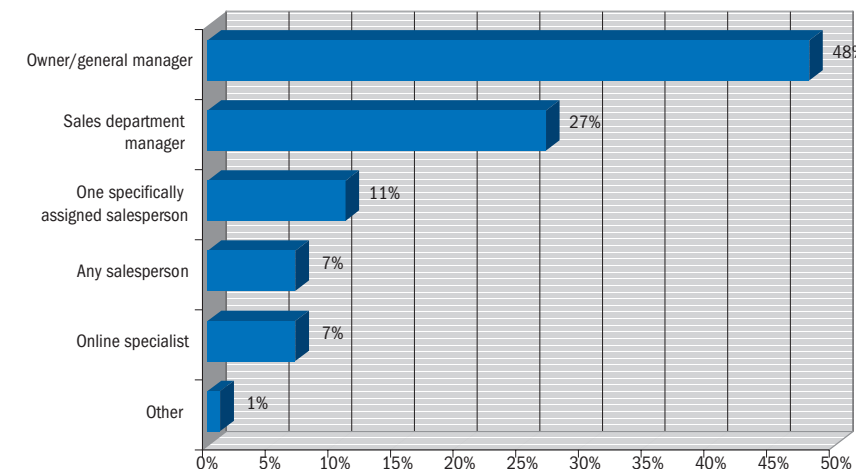
In the boating industry, the world's most powerful content will not assure that you increase sales, unless customers can find you. Keeping up with the fundamentals of SEO and SEM are good investments for dealers who want to succeed with their online efforts.

make themselves the center of attention," says Kasperski. "Where really what they should be focusing on is providing some additional value to people in what they're already doing within social media. The other thing to keep in mind is that dealers should really focus on what the intention is of the consumer. What is the purpose behind that contact or that engagement? A lot of times we marketing people assume we know what that customer wants or what their intent is, and I think you can really miss the bull's-eye in a big way."

#### Challenges and opportunities

While the Web's impact on the marine business is undeniable from the standpoint of stationary desktop computers or even laptops, there is a delivery system for information, research and commentary that has taken off more quickly than even many experts predicted. The rise in mobile technology, first with the Palm and Blackberry, then with Apple's game-changing iPhone has meant another shift in speed and accessibility.

### WHO INITIALLY "TOUCHES" OR HANDLES THE NEW WEB LEAD?



**Web exclusive**

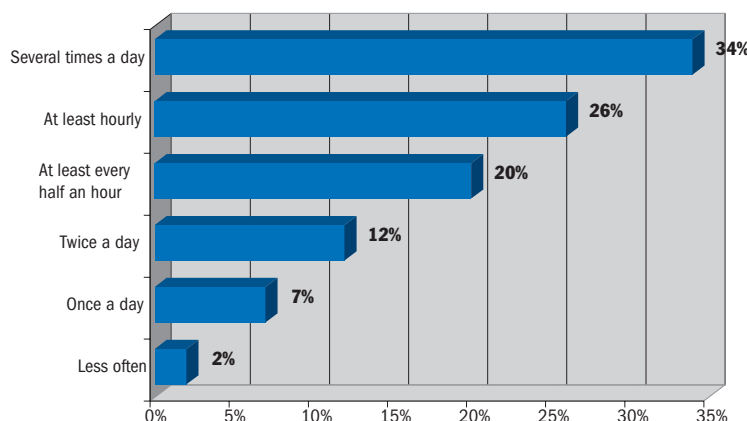
To see all the answers to Boating Industry's lead-management survey, visit the Web Exclusives section of [www.boating-industry.com](http://www.boating-industry.com).

"Customers (now) control the relationship, they control the dialogue, they control the relationship, they control the dialogue. You cannot curtail access to the Internet," says Pizzolato. "There's a small group of dealers who protect their Internet presence and say 'I want that customer to come in the door, don't want them to see me only through the Internet.' In fact, that horse left the barn several years ago. The customer will not come through the door unless they see you with an Internet presence."

One of the keys to understanding the dynamics of social media is to realize that it's about the customers, not, for example, the dealership. Social media allows you to eavesdrop into the conversations of buyers while participating in subtle ways.

"Social is very important, but a lot of brands approach social in the wrong way, where they try to

### HOW MANY TIMES A DAY DOES YOUR STORE CHECK FOR, AND RESPOND TO, WEB LEADS?



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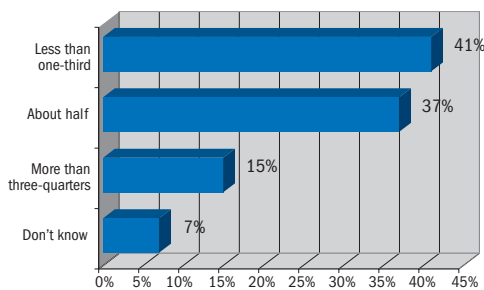


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*Courtney Chalmers, director of marketing, Dominion Marine*

“I think everything’s going to become more and more mobile,” said Courtney Chalmers, director of marketing for Dominion Marine, which owns Boats.com, Boat Trader, Yachtworld.com and many other marine-related publications and Web portals. “Consumers will be more mobile and more social. The speed at which we want information is incredi-

### WHAT PERCENTAGE OF YOUR ONLINE LEADS ARE CONVERTED TO PHONE CONVERSATIONS?



ble. Buyers are actively engaged in reviews and social media so much that they are taking the salesperson out of the equation until much further along in the process.”

While the challenges of keeping up with the ever-changing Internet and the impact it has on the marine industry are undeniable, they are matched by the opportunities that continue to emerge at the same rate. While the tools we use may be different, the relationship between businesses and customers really hasn’t changed at all. The more we understand each other, the better for everybody. 🐟

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