

EHLERT Boating INDUSTRY

InTHENews

From rent to own

A new company hopes that by making the boat rental biz easier, it will help grow the industry.

The boat rental business has been around a long time and hasn't changed much. But with the entry of a new company into the marketplace, it may be easier to run one than ever before.

That could be good news for the industry as it tries to grow the number of first-time boaters. As many as a quarter of those renting boats are looking to try out the lifestyle for the first time – and that percentage could grow, if boat rental was better marketed.

That's part of what J.R. Hilderbrandt is trying to do through his newly launched firm BoatRenting.com.

"I think boat rental could be the first step for a lot of people to get into boating," he says. "It should be promoted more. I don't think the Grow Boating campaign is specifying it enough."

Hilderbrandt and his family own a couple of marinas in Long Island, N.Y., and began offering boats for rent as a new revenue stream about 10 years ago. To support that business, he purchased several domain names related to boat rental.

Eventually, the family decided to use BoatRenting.com to promote its rental business. It wasn't long, however, before they started to get phone calls and e-mails from people who wanted to rent boats in other parts of the country and around the world.

"That's when we decided to make the Web site a place for renters to network with facilities," he explains.

The networking site was launched this year at the Miami International Boat Show and has already been used to make hundreds of boat rental reservations worldwide. Over 200 boat rental facilities have chosen to list their vessels on the site, and Hilderbrandt expects that number to continue to grow.

The majority of boat rental facilities do not sell new boats, which Hilderbrandt says is a missed opportunity.

A lot of rentals are test drives in disguise – either first-timers trying out the experience or current boat owners considering trading up. With many dealers refusing to offer test drives unless boat shoppers sign on the dotted line, he says boat rental facilities "can almost name their price."

Hilderbrandt says the site not only allows people interested in boating to quickly and easily fulfill that desire, it also makes it simpler to manage a rental business.

In addition to allowing visitors to search for a boat rental facility and make a reservation – driving business to its members' facilities – the site also serves as a boat rental management program for those members.

Ultimately, he hopes the site will help grow the boat rental business – and the boating industry in general. "So many people want to get into boating, but can't find a way," he says.

- LIZ WALZ



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