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Young blood



How do we generate enthusiasm for boating and water sports?

Sarah Dhanda, senior federation director of the British Marine Federation, acknowledged the challenges in an excellent presentation at the UK Marina Conference in May: "We are keeping our core boaters but not retaining the casual 'have-a-go' boaters. The gap has closed between male and female interest but there is no growth and 'time' – above 'cost' – is the biggest reason given for lapse in boating activity," she said.

"Age is a huge concern. The 54+ age group is increasing (possibly due to demographics) but there is no growth in the under-35 age bracket," she added.

"Children are a major target market," said dual Olympic gold medallist, Malcolm Page, and sport development director, Ross Kilborn, at the Marine13 conference in Sydney, Australia in April. The lifetime value of one child spending US\$1,000 a year on sailing will give US\$50,000 to a club over 50 years. A class of 20 children would therefore have a potential lifetime value of US\$1 million...

A panel session, chaired by Mike Townshend of Dean & Reddyhoff Marinas at the UK Conference, specifically addressed the topic of attracting young people to boating. Gary Sutcliffe of LeeSan stressed the need to 'make young people aware that boating is affordable'; Mick Bettsworth of MDL suggested that the UK should 'take lessons from other European countries where they are very keen on getting youngsters interested in sailing at an early age'; and Steve Arber of Tingdene Marinas noted 'we can't do much about price but we ought to add as much value as we can – and we should concentrate on a mix of social media.'

All panellists rated social media as an asset not to be overlooked, with Townshend describing Facebook as a great place 'to capture compliments and really engage with your customers'. Sutcliffe noted that social media 'had to be accepted as part of the marketing toolbox' and Bettsworth described it as 'pretty much the future.' "Young people don't 'do' email," he said.

The vast majority of conference delegates freely admitted that they didn't understand social media or, if they did, they didn't have time to engage with it.

Time for a sea change? At Marine13 social media was described as 'the bar, club or cocktail party of the online city', and it's a club greatly favoured by the young people who form such a worrying gap in boating demographics.

If you want them in *your* club, you should seriously consider joining *theirs*.

Carol Fulford
Editor