



Marketing Messages

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Full sale: marketing's seafaring similarities

I was fortunate to spend the last glorious sunny week of September sailing with my family on BC's coastal waters. Although I had promised to park my brain for a few days and not think about work, I found myself considering the parallels between sailing and marketing. Even landlubbers will be able to appreciate what sailing has to teach us.

1. You can never have too much information:

When sailing it's best to have all implements of assistance on side: charts, compass, GPS and cruising guides. Because your very survival hinges on staying clear of rocks, knowing where you are at all times is a necessity. The more information the better. This is much like your marketing strategy. You need internal information on your capabilities, strengths, weaknesses, and external market information on competitors, changing markets or new technologies and regulations apt to effect your industry. Information is king. You need lots of it to stay off the rocks.

2. Despite the number of crew on board, there is only one skipper:

On a boat someone has to take charge, accept final responsibility and lead the group. Although it is possible to have several talented and knowledgeable people on board, only one can lead. The very safety of the crew and the ability to meet your final destination depends on it. This is not unlike the CEO or the marketing manager. Those at the top must show strong leadership and staff must follow their direction. Of course it helps if the skipper has gained the crews respect through a demonstration of knowledge and experience. Ditto in business.

3. Never leave port without a plan:

Before pulling the anchor or departing the dock, you should know where you are going and how long it will take to get there. You also need to consider the wind, tide and weather conditions, and have a backup plan should the wind change or you experience a mechanical failure. These are all critical considerations for boaters. Likewise in marketing, you need to define goals for your product, service or business. You need to know where you're going. You need to have an estimate for how long it will take to achieve these goals and the checkpoints for success along the way. You need to consider all internal and external forces such as competitors, knock off products, changes in technology, changed cost structures in your business or employee capabilities. These are like safety maintenance of your boat or considering the influences of weather. All must be factored in when making your marketing plan.

4. Alert all crew before changing directions with your sails:

On a boat, nothing is more dangerous than a quick, ill planned tack or gybe. It's hard on the boat, and worse can threaten the very safety of the crew or that of other boats in proximity. All crew must be alerted to the planned change, and they must act as a team to execute their role completing a safe and quick change of direction. This is not unlike the employees in your business. Everyone must be on board for a planned change in marketing. Customers, like the other boats, must be considered and informed. All staff must be aware of the role they play, and how they will work together to execute a change in strategy.

5. Know the forecast before setting anchor:

When picking an anchorage sailors must be aware of water depth, tide changes while they plan to be there, current and possible changes to wind direction, the location of other boats and their anticipated swing. This is not unlike forecasting in marketing. Before setting your anchor and committing to a plan and strategy, all influences must be considered. At this point it comes full circle back to constantly collecting information. Be aware of your industry and make competitive intelligence a priority.

The beauty of sailing is it demands skill, knowledge, alertness and planning. There is nothing more invigorating than a day on the high seas. Business too can deliver these same pleasures. But as any good sailor knows, to be good you must be prepared to constantly learn. This credo also applies to business.

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