



SENIOR MOMENT

Inside out

This spring I visited Saratoga Boatworks.

The Upstate New York dealership ranked 54th on *Boating Industry's* 2007 Top 100 Dealer list after applying to the program for the first time. When it arrived last summer, I remember how excited I was that we finally had an application from a dealer I would consider somewhat "local"

to my office in the Syracuse, N.Y., suburbs.

As I read through it, that excitement continued to build. While it was clear that the owner, Jeff Olson, was relatively new to the business, he had a fresh take on growing and improving his company and a real commitment to it. I was impressed to learn, for instance, that when Saratoga Boatworks met its profitability goal for 2006, Olson took his entire team to the Florida Keys to celebrate and take part in "Boatworks University," which consisted of team building exercises led by an outside consultant.

It was with great anticipation that I first drove up to the company's newly opened Lake George sales and service facility – the second location they've opened in the past 12 months. Later in the day, I also visited the dealership's original Saratoga Lake marina, sales and service facility.

While they were both neat and clean, neither showroom was award winning. But after spending the day with their owner and a few of his staff, I was more impressed with Saratoga Boatworks than when I first read its application. It was clear the people and their commitment to the dealership's vision, customer service and continuous improvement were anything but average.

Their example reminds me of a call I received after the first year of our Top 100 Dealer program. The owners of a dealership on the list had decided to visit another Top 100 Dealership a few hundred miles away. After the visit, they immediately called to complain that we hadn't ranked them correctly. Their dealership, which had a much larger and more professional showroom and sold many more units, was ranked lower on the list than the one they had visited.

What they failed to take into consideration was the value they couldn't see from the surface. The other dealership not only had a better long-term customer relations strategy leading to higher CSI scores, it offered more employee training and development, which added up to a better boating experience for its customers. It also was more profitable.

Appearances are important. As the cliché goes, you never get a second chance to make a first impression. Increasing the professionalism of dealership sales and service environments will, in the long run, help our industry attract more boaters.

And in an ideal world, our industry's dealerships would excel at both. There are certainly many among the highest ranks of our Top 100 Dealers that do, and they represent the best examples of what other dealers should aim for. But when a business must choose between investing in internal operations and its physical presence, I'd rather see it work from the inside out.

Not only is it less expensive to keep the customers we have than to constantly attract new ones, but we benefit more from inspiring feelings of pleasant surprise in our boating customers than bitter disappointment. ❖

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