

Spreading the Word

A veteran marine journalist's lesson from IBEX: Even if you make a great product, you can't miss any chance to talk it up.

by Chris Caswell

I've just returned from the very successful 2010 IBEX show in Louisville, Kentucky, where I was a judge selecting the Innovation Award winners for new products. Before sharing some of my insights, a disclaimer: I am not a boatbuilder. Yes, far back in my past I built wooden boats and bear the scars on my hands and bank account to prove it. But for four decades I've been, by profession and training, a journalist. That's my side of the fence.

There were far more entries in the contest for IBEX Innovation Awards than I had expected. Why? Because it hasn't been a great year for this industry, and product development is expensive. When all a production boat builder can do to justify a "new model" is change the color of the upholstery, you know not much money is being spent on development. So I was pleased by the number of competitors. Yes, a few were so lame it would be a felony to use the product name and the word *innovation* in the same sentence, but several made us judges slap our foreheads and ask, "Why didn't *we* think of that?"

What I really want to share didn't happen in the judging room, however. It happened afterward, on the show floor. We'd walked the entire exhibition a number of times during the setup days in order to complete our judging by the opening day breakfast. But, I walked it again to see all the finished exhibits, to shake hands with the Innovation Award winners, and to tell the losing entries that it was the other judges who didn't like them (just kidding).

My revelation: On *every* aisle I found at least one product that *should* have competed for an Innovation Award. Several could easily have won



Naval architect Albert Nazarov, center, gets the lowdown on the Zeus drive at the Cummins/MerCruiser booth at the 2010 IBEX. Even strong and innovative products like the Zeus and other efficient pod drives coming onto the market can't be relied on to sell themselves.

in their categories, earning a wealth of free publicity as well as a nice trophy.

But they hadn't been entered.

Okay, the entry fee was \$150, plus you had to make sure the product was at the show early enough for the judges to see it. And we asked for a 150-word write-up to tell why it was innovative. So there was some money, some time, and some effort involved.

But not that much!

As a boating journalist, I'm continually amazed when I contact a boatbuilder to arrange a feature test on a boat and get...how can I say this delicately?...blown off. They don't actually come out and say that they're too busy to bother with a boat test, but I can read between the lines.

I want to grab them by their shirtfronts and shake them. I didn't ask them to take me for a free boat ride; I offered them a *feature story* in a prestigious magazine! If they had to buy those four, five, or six pages as advertising, well, their kids might be

working at Dairy Queen instead of going to college. Besides, tests have proved that readers are far more likely to believe statements made in editorial than claims made in ads.

All of the Innovation Award entries, even the lame ones, were displayed in a special area at IBEX for everyone to see. And since most of the judges were either print or Internet journalists, they were likely to mention a lot of those products in future stories. I know I will.

On top of that, as soon as the trophies were presented, the public relations team for the National Marine Manufacturers Association (NMMA), which co-sponsored IBEX along with *Professional*

BoatBuilder, swung into action, sending reams of press releases to a long list of publications and Web sites around the world.

My point is a simple one: Get off your butt and take advantage of every marketing opportunity—especially the free ones!

By promptly fielding a journalist's request for information, by entering an Innovation Award competition (when you have something truly innovative), and by exploiting every opportunity for free publicity, your business will be the better for it.

Because, my friends, you cannot *buy* that kind of ink. **PBB**

About the Author: *The former editor of Sea Magazine and Yachting, Chris Caswell has written nine books on boating, and hosts the Marine Voyager series on theSpeed Channel. He says he's owned more boats than he wants either his banker or his wife to know about, and has therefore spent an inordinate amount of his life—and finances—in boatyards.*