

Boating Magazine Qualitative Editorial Research

Summary Report

Boating Magazine

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By:

Client Company Name

Background

The purpose of this Phase I research—the qualitative interviewing—is to uncover relevant issues among readers and potential readers which can be integrated into the survey instrument for the Phase II quantitative study. This qualitative assessment is, in effect, an internal effort aimed at study development. The essential issues that were explored are:

- How is *Boating* different from the competition?
- What things can *Boating* do to be different or better than the competition?

The quantitative phase, which is to be a self-completed mail study conducted among the same target audience, will serve to assess how receptive readers and prospects are to the editorial recommendations that emerge from this qualitative research, and other enhancements contemplated by management.

A total of 30 in-depth interviews were completed. Ten interviews were conducted face-to-face at an interviewing facility in Old Bridge, New Jersey on Saturday, January 24 for the benefit of first-hand observation by management. The remaining 20 interviews were conducted by telephone through February 20. All participants (face-to-face and telephone interviews) were mailed a set of current issues of *Boating*, *MB&S*, and either *PMY* or *Sail*, and instructed to review them prior to the interview. The interview itself covered specific topic areas (see appendix) but was unstructured, allowing respondents to add their own insights beyond the discussion topics. Each interview lasted approximately 15-20 minutes, and respondents were guaranteed anonymity. Respondents were offered an incentive (\$200 for personal interviews, \$30 for telephone interviews) for participating, though more than half of those interviewed by phone declined the incentive. The sample specifications are:

- Category readers, half of whom are *Boating* subscribers who also subscribe to at least one of the competitive titles (*Power & Motoryacht*, *Boating*, *Motorboating & Sailing*, *Sail*, *Cruising World*);
- Half are Non-*Boating* subscribers who subscribe to at least two of the competitive set; and
- 70% own powerboats, 30% own sailboats.

- To help ensure that boaters with a desirable demographic and boating profile were included, respondents interviewed by telephone were screened additionally for income (HHI \$100,000+), length of boat (30+ feet), have an investment in a slip, and knowledge of annual boat operating cost.

Assessing unstructured interviews such as these is ultimately a subjective task, as is the case with most qualitative research. One must also recognize that thirty individuals do not necessarily represent the points of view of all *Boating* subscribers and prospective readers. In reviewing these findings, it is important to note that in real day-to-day life, most participants do not react with the magazine as they did for these interviews. Some participants told us they had read through the three magazines we sent them, while others may have just skimmed through them.

Summary

The in-depth interviews among current and non-subscribers provide important insight into *Boating's* audience and their impressions of the magazine. It is worth pointing out that *Boating*, in the classic marketing sense, possesses a brand equity just as any other branded product does. The fundamental element of the concept is that brand equity exists only as a function of *consumer choice in the marketplace*—it comes into being when the consumer chooses a product. *Boating* management tries to differentiate itself from the other boating books and, certainly for subscribers, it does. But differentiating the magazine from the competition may not go far enough; rather, establishing (positive) brand equity is a more useful objective because it places consumer choice at the forefront: *a brand (Boating) does not possess equity, but is attributed equity by the consumer*. Put another way, management does not differentiate the magazine by its edit, its audience differentiates *Boating* from the other books.

This is an important distinction because committed boaters regularly read more than one boating magazine. It is supported by previous research and was clearly evident among the respondents interviewed here. Why do boaters read more than one boating book? It may be the curse of being passionate about a hobby or avocation: an often-insatiable interest in a subject like Boating. Though typical of enthusiast

categories, multiple magazine readership, by definition, poses a potential threat to any book; again, it's that pervasive issue of *choice*. At the least, it may diffuse the impact of *Boating* editorial and advertising; worse, readers may find another magazine they like better.

Why do boaters read the books they do? Do they see the magazines as being different from one another? What are they looking for in boating magazines? These are questions whose answers vary considerably by individual. Even for enthusiast books like *Boating* that have the luxury of a *focus*, the editorial dilemma is in knowing to whom to edit the book. In this case boating is the obvious common interest. However, that still leaves a very wide range of individuals who may have different interests and information needs--they comprise *Boating's* readership and potential. By and large, the opinions expressed by participants about *Boating* represent somewhat polarized viewpoints.

Subscribers generally regard the book as an essential read, a resource that meets their information needs and fuels their interests about Boating better than, or at least as well as, the other mainstream books they read. Those who don't read *Boating* would seem to have a commitment to another mainstream book (usually *MB&S* and *PMY*) rather than a particular dislike for *Boating*. Or, they have a special interest like fishing, and read the special-interest books on that topic. Non-readers are decidedly indifferent toward the book. Even when pressed to evaluate the magazine as part of the interview, non-readers are for the most part unable to observe meaningful differences in style and format between *Boating* and the other books, other than their perceptions that the magazine is "high end" and venerable. Indeed, the task of reviewing side by side the three magazines we sent them, if anything, served to reinforce non-readers' belief that the mainstream boating magazines are all pretty much alike.

Is *Boating* really a service book disguised as a buff book? Hardly, but it is clear that the people we talked to expect a certain amount of practical information in the boating books they read—what boat to buy, how things work, how to maintain, new products, where to go, etc. One person said it nicely, "*The passion of boating is in being hands-on.*" The respondents in this study seek, among other things, hands-on

information from the magazines they read. All could be described as committed, yet practical, boaters. They seem to know the dollar costs of their passion, and are able to make clear trade-offs between expenses and the rewards of Boating, irrespective of income and net worth.

The experiential and aspirational reasons for reading *Boating* appear to be important drivers too, but less so than participants' information needs. For those who enjoy it, the experiential/aspirational elements of the book are "nice to know." The risk is, though, that for others, such editorial can instead be off-putting; what rounds out the book to some (especially those who want to read anything and everything about Boating) may serve to make *Boating* inaccessible ("not written for me") to others. Especially among non-readers, *Boating's* perceived focus on megayachts may be evidence that the high end, which fairly or unfairly distinguishes *Boating* from the other books, is not necessarily an ideal image identity component to have. It does differentiate, but may also limit: some readers may not enjoy reading about that class of boat because they know they do not want, or cannot afford, to own one.

It may be possible for *Boating* to stake out a more populist positioning while still leveraging its heritage and standing as a magazine. Though readers do acknowledge that the book covers a wide range of boat sizes, *Boating* appears nevertheless to have the most upscale identity of the mainstream books. (Certainly the large-boat skew in the brokerage coverage contributes to this perception.) That is both a highly desirable thing, particularly with respect to acquiring advertisers, and a not-so-great thing. The statistics of boat ownership remind us there is a very finite number of individuals in the megayacht class of buying power; it is safe to say that large numbers of additional readers will probably not come from the high end.

There is an editorial opportunity worth exploring further—working toward making the book an *essential resource* for boaters. This theme is expressed directly and implicitly in the ideas we heard from readers in describing their "perfect" boating magazine and also when making recommendations on how to improve the magazine. *Boating* will only become a must-read when readers see it as being a more essential read than the other books, which many, based on these interviews, do not now believe. The editorial themes to be considered for inclusion in the Phase II research follow below. They reflect readers' input and underscore the notion of

Boating becoming more of an information resource, and the implications for comprehensiveness and relevancy that go with it.

Editorial Considerations

There is no agreement whatsoever on how the book should be edited. Those with limited motivation to read the magazine tend to want shorter, less detailed coverage. Others relish in-depth coverage of subjects that interest them. Below are ideas respondents put forth, some of which may be appropriate for further evaluation if they have not already been considered, or already exist.

- *Boating* has attracted a wide audience of subscribers, but the perception is that it is a magazine for older, wealthy men with large yachts. This reader is thought to be at least 40-55 years old, already with a second home, with teenage children, and owning an expensive yacht. He may be spending as much as 10%-15% of his annual income on boating. "How to" information, to them, presumably has a different meaning than for other boaters who may be more personally involved in the upkeep and enhancement of their boats. The implication is that how-to articles in the magazine are not specific enough. For many, readers and non-readers alike, the regular "how to" features are too short and lack the depth of detail to make them of practical use.

"Give boaters more technical information. They will tackle projects they are comfortable doing. They will do it."

"How-to's seem almost out of place in a high-end boating magazine [like Boating]."

- Acknowledge smaller boat owners. A perceived acceptance of small boat owners within the editorial would help expand the potential audience and increase the book's relevance to non-readers who are put-off by the perception that *Boating* covers only megayachts. This applies to the brokerage section as well—include smaller boats.
- Editorials. Taking stands on boating issues. The personal watercraft article is cited as a good example. The magazine or publisher's stance on industry issues is

felt to be appropriate, and is welcomed by readers. Taking a position adds credibility to the book and leverages the stature *Boating* has that other books may not.

- Travelogues. As a subject area these are of high interest to boaters. Though some would call them “fluff” pieces, destination-oriented features reveal the experiential aspects of boating that are otherwise only incidental in the boating and product reviews and other elements of the book. Boaters ask for destination pieces, even though some, because of their long-distance nature, represent pure fantasy for the reader. These pieces can also serve to add more adventure and real-life stories to the edit, which would help attract a younger audience.

“. . . sort of like a cross between Travel & Leisure and Fisherman, why don't you highlight a certain port every month?”

- Boat and product reviews. Generally, the depth and quality of the reviews and the perceptivity of the reviewers are considered as good or better than the other books. The criticism is that the reviews are too piecemeal, driven by recent introduction or availability. A number of respondents want to see more head-to-head comparison reviewing of boats and equipment a la *Consumer Reports*: group boats by size or class and review them together. The same for products. This would serve as a resource for those in the market to buy, and would also lend more credibility to the reviews (“Boat A in 48-55 foot sportfishing size range is better because . . .”)

“How would I know if a Hatteras 56' is better than a Main Ship? Which one is going to be a better investment in the long run?”

“New boats that are coming out. But not so much 'here it is, it's \$365,000 and put out by a company that's well known for putting out new boats.' Get into showing how the builder has refined a typical design to make the boat better. Not just that the boat is a foot longer to compete with their resale market but how they actually made some improvements that makes this boat better than others in its class. Maybe they moved the galley this way to overcome a passageway problem. That six inches may have solved a big problem.”

- Long-term valuations of boats. Coupled with head-to-head reviews of new boats, readers would like to know how well a boat has held up over time, both in terms of durability and quality of workmanship and in resale value as well. Though a daunting task to compile, such information (at least resale values on a “nationalized” basis) could be presented as a periodic, or even a perpetual index. Providing long-term valuations that may include advertisers’ products may be sacrilegious, but readers do ask for it.
- Index of reviews. Because it may not be practical to group enough similar boats or equipment for side-by-side comparison in a given issue, readers are asking for an index of past issues with comparable boats or products for comparison.
- Offer buying guides more frequently. Again, this is evidence that readers do not feel they have a single reference source for boating information. Many of those interviewed commented on the January *MB&S Buying Guide '98* article as being the type of coverage they wished they could read more frequently.
- Sport fishing. Including sport fishing into the cruising destinations might be a way to capture fishermen’s’ interest without entering the highly competitive fishing segment.
- Seamanship. Articles reviewing rules of boating, etiquette, docking, hurricane preparedness, navigation (tides, etc.) and such cut across the wide interests of boaters, the types of boats they own, and the kinds of boating they do. Inclusion of seamanship articles is hardly new, but they may be too diffused in presentation and infrequent to stand as a distinct element of the book.

“Navigation. Everyone takes their courses and understands it, but I have not seen a whole lot of people out with sextants. Between that traditional knowledge and GPS, I think there are a lot of people that would like a review on some of the basic stuff that they’ve forgotten.”

“I’d like to see a refresher course on some of the stuff someone may have learned in a class ten, twelve years ago but they’ve forgotten, a series of articles talking about rules of the road, like crossing situations or large vessels or crowded harbors.”

- Regional coverage. Readers are asking for regional editions of the book. Though this may not be practical, “regionalizing” the book in other ways would address

this need. An example given would be coverage of local ports of call, rotating by region across issues, and more charts.

"...like regularly covering what's going on in local waters—day trips, routes on how to get to key ports, where you would stay, what you could do."

- Coverage of major boating areas. As with the calendar, readers say they want to read more about boating areas (like the Chesapeake, Puget Sound, Lake Michigan, Long Island Sound, portions of the ICW) which are not necessarily near them. Recurring feature-length articles that would appear every 3-6 months could address readers' desire for more "regional" coverage while at the same time provide additional experiential content.
- Brokerage. Though many readers are critical of the sheer size and high-end skew of the brokerage listings, several readers want to see local (or regional) listings. They claim these would be far more practical for the prospective buyer.

"When I bought my last boat, and I knew I wanted a used one, I went to a brokerage here on the [Long Island] Sound and told him what I was looking for. He used his network to locate boats in my size range that were essentially local. Why would I want to look at what a Florida broker is offering when there are so many boats closer to home?"

- Calendar. Ongoing listing of events by region. This could include races and regattas. The need appears to be for a national compendium of local and regional events. Enthusiasts like to read about events in other areas even though they may have no intention of going there.
- "Local yokels." Even though well-known writers or editorial personalities do not appear to be essential (if at all important) to the read, some readers expressed an interest in articles that would be written by local writers who presumably "would know the water better." Again, this speaks to an interest in regional coverage.
- Historical story lines. This may be a thematic element worth considering.

"Maybe put in some historical perspectives, like wooden boats of historical significance, or boats that were made in the 20's or 30's that people still keep up, or small organizations where people get together and share stories about how they found their derelict wooden boat and how

they restored it, stuff like that. It's kind of lighthearted but if done right it may expand readers' knowledge of what's entailed in wooden boats and some of the designs that were employed during that era."

- Things that Work. A regular feature where readers write-in with practical ways to do something relating to repairs, maintenance, alternative products, etc.
- *Boating* online. Based on these interviews, the Q&A line is worth promoting.
- Advertising. One reader asks why there are no ads for boat financing companies.

Other Findings

IMAGE PERCEPTIONS OF MAGAZINES

Boating

Readers and non-readers generally segment the magazine with *PMY*, as magazines that focus on large, expensive boats. Readers, however, are more aware that *Boating* covers a wider range of boats than non-readers assume. Although not everyone knows how old the publication is, boaters seem to be aware of its stature in the field, above and beyond their perceptions of its high-end coverage. There is an apparent legacy to the book.

"I'm comfortable with Boating. I like where it's going and how it's evolving. I can clip articles from it, refer to it, and can anticipate what to expect from month to month. Magazines that can do that have long-term viability, and wholesale changes are not necessary. It's got that 'gotta have' place in my mind."

"Boats are something you zip around in and always see one bigger, so you can never feel too glib about what you have. You always see something bigger, something nicer cruising by and you say, someday I'll have something like that. It never seems to fail, whether you have a 16-footer or a 60-footer, then a 110-footer pulls up next to you. That's a nice feeling, and one of the main reasons why I like reading Boating."

"This is a magazine for people who would not have a problem spending \$20,000-\$30,000 total maritime expenses a year. It's not uncommon for someone to put in \$200,000 on hardware at one time. It is geared to folks with a whole lot more financial resources than the other magazines."

"They used to have a much more distinctive look and feel about five years ago. It doesn't stand out as much now."

"Sleek, big horsepower boats. The Hatteras-type cruisers."

"Unfortunately, the back half of the magazine is all ads. It's too much."

PMY

Most respondents see this magazine as being the closest to *Boating* in its coverage. The non-*Boating* readers we spoke to almost invariably read *PMY* instead. It is interesting that many respondents know that they receive their subscription for free, yet still seem to regard the book on a prestige level equal to *Boating*, this of course would apply more to non-*Boating* readers than readers.

Their monthly ads and boats for sale sections are not as good [as Boating's]."

MB&S

This magazine is the least distinctive in the minds of respondents. It is believed to concentrate on slightly smaller boats. If anything, it would be thought to compete against a magazine like *Boating*.

"They have very good 'how to' things. You know, little 'pearls,' 100 ways to do things better. This is better than the others."

"Boating's writing is far superior to Motorboating & Sailing."

"There's nothing in there for me."

Sail

Sail is seen as a separate category from the power books. It is also seen as being skewed toward larger sailboats. For instance, one reader points out that the *Just Launched* section would rarely cover a 20-foot size. *Sail* is thought to be a true sailing magazine, with an emphasis on tactical articles like racing.

Cruising World

This is a magazine which relies heavily on an experiential approach. It does not appear to be a direct competitor to *Boating*, *PMY*, and *MB&S*, especially in terms of technical issues and comprehensiveness. It appeals to both powerboaters and sailors for whom cruising is a passion.

“Cruising World has a very definite point of view. It’s geared to people who have sold the farm, are going to live aboard, educate their children aboard, and all that. It isn’t realistic to what most people are doing with their lives, and their obligations.”

“They have human interest depth that the sailing people have. The power magazines all have too much brokerage and sales stuff.”

“Too much power and trawlers, not enough sailing.”

SAILING VS. POWER COVERAGE IN MAGAZINE

The issue of sailing coverage in *Boating* is very clear, according to readers and non-readers alike. The gradual de-emphasis of sailing over the past few years appears to have been a wise move. Readers of the magazine are primarily powerboaters, this much is obvious. For them, the current power-to-sail mix is fine (read, not enough to bother or distract them). Though powerboaters are usually not sailors, they respect sailing and believe sailing coverage has a rightful place in the book; most say they are likely to skip over the sailing articles.

“Probably not [Boating attracting sailors as readers] because, although there is a great degree of tolerance between powerboaters and sailors, there is a general dislike for each other.

“Sailors, like all boaters, want to read about their boats, it’s that simple . There’s not enough sailing in Boating.”

Sailors (both readers and non-readers) fall into two camps. Those interested in performance sailing or racing look to the sailing books for their only (or primary) read. For them, the sailing coverage in *Boating* falls short of their needs or interest areas. Clearly, performance sailors are not likely to treat *Boating* as their first read, though they may still read it as a secondary magazine, especially if they prefer cruising.

“It’s hard to get a sailor to buy into Boating. They’ll read Sail or Sailing first.”

Non-performance sailors are more likely to find the sailing coverage in *Boating* of interest to them. Though probably not likely, some cruising-oriented sailors, perhaps with large boats, may find all they need in *Boating*, but because of the strong multiple magazine readership behavior of boaters in general, it is hard to imagine that for these sailors they would not want to read one of the sailing books too. The possible exception would be a cruising sailor who reads *Boating* and *Cruising World* and none of the other sailing books.

With the current 70%/30% mix, the powerboaters are certainly happy. The sailors who read *Boating* may also, ironically, be satisfied too because it is expected that they include sailing books in their reading repertoire. The present power-to-sail edit mix may be close to optimal.

IMPORTANCE OF BYLINES

Readers are for the most part unable to recall the bylines of the contributors to the magazine. This is true for all the other books as well. Of the thirty boaters interviewed, only seven could recall the name of anyone whose article appears in one of the magazines (Peter Frederiksen, Jay Coyle, Charles Barthold are mentioned for *Boating*, Tom Duff for *Sail*, Tom Felix [Fexas] for *PMY*). The important take here is not who was named, but the fact those readers do not seem to care who the authors are.

“Over the years the professionalism of the authors has improved tremendously in all of the magazines to the point where they don’t just write a dry article, they relate some quirky story or add some humor to it, which makes it a lot easier to read the story and enjoy it. Since the level of writing is so good across the board, I don’t really care who the author is.”

“I don’t pay attention to the byline unless I become familiar with the style of writing of that writer.”

Readers do expect that whoever writes an article will be an expert in the subject area. Expertise and experience are implicit expectations. It may very well be that the names of the various departments and features in all of the books works against

byline recognition: those names are typically very catchy, and are generally very effective. Readers spontaneously recall a good number of feature and department headings. It was also pointed out that it is difficult for a reader to learn much about a writer without reading the Publisher's Letter. Photographs of contributors help, but perhaps sidebars are needed to give a short background or bio of the writer.

On the subject of celebrity writers, there was some interest. Readers clearly expect that the celebrity be the writer, not the one written about. There may be interest in reading what a celebrity has to say about a boating experience (Walter Cronchite, for example) but there is apparently no interest in reading *about* a celebrity. If readers do not recognize bylines, having celebrity writers may add additional credibility to the magazine.

Appendix

Sample Profile

- The following summarizes the demographic and usage information obtained from respondents.

<i>Based on 30 Respondents</i>	#
<u>Gender</u>	
<i>Male</i>	28
<i>Female</i>	2
<u>Type of Boat Owned</u>	
<i>Power</i>	19
<i>Sail</i>	5
<i>Both</i>	6
<u>Length (of largest boat) [feet]</u>	
<i>20 up to 30</i>	4
<i>30 up to 40</i>	12
<i>40 up to 50</i>	9
<i>50 up to 60</i>	3
<i>60 up to 70</i>	1
<i>70 or longer</i>	1
<u>Location</u> [<i>Telephone only; some cities have multiple respondents</i>]	
<i>California (Long Beach, San Rafael, Sacramento)</i>	3
<i>Connecticut (Stamford, Westport)</i>	4
<i>Florida (Jacksonville, Tampa, Miami)</i>	3
<i>Michigan (Grosse Pointe)</i>	1
<i>Minnesota (Excelsior)</i>	1

<i>Based on 30 Respondents</i>	#
<i>Missouri (St. Louis)</i>	1
<i>New Jersey (Rumsen, Colts Neck, Bricktown, Oakhurst)</i>	4
<i>North Carolina (Newport, Wilmington)</i>	2
<i>Oregon (Portland)</i>	1

Discussion Topics

I. Introduction

1. First of all, describe how you use your boat. That is, what is the primary boating experience for you or your family?

II. Magazines in general

1. Of all the boating magazines you read, which one is your favorite? Why—what is the best thing about this magazine?
2. What kind of information are you looking for in the boating magazines you read?
3. Let me read you a list of magazines in general, and for each, please give me a word or phrase (an adjective or adverb) to describe your feelings about the magazine—if you don't know it, just say so. (Don't tell me *Time Magazine* is about news or that *Sports Illustrated* is about sports—I want your feelings about it.)

***MB&S* *PMY* *Arch. Digest* *Boating* *Sailing* *Sail* *C.N. Traveler*
Boating* *Cruising World**

4. An old friend has just purchased his first boat. If you had to suggest one boating magazine for him to read among all that you now read, which one would that be? Why?
5. Let's talk about boating magazines in particular. If you could design the perfect magazine for you, what would it be like? What topics would it cover? What are three things you would want it to have?

III. Evaluation of *Boating*

1. Let's suppose that *MB&S*, *Boating*, *PMY*, & *Sail* were doing an article on a new boat. What would be unique about *Boating's* profile? How would it cover the subject differently? What would *Boating* do better or less well than the others?
 - A. Give me two telltale signs that it is a *Boating* article and not one of the other magazines.
 - B. Tell me one quality this profile done by one of the other magazines has that you wish *Boating* would incorporate?
2. What is unique about *Boating* that makes it different from the other boating magazines? What does *Boating* do or cover best? What makes it special? [Get them to think about the last 1-2 issues.]

A. What types of articles do you read? What kinds of articles should *Boating* do more of? What kinds of articles should it do *less* of?

3. Do you view *Boating* as primarily a sailboat magazine or a powerboat magazine? Would you like to see more focus on power, or sail?
4. What would you say is a “must read” in *Boating*? That is, what about the magazine would make you want to read it each month?
5. Is there a *person* who writes for *Boating* who stands out, someone whom you would look forward to reading *next* month? Who and why? [Probe: funny? useful information? the writer's background? etc.]

IV. Hands-on evaluation

1. You have had the opportunity to read through the latest issue of *Boating* and two other boating magazines.
 - A. Based on this issue, what were your major thoughts about *Boating*? What did you especially like? What are your criticisms?
 - B. What should *Boating* learn from or do like the other boating magazines? How does the magazine fall short? Explain.
2. Can you recall a story in *Boating* that was particularly memorable to you? What was it, and why?

V. Conclusion

1. Suppose you were the editor for a month. Give me two changes you would make that would make *Boating* better?
2. Suppose the editor and publisher of *Boating* were behind the mirror. What advice would you give them?