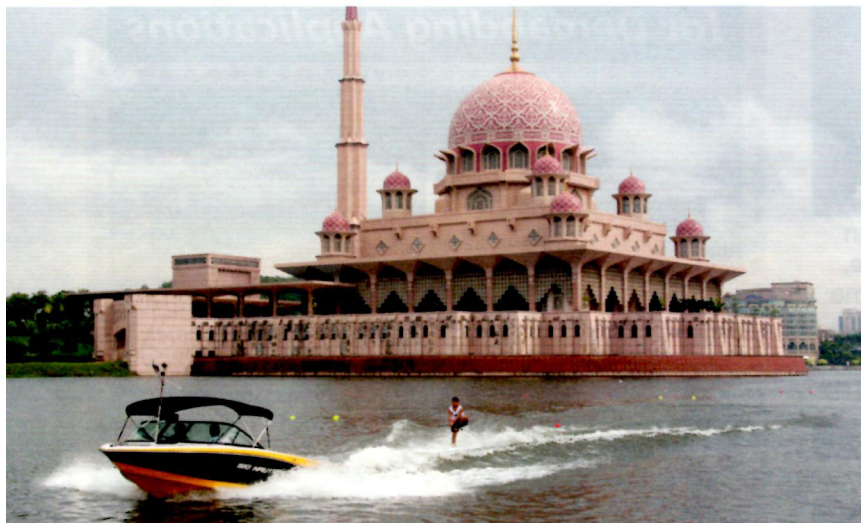


American Express

FOR US WAKEBOARD AND SKI-BOAT BUILDERS, INTERNATIONAL BUSINESS IS NOW KEY. FOR SOME NON-US DEALERS, FINDING CLIENTS HAS BECOME AN EXERCISE IN CREATIVITY

WORDS: MICHAEL VERDON



▲ West meets East
in Malaysia

When Zenon Bilas gets a call to come to Lebanon, Brazil or China, he's rarely surprised. The barefoot skiing champion has traveled around the world for nearly 30 years, doing demos and clinics to promote the sport.

One of his latest gigs was in Lebanon, where a MasterCraft dealer, Sea Pros, flew him in to hold a clinic on a local inland lake. The visit was featured on local television, including MTV Lebanon, a prime venue for reaching future teenage clients.

Bilas has circled the world with his unusual skill set, always attracting media attention for local dealers. Some visits were better than others. A 1997 visit to China found Bilas working with equipment that was left over from a previous boatbuilder's visit in 1982. "It was like a time warp," he says.

STRONG MEDIA EXPOSURE

But the Lebanon visit was successful. "The owner, Alain Maaraoui, is a barefoot skier so it was a good fit," says Bilas. "Having a barefoot champion there was really the whole shebang in terms of media exposure – he's promoting his dealership, MasterCraft and the sport."

US towboat manufacturers like MasterCraft,

Nautique and Malibu have long relied on promotional events and tournaments to generate interest in their specialty lines, especially in countries outside the US. "We set up tournaments all over South America," says Henrik Hartvig-Laursen, president of Miami Ski Nautiques. "We recently held a senior tour down there, and the World Wakeboard Championships happened in Peru."

Hartvig-Laursen has helped set up watersports dealerships in most countries in South America. He realizes that towboat marketing requires a more hands-on approach than other types of boats. "If you're selling mainstream brands like Sea Ray or Chaparral, there's a different way of going to market," he says. "In our segment, people need the specific boats to do the sports."

Many dealers, particularly in third-world countries, draw on a small but wealthy client base. Maaraoui, for instance, does the bulk of his business with high-end Ferretti yacht brands like Pershing and Riva. But the MasterCrafts have a place in his business, too. "People who buy the yachts are buying wakeboard boats for their kids," says Bilas. "I've heard that at many of the dealerships."

Even though US sales of towboats have risen seven to nine per cent this year, the market is still 60 per cent smaller than 2008, when builders sold about 13,000 units. This year, it may reach 6,000. Broadening the international network is now critical for most builders.

Bill Yeargin, president and CEO of Correct Craft, has been busy promoting the sports of wakeboarding and water-skiing, along with his Nautique brand, around the world. "Three years ago, we started a significant international business development effort that included many new events," he says. "It's a strategy to increase participation in water sports, which we have already seen increase sales."

Yeargin, who has visited 50 countries as an ambassador for Nautique, has met the President of Bahrain, the Crown Prince of Dubai, and President Obama. Yeargin also received the Florida Governor's Ambassador's award for his efforts to increase exports.

The once-sleepy brand is now lead sponsor and official towboat of the Nautique Wake Games, Nautique Big Dawg World Tour, and Nautique WWA Wakeboard World Nationals as well as the Moomba Masters in Australia.

During that time, Nautique also set up 31 new non-US dealers. "Many times a new initiative takes years to bear fruit," says Yeargin. "But the past two years have been the best years for international sales in our 88-year history. We expect 2013 to be our best year ever for international."

Photos featuring Nautiques in exotic settings – in front of a palace in Malaysia, with a sheikh in Kuwait, on a muddy lake in Paraguay – are like snapshots of a world tour. Most new markets, says Yeargin, are performing well. "We've transitioned from signing dealers to developing them," he says.

"DEFINITELY ON THE UP"

With rising sales in the US, towboat builders are also seeing some increases in international business. Richard Mainwaring, who handles the dealer base for MasterCraft Boats in much of EMEA, says that he has received more enquiries from potential dealers last summer than in the last three years. "Things are definitely on the up," he says. "Our international sales are up 12 per cent this year, with the average boat price up 10 per cent."

Mainwaring screens potential dealers by their knowledge of water-skiing and wakeboarding. "When I look for a dealer in a new country, I look at their service and support infrastructures," he says. "But I also insist that they have a product champion on staff – somebody who is a wakeboard or water-skiing expert. It sells the brand."

The MasterCraft rep believes that specialising in tournaments and competitive events will not increase sales. "The tournament market is relatively small and focuses on just the hardcore guys," says Mainwaring. "The dealers who promote outside are the ones who see results. The MasterCraft owners of the future are the Bayliner owners of today."

At the dealership level, MasterCraft Boats UK has been using tournaments

and general events to increase sales. The UK dealer, with a new showroom in Lancashire, is the official towboat for tournaments like the UK Wakeboard championships as well as the national kneeboard series.

But it also has a high profile in events like Wakestock, a weekend festival in Wales that mixes music and wakeboarding as well as London Night Jump, where water-skiers jump off ramps under spotlights. "Both events get national press coverage," says owner Michael Hardicker.

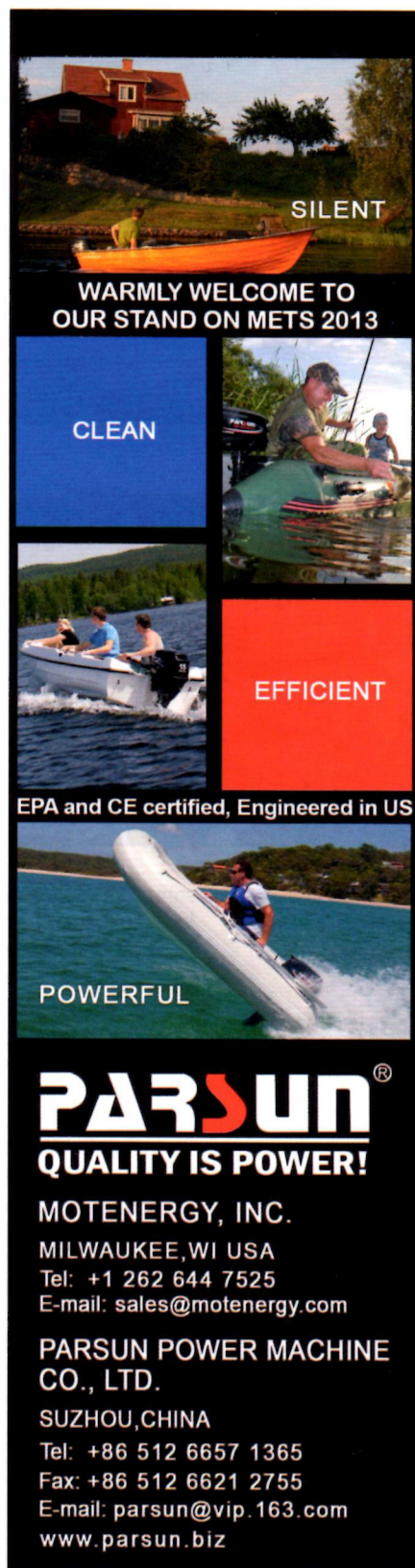
But Hardicker's team also has open day events where they bring MasterCrafts to different areas of the UK to demonstrate the boats' potential. "We also have a team of athletes under our banner that are based in different parts of the country," says Hardicker. "They might go to their local lakes each weekend. Their presence helps our brand. Ultimately, we want people to see our product on the water to get a sense of how well it performs."

Despite challenges like unpredictable English weather, MasterCraft Boats UK has one of the most committed customer bases in Europe. "We're quite active with email updates to more than 2,000 owners and enthusiasts," says Hardicker. "We constantly update our website so people know about new product launches. A lot of enthusiasts tend to be our best salespeople because they tell others about our boats."

The new headquarters will allow MasterCraft Boats UK to hold more events, says Hardicker. "We've now got everything under one banner and can interact more with our customers. They can view the product and talk to other owners about how they use their boats," he says.

MasterCraft has been in the UK since 1978, and its European part facility means strong factory support for clients. "Most of our clients are repeat customers who love the brand," says Hardicker. "New clients tend to be people already into the sport but who own a cheaper alternative to a MasterCraft. When they come in, they're finally ready to trade up to the boat of their dreams." **IBI**

“Wakestock, a festival mixing rock music and wakeboarding, has become a big media event”



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