

# THE VALUE OF A DISCOVER BOATING WEB REFERRAL

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# Introduction

The Discover Boating campaign's role is to market to consumers who are not currently boat owners—promoting the lifestyle segments that make up the recreational boating industry and providing them with a level of education so they feel compelled to go to the next level of boat shopping. Discover Boating does not, by design, have boat model pricing and model specifications on its website. This is information consumers need to make educated buying decisions, but information that constantly changes and differs from one brand to the next. Therefore, Discover Boating provides consumers with a clear path to that information from a manufacturer or dealer via website referrals.

When Discover Boating launched more than a decade ago, lead generation was a significant focus of industry leaders and considerable effort was spent optimizing Discover Boating sites to convert site visitors to sales leads.

**At that time, Discover Boating routinely generated approximately 75,000 sales leads per year from two groups of consumers:**

**Warm prospects:**

Those who would only give Discover Boating permission to contact them (50,000 annually)

**Warmer prospects:**

Those who would allow Discover Boating to share their contact information with contributing boat brands (25-30,000 annually)



# 75%

## of Discover Boating leads were first-time boat buyers

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At that time, consumers were more willing to share their contact information (before the proliferation of spam and security breaches) and approximately one-third of consumers who visited Discover Boating sites granted permission to share their personal contact information.

The leads generated on Discover Boating were annually compared to boater registration data, and according to Info-Link, an industry-leading data provider and keeper of the U.S. Coast Guard boater registration database, 12% of the leads generated on the Discover Boating website ended up purchasing a boat after visiting the site. What's more, 75% of those leads were first-time boat buyers and a higher percentage of these purchases were new boats compared to all boat purchases.

As the recession took hold and companies were looking for more cost-effective marketing tactics, email marketing campaigns soared in

popularity. Eventually, the definition of “junk mail” transformed from what was in your mailbox to what filled your inbox. As a result, fewer consumers were willing to share their contact information and, as most companies experienced, Discover Boating’s lead generation ability waned.

As purchasing behavior started to shift, consumers became increasingly leery of giving Discover Boating permission to share their email addresses with stakeholders. In some instances, consumers who left their lead data on Discover Boating websites would get multiple phone calls or emails from dealers or manufacturers within 30 minutes of submitting their information and not always related to the boat types that they expressed interest in on the Discover Boating website. It became evident that while a percentage of Discover Boating web visitors were in the shopping stage of the purchase funnel, many were also in the research phase. There was growing frustration from both consumers needing more time to research and industry stakeholders looking for the immediate sale.

# 3.2 million

## In 2016, Discover Boating generated more than 3.2 million consumer visits to manufacturer sites.

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Consumers were telling us: “I don’t want to be flooded with sales calls,” “I’m just doing research,” “I don’t know if my information will be secure,” “I’m worried about giving out too much personal information,” etc. What’s more, findings from the recently completed First-Time Boat Buyer research indicate 67% of first-time boat shoppers would not give out their personal information until the time of purchase.

To compound this challenge, mobile phone and tablet use continues to surge. Today, more than half of Discover Boating website visits originate from a mobile device, making extensive lead forms difficult to fill out. How Discover Boating responded to counter this dip has propelled the industry-wide campaign further than lead generation could ever take it. As a result, Discover Boating built an easily accessible bridge to boat brand sites—the website referral—leading consumers to the

next step on their journey to ownership – pricing information, model specifications, etc.

Discover Boating reinvented its websites as a web portal to all participating boat brand websites. This allowed consumers—after they’ve completed their research on a Discover Boating website—to click on a link to a boat brand’s website for a boat type they are interested in and gain instant access to the model and pricing information they desired. The first year of the website referral-based approach (2010) resulted in 100,000 consumer visits to manufacturer sites. In 2016, Discover Boating generated more than 3.2 million consumer visits to manufacturer sites.

These visits to manufacturer websites are defined as referral traffic. Referral traffic is Google’s method of reporting visits that come to your site from sources outside of its search engine. When someone clicks on a hyperlink to go to a new page on a different website, Google Analytics tracks the click as a referral visit to the second site.

One of the most visited sections on the Discover Boating sites is the boat selector tool. This section is the gateway to boat brand sites and is one of the primary entry points into the Discover Boating Lead System. It also presents a fork in the road for consumers: become a lead (by filling out a lead form) or become a referral (go directly to a manufacturer website via the links offered on the appropriate boat type page).

In 2016, consumers chose the referral route to a manufacturer's website at the rate of 1,000 visits (referrals) to a manufacturer site to one completed lead form. With more than five million visits to Discover Boating websites last year alone, just 3,000 consumers chose to fill out a lead form. Yet, more than 3.2 million consumers chose the more direct route and linked directly to a boat manufacturer website.

More than three million visits represent a significant amount of web traffic spread across participating boat brand sites. Discover Boating is often the largest source of third-party web traffic to brand sites outside of direct and search engine traffic. Have you taken a close look at your Google Analytics recently? If so, where does Discover Boating traffic land?

## Definitions

**Leads** are consumers who request to be contacted by dealers and manufacturers through the Discover Boating site, opting in by sharing their personal information through a lead form. Leads are added to the Discover Boating Lead System and are shared with brands and dealers that offer the visitor's specified boat type.

**Website referrals** are visitors who follow a link from the Discover Boating site directly to your brand or dealer website to research or shop for boats.

## Most importantly, what value are these Discover Boating website referrals to boat brand websites?

In 2016, Discover Boating set out to answer that question. It is estimated that around 1-2% of consumers who visit a boat dealer's website will fill out a lead form. That leaves 98-99% who do not. The recreational boating industry invests considerably, as they should, to convert the 1-2% of leads into sales. But, there is also considerable value in addressing the 98-99% of consumers who do not immediately complete a lead form.

# Methodology

Seventeen boat brands, from a variety of boat segments, volunteered to participate in this study. These seventeen brands represented one-tenth of the annual number of boat referrals generated by Discover Boating. Data and information was gathered from participating brands' Google Analytics.

A unique tracking pixel (cookie) was added as consumers left a Discover Boating website and landed on a boat brand site. This allowed brands to track consumers' movement throughout their sites. Each brand then submitted the data generated from their Google Analytics reports to OLSON, the Discover Boating Agency of Record.



# Findings

Website referrals are a key benefit for boat manufacturers that contribute to and participate in Discover Boating. Early in their boat shopping process, consumers are likely to conduct their own research online, so Discover Boating plays a vital role in transitioning their site visitors to boat brand sites to continue their research. Only boat brands that support Discover Boating are listed on the site.

Of the millions of people who come to Discover Boating websites each year, more of them than ever are opting to click off to manufacturer websites to shop boat brands on

their own rather than choosing to be contacted directly by a dealer or manufacturer.

How valuable is this website traffic for manufacturers? Is Discover Boating generating the right kind of traffic to boat manufacturer sites—consumers that genuinely are considering boat ownership someday?

The study focused on Discover Boating referral traffic within the brands' website analytics data and compared it to the total site audience to see how it stacked up in terms of audience quality.

## The study's three key learnings:

Discover Boating is sending new traffic to boat brand sites.

Discover Boating referrals represent a high-quality audience for boat brands.

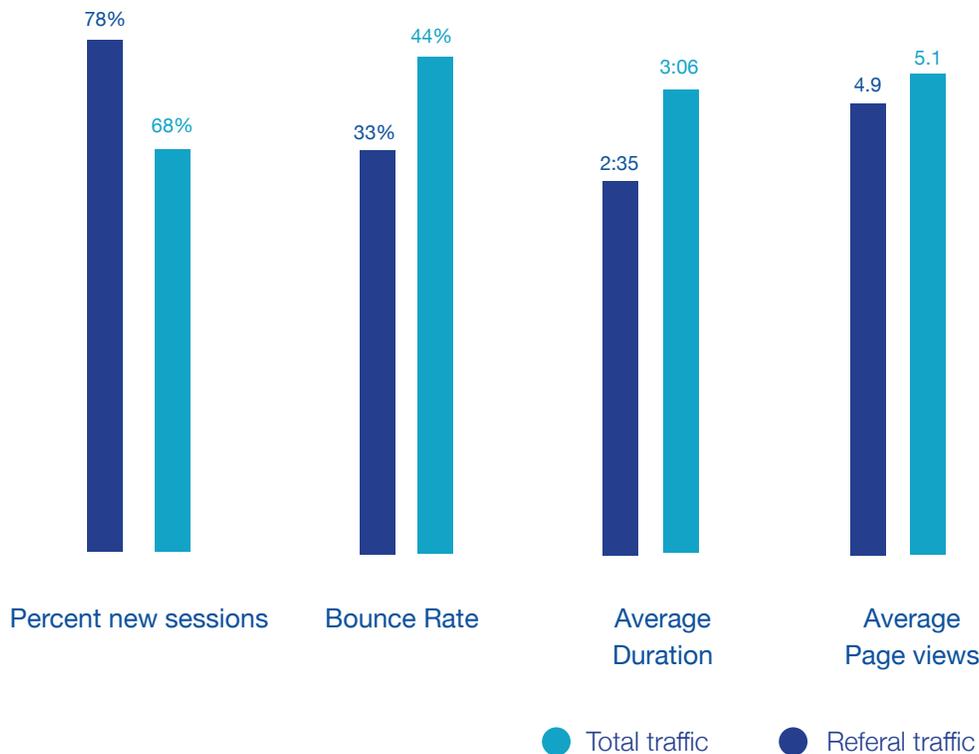
Discover Boating referral traffic is at the beginning of their consideration of the boating lifestyle and ownership.

## Discover Boating is sending new traffic to boat brand sites.

Discover Boating is sending referral traffic that would otherwise not have visited a boat brand's website. On average, 68% of the total traffic to the measured brand sites was new, whereas 78% of traffic from Discover Boating to the brand's site was new. The traffic coming from Discover Boating is driving up the overall average of new shoppers to the brand sites.

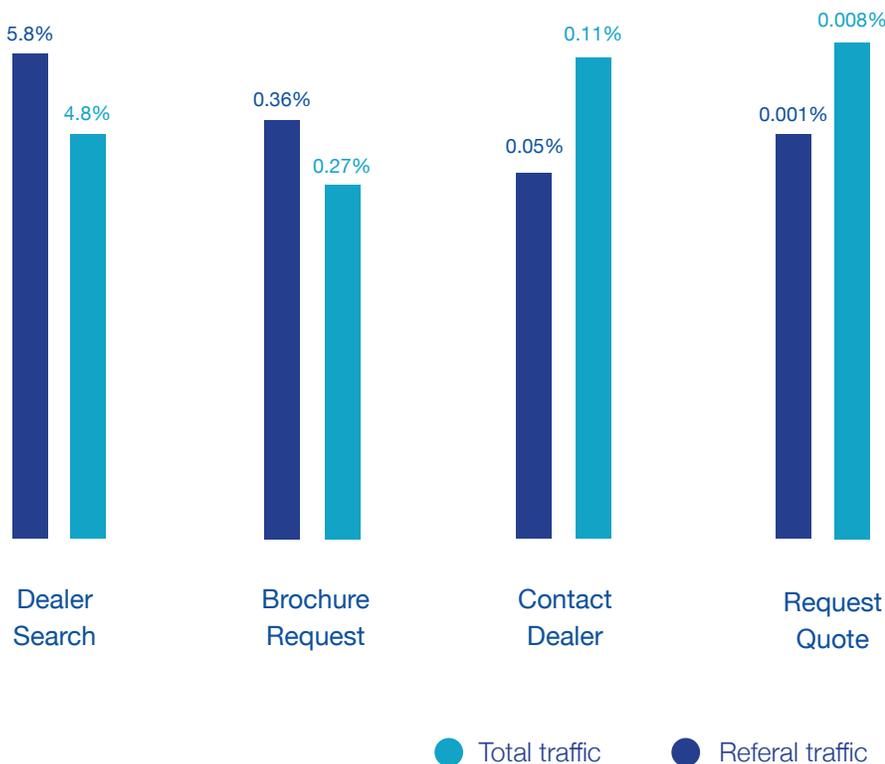
## Discover Boating website referrals represent a high-quality audience for boat brands.

Discover Boating referral traffic visitors are interested in exploring content from boat brands. This study found that Discover Boating referrals have a lower bounce rate (a visit that results in just one page viewed) than a brand's overall traffic. Discover Boating referrals also spend more than 2 ½ minutes on the site -- visiting about the same number of pages as the brand's site average (4.9 vs. 5.1).



## Discover Boating referral traffic is at the beginning of their journey towards boat ownership and the boating lifestyle.

Referral traffic from Discover Boating is more likely to take actions related to the earlier stages of the purchase process, such as searching for a local dealership and requesting a brochure. These visitors are less likely to take actions that typically happen closer to purchase such as asking for a dealer to contact them or requesting a quote for a specific model. Discover Boating referrals fall into the “top of the purchase funnel” category (those exploring their options) vs “bottom of the purchase funnel” (those ready to buy).



# Conclusion

This research indicates website referrals from Discover Boating deliver high-quality site traffic, comprised of visitors who are interested in learning more and getting in touch with boat brands and dealers--but at their own pace and control.

Discover Boating's First-Time Boat Buyer study found that two-thirds of those surveyed stated that they would not share their personal (lead) information until the point of purchase. This is likely less of a factor with repeat buyers as they know what to expect in the buying process. However, this illustrates the opportunity that exists for boat brands who understand the value of Discover Boating website referrals who visit their sites but have not yet chosen to leave their contact information.

This requires a brand to have additional website strategies for those consumers who do not leave their contact information. If only 1-2% of a brand's site traffic converts to sales leads, that leaves 98-99% to nurture for future sales. The right referral strategy can help brands better engage those who are shopping their websites but have yet to fill out lead forms. These nurture marketing strategies can lead to a pipeline of sales for years to come.

Today, as Discover Boating promotes the boating lifestyle through its integrated marketing campaign, there is no doubt the

millions of consumers Discover Boating connects with boat manufacturers and dealers have much more potential to become the boat owners of tomorrow.

Looking ahead, Discover Boating will undertake the next phase of research on the value of web referrals by identifying best practices boat brands can take to nurture web referrals on their path to becoming boat owners.



# Acknowledgements

The following organizations played a significant role in the development of the Discover Boating Lead System and the evolution to the Discover Boating web referral initiative: Grow Boating Board of Directors, past and present; OLSON; ARI, Inc.; Carmichael Lynch; NMMA Marketing Staff.

## Additional Resources

GrowBoating.org  
DiscoverBoating.com  
DiscoverBoating.ca  
Fr.DiscoverBoating.ca

## About Discover Boating

The purpose of Discover Boating is to introduce new people to boating and to advance their exploration of ownership. We're the industry's national boating awareness campaign developed by the North American recreational boating industry to help get people on the water. Discover Boating programs focus on the boating experience and building interest in recreational boating by providing a resource for Americans to explore the benefits, accessibility and fun of the boating lifestyle. To find out more, visit [DiscoverBoating.com](http://DiscoverBoating.com)

## About Grow Boating

The purpose of Grow Boating is to identify growth opportunities within the marine industry, and champion those opportunities through consumer communications, targeted programs, and by developing industry education and resources. The Discover Boating program is one of several of Grow Boating's areas of focus. To find out more, visit [GrowBoating.org](http://GrowBoating.org)

