Background and Objectives

The Market Expansion Advisory Group, comprised of marketing leaders from NMMA and MRAA member companies commissioned a strategic study to understand how recreational boating is changing and what it will take to sustain growth and in turn, inform how stakeholders (Discover Boating, OEMs, and Dealers) should reach potential buyers, encourage interaction, expand access, and drive ownership. The research consisted of stakeholder interviews, a scan of relevant macro trends impacting US consumers, and a large-scale quantitative study of N=1,500+ current, lapsed, and prospective boat owners (n=500 each). Findings have been translated into implications and recommended actions through a series of report materials, webinars, and an industry playbook.

Recap of Findings

Please note the following findings reflect the behaviors and opinions of our surveyed boat owners and prospects only.

Today's Boat Owner

Since 2020, recent buyers look meaningfully different and require different engagement. These buyers are younger, more diverse, and more affluent than pre-2020 owners; average age ~36 vs. 45. They are also more likely to have entered the boating category via experiences (charters, rentals) and adjacent outdoor activities. Charter/rental engagement among surveyed buyers rose from 17% (2020) to 27% (2024). The "Water Gene," is a clear driver or ownership, which says childhood and consistent exposure to the water is a strong predictor of boat ownership.

Recent buyers boat more frequently (monthly+) and prioritize watersports and exploring new places. Their motivations blend restoration (relaxation, nature) with stimulation (excitement, discovery). Barriers to boat ownership have shifted from only physical to also mental with recent buyers feeling constrained by time, stress/responsibility of being the operator, and weather unpredictability more than legacy owners.

The path to ownership is also quite different. Among those surveyed, it is digital-first and self-directed with heavy use of YouTube/short-form video, online reviews, social media, and manufacturer/dealer sites. Creator influence performs across the funnel; nano/micro-influencers deliver cost-effective, targeted engagement. But trust still hinges on people: the dealer remains pivotal for credibility, transparent pricing, and relationship-building, even as more recent buyers also transact peer-to-peer. To that end, boat shows must evolve from "deal floor" to experiential learning and enthusiasm-building hubs. While attendance is high among recent buyers it could be considered an underused education and access-providing platform.

Prospective Owners

Prospective owners, people who self-identify as being at least 50% or more likely to purchase a motorized boat in the future amount to approximately 44M prospective US consumers.

Please Note: All insights collected reflect opinions of our surveyed Boat Owners and Prospective Owners only; Methodology: Quantitative Survey Fielded August 22, 2025 through September 12, 2025; N=500 Boat Owners, N= 500 Lapsed Owners, N=500 Prospective Owners; Boat Owners and Lapsed Owners defined as own (or used to own) and consider primary vessel a motorized/power boat or sailboat; Prospective Owners defined as 50% or more likely to purchase a motorized/power boat or sailboat in the future and not a current or lapsed owner. Sizing was estimated using survey data and an assumed population number of 266,978,268 per 2024 census. Survey tool and details on analytics available upon request

Three cross-cutting realities define these prospects (much like recent buyers): cost barriers, complexity, and an evolved purchase journey.

Cost is the top barrier across all clusters; surveyed prospects' mean income (~$72.5K) trails current owners' mean income significantly. What will universally help all prospects, is providing transparent total cost of ownership, flexible financing, and staged pathways that continue to engage and offer access (clubs, rentals).

Lack of knowledge and logistical concerns are the second-biggest barrier, making ownership feel too complex. Mitigating this starts with education, onboarding, and ongoing support.

Purchasing is done through a combination of personal trust with digital content influence. Top influences for these prospects include friends/family, YouTube, social media, manufacturers, with dealers still critical for reputation/trustworthiness (meaning the need to modernize to digital without losing human relationship-building).

Segmenting these prospects enables more strategic and relevant targeting efforts based on where in the purchase funnel the prospect is. Five segments were identified, four of which offer material opportunities for growing the industry (the fifth segment is currently too priced out to be a worthwhile opportunity). These four segments amount to an estimated 35M high potential new buyers and map to the purchase funnel and opportunities for Dealers, OEMs, and Discover Boating.

At the top of the funnel, needing inspiration and for Discover Boating to demystify boating are these segments:

1. **Time-Pressed Segment** (20%): Seeking a near-term lifestyle solution; emphasize convenience, quick start via clubs/rentals, and clear upgrade paths.
2. **Cost-Conscious Segment** (18%): Motivated but budget-constrained; offer used/refurbished tiers, flexible financing, Total Cost of Ownership tools, and access-first pathways.

In the middle of the funnel, needing concrete information and hands-on experiences from Discover Boating and Dealers/OEMs alike is a segment with greater resources and higher likelihood but minimal experience:

3. **Inexperienced Segment** (23%): Novices needing foundational education; deploy learning content, demos, skills clinics, and trusted advisors.

At the bottom of the funnel and ready for meetings with Dealers or OEMs:

4. **Sales-Ready Segment** (19%): Ready for a sales conversation; prioritize speed, inventory certainty, transparent pricing, and trade/finance simplicity.

For recommendations, strategies, and activation opportunities against these segments, please refer to the ***Ipsos Consumer Research Member and Industry Handbook****. Survey tool and details on analytics available upon request.*

Please Note: All insights collected reflect opinions of our surveyed Boat Owners and Prospective Owners only; Methodology: Quantitative Survey Fielded August 22, 2025 through September 12, 2025; N=500 Boat Owners, N= 500 Lapsed Owners, N=500 Prospective Owners; Boat Owners and Lapsed Owners defined as own (or used to own) and consider primary vessel a motorized/power boat or sailboat; Prospective Owners defined as 50% or more likely to purchase a motorized/power boat or sailboat in the future and not a current or lapsed owner. Sizing was estimated using survey data and an assumed population number of 266,978,268 per 2024 census. Survey tool and details on analytics available upon request