



How can we make industry events more attractive to NextGen attendees?

By Lorna Titley

It kicks in somewhere around late September. Or maybe much earlier, say June. By mid-October it's definitely a "thing". Events fatigue can even occur when just thinking about the sheer number of shows, regattas and conferences, so-called "must-attend" networking occasions that lie in wait for us throughout the year.

While the prospect of sore feet, a clutch of business cards and days of follow-up emails may not seem like a great pay-off for a long week spent travelling to/ from and attending a major industry event, the sheer fact of thousands of visitors attending Monaco, Fort Lauderdale, Palm Beach, Cannes, Dusseldorf, Palma and a myriad of other show locations, is surely testimony to their power.

But what of the NextGen of superyacht Owners and their suppliers? For a generation that is growing up against the backdrop of rapidly changing technology, virtual reality and working remotely, what value will they see in regularly attending global events? What do the NextGen think of the superyacht industry's regattas and shows – are they fit for purpose?

At Quaynote`s recent conference in Monaco, NextGen Owner: Managing Tomorrow`s Superyacht, **Michelle Van der Merwe** of Pantanen and **Titta Uoti-Väisänen**, Founder at TUVYC Ltd co-hosted a roundtable discussion that tackled these questions. They were joined by conference attendees Emma Batson, Marcus Munt and Mark Theissen.

First the good news. "There are some great shows out there," says Michelle Van der Merwe. "METS is one such example. It is a real crowd-pleaser that offers lots of interaction for attendees, as well as mini seminars which are really good for industry updates and activities that really engage people."

Many of the European shows, however, have a way to go if they are to remain relevant for tomorrow`s client. Titta Uoti-Väisänen suggests that event organizers incorporate a day into their programme that targets social media influencers or schools. "Shows need to extend their reach to different groups who may have a key role to play in the industry`s future," Titta offers, adding "themed days such as Ladies Day, Family Day, School Day could help to breach the gap."

Sustainability, we`re told, is dear to the hearts of the NextGen, so why not use industry events to highlight the role of ecofriendly yachts and sustainable practices within the industry? "Educational workshops, that give information on marine conservation and sustainable sailing practices, would be a great place to start," says Van der Merwe. "Major events are the ideal vehicle for promoting organisations and sponsors such as Seakeepers Society, YachtAid Global and Yachts for Science."



Michelle Van Der Merwe

"Experiences" is another word that is often heard when describing what Owners/ charterers want from their yachts. "Our roundtable discussed how experiences are important for industry events too," comments Uoti-Väisänen. "Organisers need to focus on creating a good, interesting or happy ambiance. It`s important for an experience to evoke an emotion or create a memory. Live music, food, interactivity such as sea trials or demonstrations all help to generate a lasting impression," she concludes.

Lack of diversity is an issue that should be dear to all our hearts. Women are increasingly well- represented as speakers at industry events, but we still have a way to go to achieve truly diverse visitor profiles. Examples of how to do this better are already out there, Michelle van der Merwe believes. “YPY (Young Professionals in Yachting) and Women in Yachting are such good ambassadors for how networking associations should be.”

For some, the costs involved in attending events effectively excludes them. “Why not make it more affordable for the young people we want to attract to the industry?” asks Titta Uoti-Väisänen. “A student rate or young person discount would help to encourage more of tomorrow`s superstars to get involved.” What`s more, the fact that it is generally only yacht brokers who are allowed to view the vessels at shows may serve to reinforce the apparent inaccessibility of the industry to young people. “This needs to change,” asserts Michelle van der Merwe, “to give the next generation the opportunity to see the vessels and to see the potential of working on one.”

The talk at Michelle and Tita`s roundtable turned to the role of social media and influencers in developing more meaningful events. “There is an appetite for social media challenges, such as organized photo / video competitions on TikTok or Instagram, with event specific hashtags,” explains van der Merwe. Partnerships with influencers could also prove fruitful. “By collaborating with influencers who resonate with GenZers, event organisers will be able to harness a very effective marketing tool”, she adds.



Titta Uoti-Väisänen (left) and Sidney Bitter - Larkin, IYC.com networking at the recent Quaynote conference

Photo courtesy of Annamari Lammassaari

What do GenZ influencers have to say about superyacht events? Ed Collison is a 29 year old former round-the-world sailor who now lives on his UK-based yacht. When he's not sailing, he works as an Instagram influencer, using the name #SailingOptimist95. Collison feels like the yacht industry and its event organisers are missing a trick. "There is a passing generation here that we are not targeting – missed millennials!", he states. "Here we have a demographic which is not buying houses. They therefore have disposal income and they want to escape and travel – why are we not marketing to this group?"

While echoing concerns about ticket prices for major shows like MYS, Ed Collison also points to the "pretentious" nature of the industry and the need to follow the "correct etiquette" at industry events. "These shows need to be more attractive to young people," he states. "New visitors should be encouraged to visit, learn and grow." Collison suggests that secondary schools do road trips to yachting events or regattas, so that students can see the opportunities the industry offers first hand.

For the NextGen, yachting is the perfect way to escape and industry events should be the perfect stage to showcase this. "But we're not selling this vibe. The fun element is missing" laments Ed Collison. "Today's shows and regattas need an injection of energy".

Despite their shortcomings, Michelle van der Merwe is optimistic for the future of industry events. "The NextGen will still want to network and engage with their peers, but in a different way to their predecessors," she observes. "If organizers listen and tap into what the NextGen want, today's shows and regattas can evolve to become tomorrow's engines for industry growth."



Lorna Titley is a Director at Quaynote Communications, a communications company specialising in PR & Marketing Consultancy and Live / Virtual / Hybrid Conferences & Events for the Aviation, Maritime and Security Industries.

lorna@quaynote.co; www.quaynote.com