

Maine boatbuilding gets a promotional push

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Boatbuilding might soon join lobsters and lighthouses as Maine's most marketable attributes. Boatbuilders throughout the state — from the small one-man shops to large, nationally recognized companies — have banded together to promote, worldwide, the state's boatbuilding industry. The group, known as Maine Built Boats, is not a trade organization. Rather, it is a nonprofit marketing organization designed to boost brand awareness in the United States and beyond.

"Our main mission is to try and get the word out," said Paul Rich, executive director of the organization. "Maine-built boats have the heritage and quality, but we come up against some very powerful interests nationally and internationally."

He points to The Netherlands, New Zealand and South Africa, which receive significant government support, and often exhibit at international shows as a group. The South African pavilion at Strictly Sail Miami in February, for example, showcased an array of travel and tourism information, offered samples of South African wine, and displayed some of the region's boats.

The Maine group, like the South African group, envisions hosting special events at boat shows, highlighting the state's heritage. A reception at the Maine Built booth might feature a lobster bake and Maine-made beer, said Rich.

"The goal is to make inroads with the existing market and penetrate new markets," said Rich.

Years in the making

Maine Built was formally launched in June 2005, but industry leaders have been discussing the concept for several years, said Rich. Three years ago, cruising author Nigel Calder sent a white paper to Gov. John Baldacci touting the importance of the state's boatbuilding industry.

"That resonated with the governor's office," said Rich.

More than 450 companies in the state are involved in boatbuilding, providing about 5,000 jobs. Industry sales exceed \$650 million, and the state has identified boatbuilding as a significant and rapidly expanding business.

State pitches in

The governor forwarded the paper to the state's Department of Economic and Community Development, which helped organize preliminary meetings. The state also gave a \$15,000 grant to help get the group's efforts off the ground. The state also applied for — and was granted — a \$15 million three-year federal grant for the group.

"I give a lot of credit to the governor's office," said Tim Hodgdon of Hodgdon Yachts. "They recognized the importance of this."

Hodgdon Yachts, a manufacturer of superyachts based in East Boothbay, for years has been exhibiting and selling overseas. But Hodgdon, one of the founding members of the group, says a unified marketing effort is essential to boost his business, as well as other member companies. Increased business will lead to more jobs for Maine, he adds.

"They have been operating on their own," says Elaine Scott, marketing director of the state DECD and the state's liaison for the group. "Now, let's pull together and see how we can market to the world."

40 member companies

The initial group consisted of about a dozen companies. The organization's membership has since swelled to about 40 member companies, including Hinckley Yachts, Morris Yachts, Lyman and Morse.

"We've demonstrated the industry is quite large," says Jock Williams, president of the John Williams Boat Co. in Mount Desert. He joined the group because he'd like to enhance his company's advertising reach. The company has about 20 employees and builds Down East-style fiberglass and wooden boats.

Maine Built's roster also includes The Landing School of Boatbuilding and Design, and the WoodenBoat School. With 450 boatbuilding companies in the state, the group has the potential to expand even more.

The group has developed a Web site and trade booth, touting the state's maritime heritage and its vast array of products. The state's heritage is steeped in boatbuilding, beginning with the Native Americans who built canoes and dories. Colonists, seeking to return to England, built the first ship: the Virginia.

Boatbuilding and boating have been integral to life on Maine's coastline ever since. Maine-built boats range from handcrafted wooden boats to yachts made with cutting-edge technology, such as cold molding and composites.

'A nice fit'

"We're doing some neat stuff," says Rich. "We've got the cultural heritage and the most technically advanced pieces of watercraft."

Rich, a graduate of the Maine Maritime Academy, was tapped to head the group. Rich is a Maine native who has experience in project development and consulting.

"It was a nice fit for me," said Rich.

Members have been meeting almost monthly to discuss plans. The annual meeting was held in March at the Maine Boatbuilders Show.

The group has forged a relationship with Rich's alma mater. This summer the academy's training ship will bring the Maine Built Boats trade booth aboard on its voyage across the Atlantic. The booth will be displayed at ports throughout Europe, and will be featured at receptions with European dignitaries and industry representatives.

"We're going to carry the flag over there," said Rich.

The collaboration has already garnered outside recognition. Author Donna Fenn, in her book "Alpha Dogs: How Small Business Can Become a Leader of the Pack," calls it an example of how competitors can work together for a common good.

Members acknowledge they are competitors, to some extent. The companies are diverse, however, and serve different niches or markets. But, in the end, they have similar goals. They want to build and sell boats, said Hodgdon.