

# SURF'S UP



Internet viewers have caught glimpses of the planet Mars and have witnessed a live birth online. From the ordinary to the extraordinary, the internet holds something for everyone ... but what does it hold for the boating industry?

**Michael Muth** finds out

**W**hen IBI first looked at the internet phenomenon (IBI, April/May 1995 — 'Surfing the Net') we discovered that a small band of intrepid marine recreation companies had ventured into cyberspace and tapped into a potential audience of interconnected computer users then estimated to number 25 million.

Only a month earlier Bayliner had set up its own world wide web site, complete with online catalogue, joining a few other big-name boatbuilders such as Sea Ray and Carver Yachts, as well as special marine-related interest groups including sailboat class associations and the UK's Royal Yachting Association and Royal Ocean Racing Club.

... That was only three and half years ago. Today, the number of boating related companies with web sites has grown considerably, as has the potential audience of net 'surfers'. Globally, no one can say for sure how many people with personal computers are online these days, but most estimates go into several hundred million as internet use quickly spreads outside North America, where it all started in the late 1980s.

As far as the uptake by the boating industry is concerned, a quick search for 'boats' on the Yahoo web search engine (<http://www.yahoo.com>) recently yielded 32 categories of information which contain 1,743 websites associated with boats. So why are marine companies joining the general rush to the web? How are they using their sites and what benefits are they getting from them? We thought it was time to ask a few at random.

## BOATBUILDERS

According to Courtney Smith, marketing manager of Ohio, USA performance boatbuilder Baja Marine (<http://www.bajamarine.com>): "The response to our website has been tremendous and interest has been climbing through the summer".

The company's online brochure features video clips and links to other speed sites. If customers don't know what colours are available and how they look in combinations, they can paint their own boats online to see how the different possibilities look. Baja is also developing a screen saver which will come out soon.

Regal Marine Industries of Orlando, Florida (<http://www.RegalBoats.com>) is pointing towards on-line order entry and export shipping schedules for its range of

sportsboats and power cruisers. The company already uses PCs for scheduling shipping.

Erik Sayre of Vanguard Racing Sailboats, the Rhode Island builder of Sunfish, Laser and other open sailboats in the US, wants his company's dealers to be able to point and click on a screen to place orders. At present all orders are sent by fax and then manually entered in the company's

customers. For instance, dealers can check inventories direct."

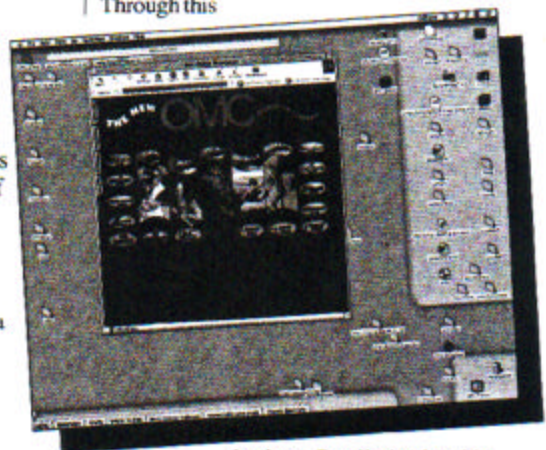
In time the company plans to enable its Interactive World of Zodiac multimedia CD-ROM, effectively an electronic catalogue for dealers, to interface directly with the internet to make ordering even easier.

## ENGINE MANUFACTURERS

Those marine companies which are the most aggressive in their use of the internet are the engine manufacturers. Even so, Tony Esposito, public relations manager of Mercury Marine (<http://www.mercmarine.com>), says: "We are trying to drive customers to dealers, who are the best source of information. Corporate will not compete with dealers on the internet. Dealers are encouraged to create their own websites. At least 20 dealers had websites up to two years before we did. Other dealers are just starting to realise computers may not be a fad."

He adds: "Some dealers have been afraid of technology. Yet product on the floor is run by a computer. It's a chicken or egg issue. Which comes first, investment in technology or bringing dealers up to speed? There is huge variability in technical proficiency and equipment — many dealers still have DOS-based systems."

Mercury is currently testing its own internal 'intranet' strictly for dealers so that headquarters in Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, can interface directly with dealer management systems in Europe in eight languages before introducing it in the US. Through this



database. By eliminating this second manual data entry the company can eliminate at least one set of human errors. At the same time, the company safeguards trade confidentiality by denying consumers access to wholesale prices with password protection.

Of all the sectors of the boating industry's various segments, it is inflatable manufacturers that appear to lead the field when it comes to using the web. Lesley Ann Hamilton, national sales and marketing co-ordinator for Avon Marine (<http://www.avonmarine.com>) in the UK says "We get 20-30 enquiries to our website per day, which is a mind-boggling response."

Hamilton adds that Avon's biggest dealers began to develop their own sites and e-mail addresses almost two years ago. As a result Avon gets fewer phone calls and is starting to communicate differently now.

Edward Washburn, vice president the North American division of Zodiac, the French inflatables group that recently bought Avon (<http://www.zodiac.com>) takes up the point. "It is a new way of communicating with our

