

Bringing the boater back to your business



Joy Koch McPeters

How do you market your marina? Do you use local media and rely on word of mouth? If so, you are in good company as many marinas around the world operate happily and profitably by these means especially if slip space is at a premium and they have no need or wish to attract significant numbers of visitors. If, however, the revenue from transient boaters appeals, it may be that your chosen media is *too* local and word of mouth *too* neighbourly. Being part of the dedicated centralised marina reservation and travel planning service offered by Marinalife will bring your marina to the attention of thousands of boaters – from all over the world.



Marinalife is a Baltimore, USA, based company that offers premier travel services to active members of the boating community. It was the first and claims to be the only company to provide a centralised, online marina reservation service and a complete suite of travel services that brings together manufacturers, dealers, service providers, marinas and boaters.

The Marinalife website - www.marinalife.com - a quarterly magazine, and various promotions combine to create a uniquely valuable marketing package for marinas and a one-stop service for boaters seeking either long-term dockage or planning trips and cruises. Boating customers receive a wealth of information enabling them to make the best travel plan decisions and benefit from discounts give by Marinalife marina and marine business members. The service is simple to use and, according to membership level, trips can either be planned directly by the customer via the Internet or discussed with a Marinalife staff member.

Joy Koch McPeters established the ongoing philosophy of the company when she founded it in February 2000. "The basic premise of why I started Marinalife – to enhance the boating experience – has not changed," she tells *Marina World*. "I wanted to make researching marinas, cruise planning and booking reservations easy, stress-free and enjoyable." As the company has developed, services have been expanded and innovative use of new

technology – specifically for boating services – has been adopted.

The company has thousands of boater members as it handles the owners' clubs for ten major manufacturers including Bertram Yachts, Lazzara, Viking Sports Cruisers, Meridian and Ocean Alexander. Members can join at one of five different levels according to their boating needs for annual fees ranging from around US\$60 to US\$500. The lowest cost levels, Captain's and Premiere, enable customers to make reservations via the Marinalife website utilising online cruise templates and tools. The next three levels (Platinum, Sportfish and Diamond) offer a concierge service giving members access to a customer service representative for personalised attention including marina reservations and trip planning.

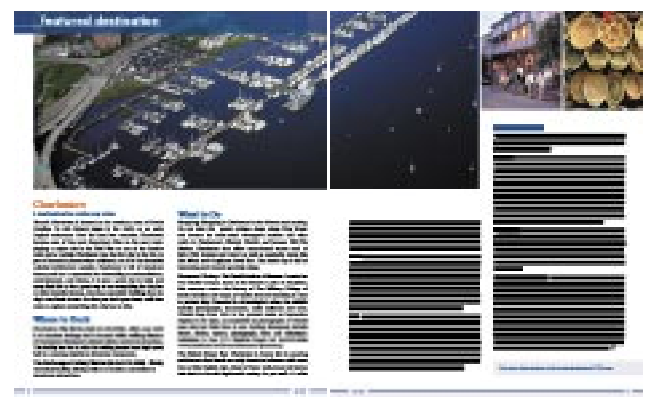
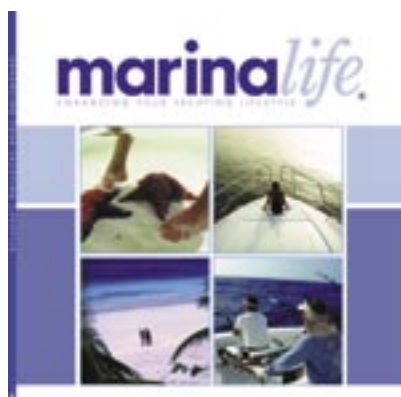
Reservations and planning

Reservations can be made at marinas in the USA, Canada, Bahamas, Caribbean and Central America for transient and long-term

dockage and moorings. Customers can search by country, state, city, marina name, body of water, marina rating and/or amenity to find the marina that best suits.

Many tools are available for travel planning including sample itineraries of popular cruising destinations such as the Bahamas, Florida, Chesapeake Bay, Great Loop, Long Island and more. The pre-planning data includes approximate mileage between each leg, notes on the area and detailed information about each marina. Valuable extras such as real-time satellite weather, provisions, mileage calculator, restaurant and hotel information are all available to assist in planning a cruise or weekend trip.

Members have access to a wealth of marina information including satellite maps and charts, marina ratings, weather, tides, preferred dockage rates, fuel services, restaurants etc. Boaters can also communicate with their fellow members through the 'community section' of Marinalife, a forum for posting messages, cruising stories etc.



Marketing your marina

Marinas and marine related businesses can take advantage of several promotional opportunities, as McPeters explains. "At the basic level, any marina can be an Associate Member, which is an effective, free promotion tool. By offering a discount to a Marinalife member, an Associate Member is featured in our reservation system, listed in the Marinalife magazine and promoted in one e-newsletter."

As a result of the popularity of web advertising, the company now offers three different web packages for marinas that include a monthly fee for banner advertising, featured placement, featured destination



listings etc. The most popular programme is an annual integrated web and print annual package that includes four advertisements in the magazine, a banner on the website, featured marina placement, featured 'property of the month' and promotion in the monthly e-newsletter.

Marinalife features over 600 member marinas via its website and quarterly magazine, and promotion is continuous. "The Marinalife solution is unique because we are constantly making sure the marina is in front of active boaters (through the magazine, website, boat shows, reservation staff recommendations etc). Unlike most print advertising, we use a personal and proactive approach to ensure that the boating community knows about these marinas," McPeters explains.

The magazine, website and valuable 'word of mouth' promotion – international rather than just local – are Marinalife's key marketing tools and assets. Much attention is paid to the Internet. "We have an aggressive search engine optimisation plan and, as a result, have increased visitors to our site 50% this past year. Our marina search has one of the most extensive databases available to the boating world and we are very focused on ensuring our marinas are the first to show up in Internet search results," she reveals. And the efforts have created a new customer trend. "Hands down, our most valued member benefit is our one of a kind reliable reservation service. Boaters receive an email confirmation for each reservation with rates, policies, marina information, a port report (recommended



places to eat, what to do etc), link to a weather forecast and rental car information. The new trend is for the boating community to rely on the Internet to conduct research, plan and book their travel. To complement this trend we have added a Cruise-Your-Own-Cruise tool and Pre-planned Cruise Templates."

Although currently covering North and Central America, the Caribbean and parts of South America, Marinalife could roll out to other areas. "We are always looking to expand and would want to find the right partner in other regions in order to do this," McPeters confirms. Existing boating members are located throughout the world. However, they primarily boat at least half the year in the regions already covered so are able to make best use of services. Any future partnerships will further benefit boaters around the world, as well as member marinas seeking to strengthen their regional and international marketing options.



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