



POLARIS MARINE

Cultivating Quality, Courting Longtime Customers

By Symone C. Skrzycki

Imagine yourself surrounded with a breathtaking view as lake or ocean water laps the sides of your vessel. The atmosphere is serene. The boat is comfortable and stylish. Behind the scenes, employees at Polaris Marine meticulously crafted every element of the product to help ensure your safety and that your experience goes swimmingly.

Who are the people of Polaris and what is the company's story?

Let's dive in.

History

Polaris was formed in 1954 as a snowmobile company. Headquartered in Minnesota, its product line swelled through the years to encompass additional power sports such as the Indian Motorcycle brand, off-road side-by-side vehicles, all-terrain transport and expedition vehicles.

In 2018, Polaris entered a new market by acquiring Boat Holdings – the nation's largest manufacturer of pontoon boats – in Elkhart. Today, Polaris Marine is comprised of three segments: Bennington and Godfrey pontoons (each with a manufacturing facility in Elkhart) and Hurricane fiberglass deck boats (produced in Syracuse).

"Polaris has done a wonderful job of continually investing in business here," Ben Duke stresses.

"From the facilities to the products to the people, every aspect of the business has had investment made into it. It wasn't the case where they just bought the company and either left it alone or over integrated it. They gave us the capital we needed to become even more incredibly successful and gave us access to things that we would've never had – from metallurgy facilities and when we're doing new weld techniques to how we buy certain products. It's been a great partnership locally."

Expansions in recent years have taken place on both Elkhart facilities.

"Those included everything from robotics to facility expansions to retooling of the plant," Duke shares. "On the Godfrey side (for instance), we invested more capital last year than we had the 10 years previous in the facility. That's from refreshing the buildings, putting robotics in and spending money on the campus generally just to make it a better place for our employees."

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Employees: Polaris (18,000); Polaris Marine (1,200)

Resource: Ben Duke, president, Polaris Marine

Weathering the pandemic

COVID-19 changed every aspect of people's lives. In the marine world, that included the attraction to boat buying.

"When a person would buy a boat pre-pandemic, we would retain a percentage of those people," Duke reflects. "There would be a percentage that would say, 'OK, I bought this boat. I'm not using it as much as I thought I would because my kids play sports or I'm too active with other things in my life.' They never fell in love to the level that we thought they would. And so those people exited (the market). It's similar if they get into off-roading or anything, right?"

"(But) during the pandemic, people truly had time to love the sport. So, we're retaining a lot more people now than we ever have. People came into the sport of boating, the recreational aspects of boating, and they've stayed in it. For people who live on the water, I hear this at boat shows and at dinner with folks, that their lakes are busier now than they've ever seen them. I think that has a lot to do with (the fact that) people were given the opportunity during the pandemic to fall in love with boating."

He recalls how the pandemic also led to increased efficiency with employee training.

"We started a frontline leader training program where all of our frontline leaders go through a full 29-day course. We're spending a lot more time developing our people from the ground up rather than really looking outside. We've gotten exceptionally good at that."

As employers around the country struggle with a talent shortage, Polaris Marine has elevated efforts to develop individuals from within and to retain workers.

According to Duke, doing both has been crucial to Polaris Marine's success.

"For us, people are the core to everything that we do," he asserts. "So, we hire right and then we invest in those people. It's important because talent is becoming one of the most important battlegrounds that we face every day. So, when we find good people, we want to invest in them. Make sure that the culture is good, and that they're happy and that we have the right benefits that help them."

Culture of safety, caring

Safety is integral to all endeavors at Polaris Marine.

"Our EHS (environment, health and safety) program is extremely strong," Duke emphasizes. "We start every day reminding people that we want them to work safely and leave in the same condition that they got here."

Additional core components are process-driven production and cultivating a sense of curiosity.



Ben Duke, president of Polaris Marine: "We have a really robust product map, so as we look to the future, we know where we're investing. And first and foremost, it's in the people. We have to have the right engineers and the right technical ability so that we can continue to transform the business. On the operations side too, we've brought robotics into portions of boat building that have really never seen robotics before, and the output's been incredible."



"If they don't understand something, people reach out to their team lead or the team lead reaches out to their supervisor," Duke notes. "From people on the shop floor all the way up into the executive offices, everybody's very curious: If something's going well, why is it going well? If something's not going well, let's get together as a team and figure out what we need to do to improve that."

Polaris Marine is also all in on giving back, with initiatives including Boys and Girls Club of Elkhart County, Habitat for Humanity, Potawatomi Zoo and sports teams supporting employees' children.

"With United Way, there's a program where they create dry soup packs through a small nonprofit and sell those," Duke relates. "Three years ago, we started (partnering)

with Elkhart County with Dollars for Scholars, which is their program for scholarships. We've grown, every year, how many scholarships we offer. And a lot of our employees, their kids go there (to college). So, it's important for us to support those kids as they're going to higher education. And even though that (path's) not perfect for everyone, some kids do go that way. We want them to return here and work in Elkhart County."

"Whatever the program, we do it in a wonderful, competitive way. Every year, we grow what our giving is from our employee base. And it's because they want to do that."

Reflecting on Polaris Marine's culture, he adds, "You're with your friends here at work almost more than you're with your family. It's genuine. There's a lot of good-natured laughter (within the facilities)."



Craftsmanship at Polaris Marine is driven by a culture of safety, learning and adapting.

Adapting and thriving

Testing the waters and looking ahead is a driving strategy at Polaris Marine.

While the brunt of the business is in internal combustion engines – ice engines – Polaris Marine unveiled two new concept electric pontoons under its Bennington and Godfrey Pontoons brands in August 2023.

“We want to make sure – as or if the market moves that way – that we’ll be prepared,” Duke affirms. “Today, you can get one of our boats with four manufacturers of engines, and our boats are designed to run all four of those. Even though they look similar, outboard engines run differently, whether that be the way they go through the water or the propellers. All of these different factors. So, we have to get really good at being able to use those four different manufacturers.

“With electric, we feel like we want to be in the same position. So, we’ve partnered and continue to partner with different manufacturers to see who’s going to come up with the best solution, and then we’ll be prepared to quickly move in that direction. It’s a little bit different (strategy) than some of our competition, but we think that when and if electric becomes more popular, we’ll be well positioned to jump on that,” he explains.

“Part of this is – everybody (in the industry) is going to have to take a journey. It’s when you choose to start learning from that. And we’re starting early compared to a lot of our competition. Part of that is because of the immense support we get from Polaris. As a much larger company than most of our competition, were given unbelievable access to incredible resources.” ■

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