Pulling off an event like the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show (FLIBS) is no small feat. Owned by the Marine Industries Association of South Florida (MIASF), the show is touted as the world’s largest in-water boat show. Last year, it attracted more than 105,000 visitors from 53 countries and generated $508 million in sales, according to MIASF.

In March, London-based global exhibitions company Informa acquired Show Management, which had produced FLIBS since 1976 and four other consumer boat shows in Florida, in a deal worth $133 million.

“It’s rare to have the opportunity to acquire strong shows that are also underdeveloped,” said Charlie McCurdy, CEO of Informa Exhibitions. “That’s our view on the Show Management group. By creating a better selling and buyer experience for participants, we look to make the market more effective.”

Established in 1959, FLIBS is now held in seven locations connected by a network of water and land transportation. Show locations include the Bahia Mar Fort Lauderdale Beach Hotel & Yachting Center, the Hall of Fame Marina, Las Olas Municipal Marina, Hilton Fort Lauderdale Marina, Sails Marina, Hyatt Regency Pier 66 Marina and the Greater Fort Lauderdale/Broward County Convention Center.

In addition to the seven locations, Informa will build and bring in seven miles of portable floating docks, doubling the inventory space at the participating locations.
marinas. In total, more than 2 million square feet of indoor and outdoor space will be used – and require security.

“We are building a city with one convention center and six marinas,” said Andrew Doole, who has worked on FLIBS since 1982 and now serves as Vice President/General Manager of Informa Global Exhibitions USA Boat Shows. “A lot of the large yachts have crews who live on board the boats, so we will have thousands of residents before attendees even show up. It’s a living, breathing city that’s built in three weeks.”

A wide array of boats will be on display: runabouts, sportfishers, high performance vessels, center consoles, cabin cruisers, flats boats, skiffs, express cruisers, sailing yachts, motor yachts, bowriders, catamarans, ski boats, jet boats, trawlers, inflatables, canoes and superyachts.

“This year’s show will feature more than 1,200 boats in water, and 200 of those will be over 100 feet long,” said Doole. “We will have billions of dollars of product at the event.”

Despite scares from hurricanes Irma and Maria, there was no damage to the marinas. But communicating that fact to exhibitors and attendees proved challenging, Doole said.

“Our equipment was still in storage,” he said. “We were fortunate. Fort Lauderdale sustained minimal damage.”

When the 58th annual FLIBS opens Wednesday, Nov. 1, attendees will see significant infrastructure upgrades at the event. Informa invested $8.2 million on show improvements this year and will spend an additional $20 million over the next four years.

“We see our role as increasing commercial productivity in attractive markets, like the yachting sector,” said McCurdy. “We look to create a more productive buying experience for visitors through marketing, physical on-site improvements and on-line discovery tools. We are making all these investments. And by doing this, we can bring higher quality, more actionable prospects to our exhibitors. Result: a thriving marketplace, with us as the ‘market maker.’ ”

Since 2015, Informa has been focused on market-leading brands, international expansion and building scale within attractive and growing verticals. This strategy is delivering consistently strong divisional growth, supported by ongoing investment in product innovation, pricing initiatives and digital platforms via its market maker strategy, according to Informa’s financial reports.

MIASF, owner of FLIBS since 1961, has a 30-year management contract with Show Management – now Informa – that runs through 2046.

“When we bring value to a strong market like the Florida marine market, we get to share in the upside with the industry,” McCurdy said. “That’s our ROI.”

The acquisition also included Show Management’s four other Florida-based maritime shows: the Palm Beach International Boat Show, Miami Yacht Show, St. Petersburg Power and Sailboat Show, and the Suncoast Boat Show. The Palm Beach International Boat Show is co-owned by the Marine Industries Association of Palm Beach County.

The Miami Yacht Show was co-owned by Show Management and the International Yacht Brokers Association. Informa assumed long-term contracts for all of them.

“Like many exhibition organizers, we work with associations and like entities in many parts of the world through a wide variety of arrangements,” McCurdy said. “Show Management’s arrangements with the Florida yacht and marine associations are both long-standing and long-term in nature. They are also well-structured as to sharing the rewards of growth.”
**Date Changes**

In April, one month after the acquisition, Informa announced new dates for the 2017 FLIBS: Wednesday, Nov. 1 through Sunday, Nov. 5. Historically, the show has opened on the first Thursday of November and closed the following Monday.

"Over the past 57 years, the Fort Lauderdale International Boat Show has evolved from a local boat show into a truly international exhibition," Purcell said. "In today's world of financial transactions, it is no longer necessary to use Monday as a banking day, and with more frequent client visits and exhibitor opportunities on Wednesday, we think it's in the best interest of both exhibitors and consumers to activate the Wednesday of show week and deactivate Monday."

Changing dates is difficult for any show, but doing so in six months is even more challenging. Taking the bold step to change dates was applauded by both exhibitors and attendees.

"We think it will be a major improvement, and we expect to draw more VIPs with the Wednesday opening," Doole said. "We couldn’t change the date for move-in at some of the venues, so we will have to do it quicker."

**Investing in the Future**

One major difference between FLIBS and most other trade and consumer show, is that Informa serves as its own contractor. "A lot of the equipment we use, you can’t go rent," Doole said. "Over the last 30 years, the company has made an enormous investment in floating docks to be able to produce the shows we do. It’s a unique product and a unique part of our business.”

In 2017 FLIBS added about one mile of floating docks, increasing its total inventory to more than seven miles of floating docks.

"We have invested several million dollars on building new docks and resurfacing the existing docks with composite decking,” Doole said. “The composite decking is more expensive than pressure-treated lumber on the front end, but it will enhance the appearance of the show dramatically.”

Like other contractors, Informa stores and maintains the equipment. "We will launch the docks and then take them back out,” said Doole. “It’s a huge logistical task. The docks are trucked from the storage yard and launched by train in a continuous process that lasts three weeks to get all the docks set up in the water.”

Why would the show go through so much effort and investment?

"We can go to a city – like West Palm Beach, St. Pete and Miami – without a marina and bring in a fully functioning marina with shore power, water and lighting,” said Doole. “It gives us flexibility and we can control our own destiny.”

Docks can be configured to stack boats tightly to make the most efficient use of available space. Doing so also significantly increases the footprint of the show.

"By not being confined to an exhibit hall, we can keep expanding the show in the water," Doole said. "The natural habitat makes all the difference in the world.”

Additional infrastructure improvements include: new trucks; new electrical equipment for the tents and docks; improved tent flooring from wood to interlocking plastic; and improved signage to make it easier for attendees to navigate to the show’s seven locations and find specific products.

Informa contracted with a local land planning company that works closely with Disney to create way-finding and signage systems to cover the 2 million square feet of space across the venues. The 40 acres at Bahia Mar, for example, is split into zones, and the company invested in large totems to identify docks with a new numbering system. Informa also invested in software to help consumers plan and manage their visits to the show with a “walking list” of exhibitors and products.

**Attendee Draws**

Last year’s show attracted exhibitors from 30 countries and 105,000 local, regional, national and international consumers.

“Many enthusiast boaters come every year to see the new technologies and latest equipment,” Doole said.

The show serves a diverse demographic. "We are very much like a huge department store, with everything from small starter boats to superyachts worth up to $150 million,” Doole said. “That’s the spectrum.”

To appeal to this broad range of demographics, the show offers a variety of activities and ticketing options. Attendees can purchase single-day tickets, multi-day tickets and VIP packages.

“The Windward VIP Club Experience at FLIBS offers the luxury of a private dining area, a premium open bar, gourmet food, and meet-and-greet opportunities,” according to the show website.

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**By Water.** Attendees can purchase tickets for transportation via water taxi available for pick-up at five locations.
“This climate-controlled sanctuary is the perfect platform to network, close business, or simply share the excitement of this international boating spectacular. Each VIP Club Experience package includes show entry, Windward VIP Club access and Water Taxi entry.”

Many of the larger yachts can be viewed by appointment only.

“The general public can look but not necessary view inside,” Doole said. “Exhibitors qualify attendees before the show.”

In addition to in-water boats, the show features:

- The Powerboat School, which offers a hands-on boating experience. Sessions – ranging from basic docking skills and anchoring techniques to open water boat-handling skills and precision boat control – are taught by U.S. Coast Guard-licensed captains who are certified instructors.

- Blue Wild Watersports and Marine Art Expo at the Broward County Convention Center. Experts speak about different water sports – from freediving and spearfishing to stand-up paddle boarding and underwater photography.

- Annual Kids’ Fishing Clinic. The clinic is free for all children ages five to 16 who have a ticket to the boat show.

Security Matters
Informa is beefing up its security budget for FLIBS to protect 105,000 attendees, 2 million square feet of indoor and outdoor space and billions of dollars of products on site.

“It’s difficult to guard a large event,” Doole said. “We have been cognizant of the safety of everyone for some time. We work with local police, FBI, Homeland Security, USCG, and other agencies.”

The show has for the last few years employed undercover officers, bomb dogs and bag checks, but Doole is taking it up a notch in 2017. Informa is working with United Security Services Inc., a division of United Service Companies, which also owns Trade Show Executive.

United Security conducted a threat assessment to develop a security plan.

“By having a professional do a threat assessment, you can create a formula for a security plan, given your specific situation,” said Richard “Rick” Simon, President and CEO of United Services Companies. “The facilities, local labor, events in and around the city, key exhibitors and keynote speakers can all affect the threat assessment of your event. Informa has been very responsive to the issues we raised, knowing this would significantly increase the year-over-year security budget.”

United’s Anthony D’Angelo, who served as a supervisory agent at the Joint Terrorism Task Force for the FBI, and Jeff Muller, a critical infrastructure and protection expert with 22 years of service with the FBI, will lead the company’s 18-member strategic executive-level team to provide enhanced security through integrated technology. The team will supervise 200 security guards, a contingent of Ft. Lauderdale police officers and federal agents who will work from a unified command center.

“We are piloting an integrated system using the best of the best technologies for the boat show,” Muller said. “All of the data will be pushed through our on-site command center and monitored by operatives of each technology.”

The command center will feature large display screens customized with live feeds from surveillance cameras installed in enclosed areas, airborne camera equipment with night vision, counter-drone technology, pulse induction screening, social media monitoring, air quality monitors and more. The command center will be staffed with United Security managers, as well as local and federal agencies, 24/7 — before, during and after the show.

This year, for the first time in the show’s history, magnetometers will be deployed at all seven locations, along with pulse induction screening for weapons and explosives detection at the main gate.

“These initiatives were started long before the shooting in Las Vegas,” Simon said. “If done correctly, it shouldn’t take more than one to two minutes. We are very conscious of the need for expedited screening, and there is literally one right way to do it.”

Developed for U.S. military submarines, pulse induction screening can distinguish between dangerous items such as knives and guns and common items like keys, glasses and coins.

“This allows for a six-times to 10-times increase in through-put for a better customer experience,” Muller said.

Outside of ticketing and gates, the show is adding barricades to protect against vehicle attacks like the ones in Spain in August that killed 13 people and injured more than 100.

“We had a discussion about current threats and developed a plan to counter those threats,” Muller said. “We are also...
working with hotels to enact additional security layers because of what happened in Las Vegas.”

FLIBS has some unique challenges that other shows don’t. Because they need 24/7 access to the docks, yacht crews and passengers docked at the marina will be vetted by Homeland Security. Evolving technology will continue to improve security capabilities at future shows.

“By next year, we will use facial recognition to gain access to these areas at night,” Doole said.

United Security is also providing social media monitoring services for FLIBS.

“Without giving away too much information, this is accomplished by monitoring the web in multiple languages worldwide for any sign of a threat that may adversely affect the event or facility,” Simon said. The monitoring started several weeks before the event, and predictive modeling will be used to determine if there’s a swell of sentiment, either positive or negative.

FLIBS will also deploy drones to cover the outdoor spaces.

“The new drone technologies have an enhanced camera with night vision capabilities,” Simon said. “They offer more coverage and vision than just having guards on the ground.”

United Security will use countermeasure technology to defend against potential drone attacks. Additional cameras will be installed to monitor indoor and outdoor spaces. These high-tech cameras will be able to recognize license plates and watch for multiple passes.

With the latest technology, United Security can help predict and push back against many types of threats and safeguard the show’s attendees and exhibitors.

“Times have changed,” Muller said. “The new FBI director said he believes a drone attack within the continental U.S. is imminent. That’s strong language from the intelligence community.”

Simon advised: “Every show organizer should be asking, ‘What are my new security needs in the world we live in today?”

Cost Considerations

“Without a question, the biggest line item expense is the venue rental,” Doole said. “In addition to the convention center, we are going to marinas, where they have existing business from boats docked there. We pay a premium because of that and it requires significantly more negotiation.”

The Miami Yacht Show uses 1.25 miles on Collins Avenue.

“Each building owns the waterfront so, consequently, that leaves us with 43 landlords to do one event,” Doole explained.

In June, MIA SF and Informa signed a 30-year lease extension with the operators of the city-owned Bahia Mar resort and marina to keep FLIBS through 2050 as the venue upgrades and plans a redevelopment. There were rumors the show might leave Fort Lauderdale if it could not come to terms over the cost of the lease and space for the show.

The long-term plan for Bahia Mar is a mixed-use development, custom designed with FLIBS in mind. James Tate, Managing Partner of Bahia Mar, applauded Informa for the ongoing improvements to the show. “The redesign of the event has been dramatic, the attention to detail — especially security — will enhance the customer experience,” Tate said. “The Bahia Mar project and Informa continue planning for the future together.”

But the city-owned venue had an incentive to keep the show in Fort Lauderdale. FLIBS had an estimated $531.5 million economic impact in South Florida and an $857.3 million impact statewide, according to a 2015 study by Thomas J. Murray & Associates and the University of Florida. Exhibitors generated $508.3 million in total sales by FLIBS participants.

Informa clearly hopes to build on the show’s proven success by making these significant investments.

“We won’t discuss specific projections to any of our events, but these shows have a long history of expansion and we see ways to continue that trajectory,” McCurdy said.

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