

Successful PADI Member Perspectives

A Candid Interview with Dave Valaika [MI-175094]

by Jo Walters, Marketing Consultant,
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What makes a PADI Pro successful? What separates one from the next when it comes to becoming a top certification producer? Is it the ability to sling cylinders? A secret handshake? Do they have some strategies that maybe you can apply to build *your* business? To find out, I spoke with Dave Valaika, owner of Indian Valley Scuba in Harleysville, Pennsylvania, USA, to talk about his career as a PADI Pro. I wanted to ask him what he does that makes him one of the most prolific PADI Members in the PADI Americas region. I started with some basics about who he is and what makes him tick as a person, a diver and a businessman.



Valaika began diving almost 40 years ago, inspired by an employer who owned his own boat, dove frequently and always came back with big fish stories. In the four decades since his first dive, Valaika has developed an intuitive sense of what it takes to succeed in the dive industry. And, though he runs a scuba business that takes a great deal of his time and energy, he still finds time to coach youth athletics for his three daughters. Valaika strongly believes sports are one of the secrets to success when it comes to raising children.

"It's amazing how sports can affect the caliber of friends kids choose," he observes, "And [it affects] their decision making in so many positive ways." As you may expect, Valaika's family life overlaps into diving, and diving is one of the sports in which he involves his children. Two of his daughters have already learned to dive and sometimes accompany him on dive trips. Like many PADI Pros, he found certifying family members particularly gratifying. "One of my main motivations for becoming a PADI Professional was to share the wonder and beauty of the underwater world with others. Sharing it with my own daughters has been absolutely fantastic."

Valaika has had some other memorable students as well. "In addition to conventional diver education, I work with special needs divers who have physical or mental challenges. Unquestionably, my favorite teaching experiences come from sharing my knowledge with someone who's getting out of a wheelchair to dive with us. Or, making a connection with an autistic child, getting him to calm down and focus so he can experience a scuba dive. *These* are the most memorable moments and there's nothing else that quite compares to it," he says.

Valaika describes big animal encounters as his most exciting dive experiences. "We've done several live-aboard charters in the Galapagos Islands," he says. "They are always phenomenal in that they allow you to dive in close proximity to whale sharks and manta rays -- these probably rank up there with some of my all-time favorite dive experiences."

Moving from family and diving to dive business, I asked Valaika to share some of the secrets behind his success with his fellow PADI Members. Here's what he had to say:

Jo Walters (JW): To what do you attribute your success as a PADI Pro?

David Valaika (DV): I attribute it to a number of things. Certainly one is the depth of education we provide for our students. For example, we don't stop at Open Water Diver certification. Our minimum graduation requirement for our students is six open water dives, completion of the Peak Performance Buoyancy Specialty diver course, as well as AWARE-Coral Reef Conservation. We have close to 100 percent continuing education, too; almost all of our Open Water Divers continue to on to their Advanced Open Water Diver and specialty diver certifications.

JW: How do you motivate divers to continue their education?

DV: We bring our clients the dive experiences they want. Although we are located in the Northeastern United States, most of the people who take a scuba diving course with us want to learn to dive so they can enjoy it during a tropical vacation. The standard procedure for most other stores

and instructors in our area is to run them through their academics and confined water sessions in a pool and then take them to a dark, cold quarry to complete their training. We conduct 90 percent of our open water training dives in the Florida Keys or destinations in the Caribbean. By providing students with the kind of diving they envision when they first think about signing up for a course, we prepare them to be great divers and instill in them the desire to keep diving. Often, before we're even home from their first trip, they're already looking at our travel schedule and seeing when they can join us again.

JW: How do you find new divers?

DV: We promote in a number of ways. For example, we teach at five local YMCA facilities. We have developed some very nice signs that we post around the facilities and we advertise in the electronic flyers and newsletters that the facilities send out to their members.

We also conduct free monthly Discover Scuba Diving experiences at each of the pools where we teach. This has been a very successful strategy because the facilities have many members who are interested in diving, but have a feeling they wouldn't be able to succeed, or couldn't do it. We get

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them to jump in the water and prove to themselves they can and, next thing you know, they're signing up for a class. There is no obligation; the sessions encourage prospective new divers to take the plunge and try it out.

Additionally, we have a booth we use at outdoor sports tradeshows and we sponsored the DEMA learn-to-dive-pool at two different outdoor events.

JW: How do you motivate divers to Go PRO?

DV: I've found only a small percentage of divers in their otherwise busy lives really want to advance to the pro level. Nevertheless, we are very strong advocates of continuing education. Most of our divers end up with a minimum of their Advanced Open Water Diver and Enriched Air Diver Specialty course certifications, or their Master Scuba Diver ratings. We also encourage them to stay involved and come to our pool sessions to assist newer students. In fact, sometimes our "assistants" outnumber our students so many people are coming back and staying involved. This involvement often leads them to realize they would like

DV: I think overall our favorite course is Advanced Open Water Diver. We include a selection of deep dives, wreck dives and night dives, which add to students' excitement. Plus, the education is continuous: We incorporate aspects of multiple specialty dives rather than limit them to a specific Adventure Dive. This gives students a taste of the various specialties, enhances the educational experience and makes them want to come back and take the actual specialty courses.

JW: Speaking of specialty courses, do you have a favorite?

DV: Wreck Diver, Digital Underwater Photographer and Night Diver Specialty courses are my personal favorites.

JW: Do you have a favorite dive spot?

DV: No, for me, it's the people I dive with. I've been on plenty of dives that you might think would be so-so due to the conditions or the environment, but the people I've been with made the trip phenomenal. Conversely, I've been to some great dive spots, but wasn't necessarily surrounded by the right kind of people and it detracted from the dive. So, really it's the

community grow and see the number of people who dive with us again and again for years, people who really embrace diving. It's the greatest proof of the reality of transformation not only of my own life, but of others' lives as well. It's what keeps me pumped; every day is just as exciting as the day before.

JW: What advice do you have for part-time PADI Pros who are considering switching to a full-time career in diving?

DV: Do your homework. Don't jump into it blind. A lot of people are enamored with the perception of an ideal life of living in the tropics and teaching scuba every day. There's a lot more to being a PADI Pro or any sort of dive industry professional on a day-to-day basis; it's not nearly as glamorous in reality as it may appear at first glance. You really need to make sure the lifestyle is right for you, and if it is, then by all means go for it. But, do your homework first.

JW: How do you stay up to date on business and industry trends?

DV: I attend PADI's and other training and certification organizations' seminars

Being a PADI Pro and starting a family dive business has given me the opportunity to build an entire community of strong and confident divers. And, it's wonderful to watch our dive community grow and see the number of people who dive with us again and again for years, people who really embrace diving.

-Dave Valaika

to share their knowledge with others. And, they recognize that to be the one talking instead of helping, they've got to be a divemaster, assistant instructor, open water scuba instructor or higher. So, nurturing our students and keeping them involved in diving creates a natural progression to the professional level.

JW: What is your favorite course to teach?

crowd you're diving with that makes the dive special.

JW: How did being a PADI Pro transform your life?

DV: Being a PADI Pro and starting a family dive business has given me the opportunity to build an entire community of strong and confident divers. And, it's wonderful to watch our little dive com-

and read dive publications. I feel it's very important to know not only what PADI is offering, but what everyone else does, too, so I can answer intelligently when people ask questions. Because I have a dive business, I take advantage of opportunities to meet with sales representatives and manufacturers. This helps me find out what's

new in equipment and training, and what's out there on the horizon.

JW: What type of dive and non-dive related educational opportunities do you think PADI Pros should seek out to stay at the top of their game?

DV: I think it's important to attend seminars and forums to take advantage of opportunities to meet with other industry professionals, especially those from other geographic regions. I strongly believe in attending the DEMA show, and I always encourage our staff to attend. Also, keep reading, and continue your education. Once you stop learning, it doesn't bode well for your success. Learning needs to be an ongoing and continuous process to succeed in this industry.

JW: What's the best thing about being a PADI Pro?

DV: It allows me to share the PADI System of diver education with interested students. PADI is a first class operation from the programs to the materials to the curriculum. And, on top of all that, I really appreciate the great educational support from PADI Americas.



JW: Is there anything I didn't ask you you'd like to share?

DV: Yes. I am constantly amazed at how many dive professionals and the dive centers with which they are associated don't pursue all the opportunities PADI provides to promote continuing education, like the Master Scuba Diver Challenge or the Go PRO Challenge contests. It doesn't take

much to get divers to want to continue their education. The key is to reach out to them regularly and remind them that diving is something they *want* to stay involved with, something they *welcome* staying involved in.

Also, I don't believe in the piecemeal presentation of specialties. You're missing opportunities when you don't combine programs and specialties. When you *force* your students to come back to you and ask for everything piece-by-piece it becomes time-

and cost-prohibitive. If more dive professionals were better business professionals, they would see they can greatly improve on their certification numbers and build a bigger and more active clientele – a following, so to speak – if they showed some creativity and combined courses. If you'd like to contact Dave Valaika to learn more about how he's succeeding in the dive industry, please call 800 825 2452 or visit him on the web at indianvalleyscuba.com. ♦

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