

Russell Baqir

Senior VP Business Development, Northpoint Commercial Finance

For nearly 30 years, Russell Baqir has worked tirelessly in the commercial finance sector of the marine industry, actively supporting a wide range of OEMs and retailers.



By Wanda
Kenton Smith

For the past 13 years, he's served as a senior executive with the Northpoint Commercial Finance organization owned by Canadian-based Laurentian Bank, with US operations based in Alpharetta, GA. In his present role, he works alongside fellow Sr. VP John Durnien to

oversee the sales team, key OEM and dealer relationships, marketing strategies and implementation, and overall business and program development.

Previous stints prior to Northpoint include field service and account management roles with ITT Commercial Finance; division credit manager, sales manager and marketing manager with Green Tree Commercial Finance; and division president of Textron Commercial Finance which grew its portfolio under his leadership to become the second largest lender in the space, prior to the economic crash of 2008.

Baqir, an economics graduate from Auburn University and a certified, award-winning Six Sigma Green Belt, was named a *Boating Industry* 2017 "Mover & Shaker" finalist in its Bold Moves issue.

In this Profiles in Leadership interview, Baqir shares keen insight on a variety of topics, including the state of the industry and its most daunting challenges; top strategies for today's critical financial and inventory management; the mentors who inspired him on his career path; and his passion for customer service.

Boating Industry: Before we dive into business, what's your personal boating background?

Russell Baqir (RB): I was first introduced to boating by my spouse Tammy Baqir when we began

dating 44 years ago. We enjoyed water skiing with friends and family on Lake Martin, Alabama. I also spent time camping, fishing and swimming on the lake with my fraternity brothers at Auburn University ... the grade point average could have been better, but the memories are worth it!

Today, Tammy and I continue to gather with our family several times a year on Lake Martin and spend time relaxing on pontoons. On occasion, I enjoy deep sea fishing excursions with an Auburn fraternity brother.

BI: When and how did you launch your career in the boating industry?

RB: I graduated from Auburn in 1988 and joined ITT Commercial Finance as an FSR (floor checker), working on the Suzuki and Yamaha portfolios. I was promoted after 18 months to an account manager in the Suzuki powersports/marine portfolio.

BI: Who have been your top mentors and how did they inspire, teach and/or encourage you along the way?

RB: My dad, Dr. Ghalib Baqir, taught me that work is a priority and inspired me to go into Economics as a major.

Jerry Britton, President of ITT Commercial Finance, Green Tree Financial and Textron Commercial Finance, guided me into sales from credit. He gave me the opportunity at Green Tree to flourish and established the mindset that we are here to serve.

John Durnien, Northpoint's SVP, was GM of Green Tree Commercial Finance. I learned from John how to run an office which helped tremendously when I had the opportunity to become division president at Textron. John has been a partner since we worked together at Green Tree.

BI: As you consider the nearly three decades you've spent in the marine industry, what was the biggest challenge you faced ... and what did you learn?



Russell Baqir is one of the marine industry's long-standing leaders and experts in wholesale commercial finance.

RB: The biggest challenge occurred when the securitization market crashed in 2008. There was a complete sense of panic, and all assets were completely devalued; the US economy entered the Great Recession.

As the liquidity dried up, the process began of repossessing multiple dealers per week. We had to convert our team from growth and facilitating inventory purchases to repossessing the inventory and liquidating the collateral.

Textron Financial did not have a high enough bond rating so the government would not guarantee the bond holders. We had to have the cash available when these bonds came due. If we did not keep up with liquidating the financed asset, Textron as a company would not survive, so we partnered with OEMs and dealers to find solutions to meet this cash requirement through discount programs. I personally worked with all the marine OEMs to develop programs to ensure their dealers had a softer landing and better chance



I've had the privilege to be part of teams that have either established start-up lending to OEMs and dealers, or to assist in their survival and struggles. In both cases, to be able to see these businesses thrive and excel is the purpose of our business.

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to survive. Our team had already set up dealers across the country to centralize the location of the repossessed product. We then began selling the inventory at discounts from there. As we liquidated the portfolio, my job ended.

Building a career around helping people to accomplish their goals, to forcing them to liquidate their inventory was a completely different way to work with customers.

I learned the value of a brand and how different companies approached protecting their brand. OEMs and dealers who valued and protected their brands resulted in the highest rate of return on the sale of the product and recovered quicker than the product without brand equity.

BI: On the flip side, what has been your greatest personal professional achievement?

RB: I've had the privilege to be part of teams that have either established start-up lending to OEMs and dealers, or to assist in their survival and struggles. In both cases, to be able to see these businesses thrive and excel is the purpose of our business. Most lenders will not take this chance.



When it comes to personal passions, Russell champions football and his alma mater, Auburn University: shown at tailgate with his wife, Tammy.

BI: What have you learned about your customers that has impacted your career and how you conduct business?

RB: Customer needs are as unique as a person's fingerprint. You must listen carefully to hear them, as they don't always articulate what they really need.

BI: Let's drill down to your area of expertise on a very hot topic for many in the industry right now. What's your #1 recommendation today in terms of inventory management and control?

RB: Focus on the cashflow; spend time with the financial statements; and understand ALL the costs that sales must cover. Inventory turn!

BI: On a broader scale, what do you believe are the biggest challenge(s) facing the recreational marine industry overall in both the short and long-term today?

RB: It's clear that access to water remains front and center, so continuing to find ways to grow the industry with more people able to enjoy the

// PROFILES IN LEADERSHIP



Russell and Team Northpoint are strong advocates of important industry initiatives including sponsorship of the NMMA's ABC legislative event (shown with Georgia delegation) and MRAA's Dealer Week.

experience is critical. In both cases, the boat club model can assist greatly.

In addition, guarding against over-regulation and finding solutions that work for both sides of the regulatory issues we're facing is significant. NMMA's staff needs our support.

I'd also like to mention that Matt Gruhn and his team at the MRAA are doing a tremendous job building a strong industry event (Dealer Week) to bring us all together. More OEMs and dealers need to get involved and support this effort.

BI: Are there areas of innovation you've championed on the commercial financing front?

RB: The boat club model is a complement to dealerships and enhances their cash flow.

Our partnership with Elite Retail and the online tools for retail financing they are providing to both dealers and OEMs is groundbreaking for the marine industry.

Our partnership with Radian Technologies will have a significant impact on inventory



Understand the ultimate goal you want to achieve. Find a mentor and develop a career path. Invest the time it takes to learn all aspects of commercial lending. Be patient and embrace the opportunities and changes as they come.

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tracking that benefits the dealers, OEMs and consumers in the future.

BI: On the career development front, how difficult is it to break into wholesale commercial finance as a marine industry career choice? Any advice?

RB: We are constantly seeking people to join our team. The difficulty seems to be the learning curve, as a bank approaches lending differently than a finance company. Patience, understanding of operations, credit and sales seem to be the most difficult aspects for people to overcome.

Understand the ultimate goal you want to achieve. Find a mentor and develop a career path. Invest the time it takes to learn all aspects of commercial lending. Be patient and embrace the opportunities and changes as they come.

BI: To wrap up, when you're able to disconnect from the workplace, what do you do for fun?

RB: Golf and Auburn football: War Damn Eagle – we're coming back! ●