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**September 12, 2002**

Hover hype

World Hovercraft Championship events begin Sunday

Promoter gives tips, demo to marketing group

By Lori Henson/Tribune-Star

Sept. 12, 2002

Chris Fitzgerald promotes a cool toy.

His hovercraft speeds and maneuvers - sometimes wildly - across water and land on a cushion of air. His beloved vehicle is even featured this fall with James Bond at the controls.

But despite its inherent coolness, marketing the hovercraft and its showcase event, the World Hovercraft Championship, for which kickoff events begin Sunday in Terre Haute, isn't always easy. Fitzgerald shared some of his obstacles and advice - and a trip around the Wabash River - Wednesday with members of the local chapter of the American Marketing Association.

Fitzgerald said the difficulty in marketing a new form of transportation is finding an audience to listen.

"I've had to spend my life finding ways to create a market," said Fitzgerald, chairman and president of Neoteric Hovercraft Inc. of Terre Haute. "You don't have a clue who the customers are, and they're very hard to find."

He said he's taken tips from the early automotive and aircraft industries.

"[Charles] Lindbergh's flight put the aircraft industry on the map," Fitzgerald said.

And he credited Henry Ford's auto racing support with speeding the adoption of automobiles.

"It's a way of getting the concept into the public view without a lot of money,"

Fitzgerald told the group.

Of course, aircraft also was helped along by its heroic performance in two World Wars.

The hovercraft's popularity would soar, Fitzgerald joked, "if we could have a huge war in a swamp somewhere. So, I'm looking for that right now."

Fitzgerald doesn't need a war to popularize the hovercraft with his natural salesmanship, said Michelle Engle, manager of music entertainment for Sony Disc Manufacturing in Terre Haute and president of the Marketing Association.

"A circus manager is really what I am," Fitzgerald said. "You hope the tent is going to be there. It's a big risk."

The ringmaster even made a show out of his talk, taking Karen Landsaw, a marketing assistant at Westminster Village, for a spin in the Official Pace Craft for the World Hovercraft Championship.

"I won't be afraid," Landsaw said, and climbed into the craft in pumps and a long red skirt for a trip around the river near the Fairbanks Park boat ramp.

"It's really smooth," she said afterward. "He's a very good driver!"

Engle said she hoped members took away some good ideas from Fitzgerald's talk. But she said his speech, preceded by a moment of silence, was also a chance to celebrate a premier event in Terre Haute on an otherwise sad day, the anniversary of the Sept. 11 attacks.

"This is a day of remembrance," she said. "We're so excited to have something positive to focus on in our community."

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