

PADI vs. SDI: a comparative study on how dive companies markets themselves.

I was asked to provide my opinion of what the differences are between PADI and SDI as company policy and as matter of professionalism, I have tried not to produced a comparison between PADI and SDI or any other agency. However, I would be happy to explain to you how different marketing models effect the way a given company will seek to find a niche in the dive market and develop a marketable service or commodity from it.

This article is of course based on my experiences as both a former PADI Professional and my current certification standing as an SDI instructor.

What are the differences between SCUBA Diving International (SDI) and Professional Association of Dive instructors (PADI), and the benefits and drawbacks of each agency?

One difference is that SDI was developed from dive professionals in the technical diving field. PADI has deep roots in recreational diving and has staid true to these roots. Also the recreational diver must understand that each certification organization is simply a marketing model with the goals of producing a safe product, YOU THE DIVER! So in truth the different dive certification organizations have the ability to travel different roads, but all roads must lead to the same goal.

SDI is an the most progressive scuba diving agency in existence. Founded by Technical Diving International (TDI, the largest and most advanced technical dive agency in the world. SDI has the unique advantage of seeing the recreational diving community through the experienced eyes of technical diving. SDI was created with the philosophy that past practices should re-evaluated in the light of new technology and that recreational scuba instruction should reflect the actual needs of open water divers.

Standards that ensure genuine diver safety while maximizing the pleasures of learning to dive are the foundation of SDI's diver training programs. SDI has reexamined limits that are arbitrary or based solely on tradition and developed new guidelines using scientific data and common sense. SDI believes divers should be trained from the beginning to take advantage of new technologies and the freedom to dive deeper or longer or both - with greater safety.

As your skill and experience increase, SDI offers diver training that will allow them to advance beyond the traditional limits of recreational diving to the level of skill they desire. Simply put, divers can progress through SDI's recreational levels, than transition smoothly into technical diving with TDI.

PADI Mission Statement: PADI exists to develop programs that encourage and fulfill the public interest in recreational scuba and snorkel diving worldwide (PADI Instructor manual, version 2.7pdf [12/02])

The McPADI concept of marketing:

This comparison came to me by virtue of a discussion on a scuba board forum. The discussion was started by a NAUI instructor, not me. PADI, is arguably the largest recreational dive organization and has sought to provide the dive community a safe predictable dive experience for this class of diver. It is a large corporation and to that ends limits corporation liability. PADI lives and breath liability containment so much so that there lies it's flaw in providing innovation to the dive community.

The NAUI instructors position was:

"PADI to me is like Mc Donald s Hamburgers, you can't deny the ability for Mc Donald's to provide a specific average quality of burger world wide. The same is true of PADI anywhere in the world you can find a PADI facility that will provide you a predictable type of dive experience." My position on this is that this is not an insult, only the acceptance (of the NAUI instructors position), that, if you teach towards a certain range, your divers and instructors are for the most part going to lie within that range. This could open the perception that the problem with PADI motto, "To teach the world to Dive" is clearly not everyone in the world is capable of diving, nor should they.

Do you by attempting to teach the world to dive actually prevent the sport from developing to a form were it remains fun and challenging? Does teaching the world to dive means you focus on the average person, which leaves you to dropping the poor diver and limiting the experience of the above average student? Does focusing on the average person lead to a higher profit return? Yes, focusing your money making efforts on the average will reward you with higher short end return.

Paperwork and liability reduction

I found the difference in paperwork requirement is much greater in PADI, (LOL one whole page) than in SDI. The demand for paperwork does little to improve an instructors teaching ability or a students retention ability. Outside of the need to exclude undo legal liability all organizations are paperwork heavy.

My SDI instructor manual is half the size of the PADI manual and it doesn't teach anything less than the PADI manual. I actually had a PADI student give up and leave my shop when faced with the paperwork trail PADI required.

PADI and it's changing marketing image

PADI has moved away from underwater hunting training never officially embraced solo diving. I remember clearly the days when PADI was pro hunting? Why the change? Does not training diver to hunt actually decrease hunting? You certainly don't decrease hunting, but you loose the opportunity to have a positive influence over educating divers how to hunt with sustainable methods.

The same is said for Solo Diving, not offering instruction is not going to limit the

number of solo divers. But what you then get is divers untrained, diving solo. SDI clearly fosters diving for divers and encourages diver to press forward with the proper training.

PADI, feels its profit margin or liability reduction will be better served by ignoring solo diving, but than they teach towards the average (NAUI instructor and my opinion). But apparently teaching toward the average is very profitable for PADI (authors position). So outside of Solo diving and Underwater Hunter there are no major differences in course offerings.

The ability for SDI (subjective truth) to teach to a higher comprehension with greater opportunity at skill development is something PADI course of instruction can't meet. To understand this go back to paperwork requirement and liability reduction strategy used by PADI.

Also as an SDI instructor I feel no pressure to provide a specific number of certification per month unlike when I was a PADI instructor. I definitely felt pressure to certify to a given level when I was a PADI instructor. I found by experience that the successful PADI instructor is not so much the best instructor at teaching divers, but the instructor who produces the most certifications.

The Goals of Certification Organizations

Have no confusion modern recreational diving is a for-profit business. It is in direct competition with all other recreational sports. The recreational dive business is competing with recreational skiing, boating, climbing, hiking, Bicycling etc. Certification organization by nature and concept engage in a degree of selling to the customer of what they assume diving is all about. The reality of standardized training followed by most organizations produce a standard product, you the recreational diver.

Did you stop to consider that most of the top certification organization meet specific requirements specified from a regulatory organization outside of the concerned dive certification organizations.

The regulatory organization that provides the standards that SDI and PADI operate under is the Recreational Scuba Training Council (RSTC). So if everyone is being directed by RSTC, then what, in fact, is available to the organization to actually differ from one another.

In truth after five years as a dive professional I see little teaching latitude within recreational diving and even less latitude available for technical diving. To be a safe competent diver you must learn, practice and test out to a specific standard. To remain a safe competent diver you must then dive as you were trained and seek retraining when you have periods of prolonged absences from the water.

So the question asked of me has been answered in full. The answer being no particular dive organization is better or worst than another.

The differences lie in the marketing model used and most importantly the abilities of the individual instructors, and of course the dedication the new diver uses to uphold the standard of training they receive.

All the infighting between instructional organizations boils down to this: some instructors can work with PADI and foster PADI's ideal of diving and some instructors work better fostering the concept of diving professed by SDI and other dive certification organizations.

Would the recreational world of diving exist if there were no dive organizations? Of course it would!. Dive training would be provided by individual instructors who followed the standards of regulatory organization like RSTC. Dive training could also be obtained from the equipment supplier, who would in turn train divers based on RSTC standards or the standards by its sister organization in different countries.

This summation of what PADI feels it does for the dive community is offered by Steve Riddle of PADI America. It is subject to Mr. Riddle's position on what PADI is and does for the recreational dive community.

As Andy Rooney used to say "And that is the Rest of The Story" Although I believe PADI thinks it is doing this for the dive community. It provides no true understanding or validation as to what they are actually accomplishing in the dive community.

"PADI strongly supports and puts programs in place to bring new and old divers back into the sport. Of course many of our marketing efforts are geared to direct the consumer to a PADI Dive Facility but it also helps everyone who is connected in the Dive Industry in general. We have done marketing efforts to grow the sport of diving with programs such as

- Bring a Friend Referral Program
- Advertise to past DSD participants to encourage continuing their diver training
- Local Area Market Campaigns with local radio and bulletin board ads. This program is going to be extended to a much larger area over the next few years. It will double in size this year and so on.
- Major Sponsor of the Scuba Tour.

PADI actively fights legislation to benefit the membership and Divers in general around the world. We are not aware of any other company that does this.

We have name brand recognition as the leader in the industry - People look for the PADI name.

PADI is recognized in more than 160 countries around the world.

We can help stores market to their customer base driving business back into their store.

PADI has recently established a Chamber Fund.

We work with The Project Aware Foundation to familiarize the public with specific needs for protecting the Aquatic Environment with such campaigns as Protect the Living Reef, Protect the Wreck and AWARE Kids to name a few. Project Aware has donated More than \$2,000,000.00 to protecting the environment in the forms of grants, and other areas that protect the Aquatic World to make it a better place for the future.

PADI also has a host of special benefits for PADI Professional Members as well as PADI Dive Society Members. Some of the would include

- Travel assist
- Discounts on equipment
- Discounts on Travel
- Special promotions for continuing a divers education.
- Special events planned throughout the year for members only.

PADI is a member of the RSTC.

PADI is arguably the largest dive organization in the world producing more certifications than other organization. But are these certifications, producing divers who actually remain divers? Why does PADI need to put such a effort in bring back divers to diving? Why is there this need to bring divers back to diving? A simple explanation is that many people certified to dive have no real interest in the sport outside of a single experience and mistakenly sought or were marketed for certification instead of say a one time dive experience, which both SDI and PADI offer to the public. However the best way to address this is changing the current use of lifetime certification cards, but that my friends is a separate article.

Yours in Diving Fatimah Renfro
Ingat Pada Allah

***The author: Fatimah Matilda Abdullah Duffy Renfro was born in 1959 and became a PADI O.W. Diver in 1979. Between 1979 and 2000 she dived the west coast of the United States, and Mexico, Gulf of Mexico and the Florida pan handle and advanced to PADI DM. In 2002 she completed her IDC and left PADI in 2004 for the SDI family of professional divers. The decision to disconnect from PADI has lead to greater fulfillment as a dive instructor. Fatimah is now living and running a small dive business in Semporna, Malaysia. Oh, yes she has over 3000 plus dives to her credit with experience gathered over the years from recreational diving, commercial diving school, sea urchin diver and scrubbing many a boat bottom in Santa Barbara, California.

From the SCUBA Travel Web site.
<http://www.scubatravel.co.uk/>