

INTO THE YARD

Better Communication Improves the Experience

by Gary Caputi



Taking your pride and joy to the boatyard for service, repairs or upgrades doesn't have to be a dreaded experience, especially with the high quality yards that have been setting the standard in recent years. Top boatyards like American Custom Yachts, Viking Service Center, Bayliss, Jarrett Bay, Saunders Yachtworks and A&J Boat Works are dedicated to helping you keep your boat in top condition whether its warranty work, general maintenance or something considerably more involved. Each is staffed with dedicated customer service representatives and technicians who pride themselves on providing quality service and total customer satisfaction. However, reaching those goals depends on good communications with the vessel's owner and captain prior to bringing the boat into the yard and staying in close contact while it's there.

"Captains and owners need to have realistic expectations about turn-around times for yard work," said Mike Samuels, general manager at Viking Service Center in Riviera Beach, Florida. "And the only way we can make reasonable estimates is if the captain provides us with a complete list of items that require our attention well in advance of scheduling. As the boat is being worked on, we have to maintain communication with the captain or owner should we encounter additional items that require attention so they can be prioritized to stay on schedule. When we work closely together, the overall experience is a positive one for them and us. When expectations are unreasonable then it's our job to find a solution."

Mike provided a recent example. He had a captain come in with a 52-item punch list of work to be done on his owner's vessel and then told the Viking customer rep he need the boat back in two weeks because the boss was flying in with family and friends for a fishing trip to the Bahamas.

"The captain's expectations were simply unrealistic," Mike said, "and he was not pleased when he was told it was impossible to do everything in the time allotted. Once he saw the reality of the situation, we got down to working out a solution. We worked with him to prioritize the list, eventually getting it down to the 12 most important service items that could be completed

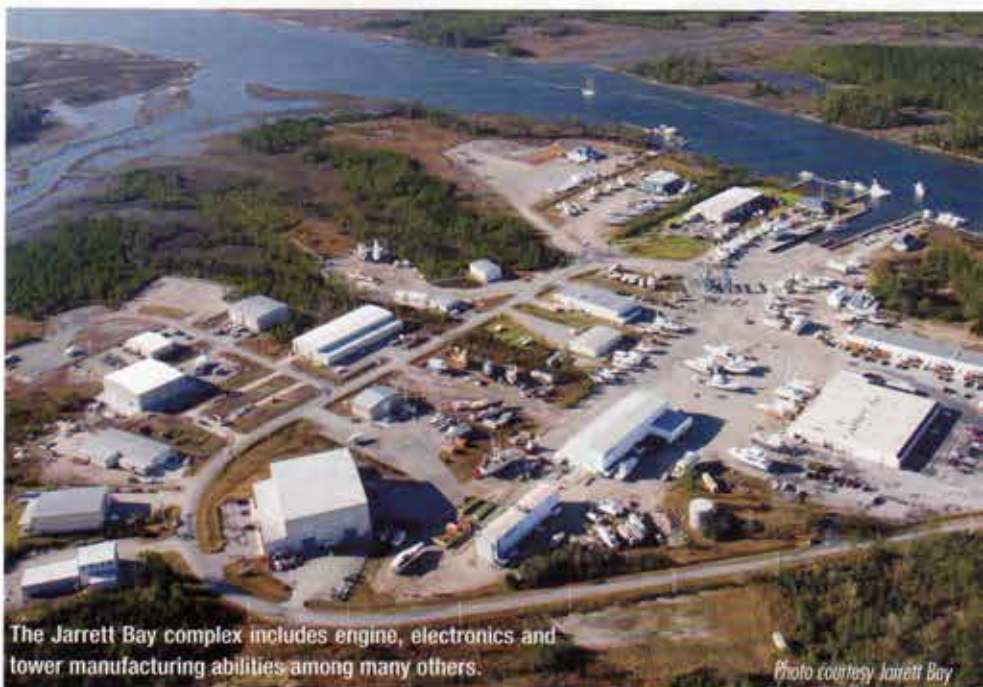


Photo courtesy Jarrett Bay

in time for the owner's trip. We still had to find a slot to get the boat into the yard, which we did, and complete the priority items while hoping we didn't run into any additional hidden problems. The captain then scheduled a second yard visit after the trip to finish the rest of the items on the list. By working together he was pleased with the outcome and a stronger working relationship was established for future visits. Managing customer expectations is an important part of reaching the goal of total customer satisfaction and in the end that is the most important part of our job."

Modern sportfishing vessels are complex pieces of equipment that include systems from numerous vendors who might not always have what you need in stock. Mike recounted a recent problem with several older boats that were equipped with 50-amp power transformers. Charles Marine manufactured them, but more recent boats use 100-amp transformers so they don't build and stock as many of the older units as the probably should. They had several boats over the span of a year that needed replacements that were back-ordered for extended periods of time while they actually built them. The yard now keeps several in stock, but at the time there was nothing they could do to expedite the process.

"A delay like that never makes a captain



The Jarrett Bay complex includes engine, electronics and tower manufacturing abilities among many others.

Photo courtesy Jarrett Bay

or owner happy and it doesn't make us happy either," Samuels said, "but it happens and has to be dealt with from time to time. If we're working on a newer Viking that needs a part that our supplier is out of stock on, we occasionally pull parts off the production line at the factory, but with older boats that option is off the table."

Mike told us that every boat coming into in the yard goes through a five-page

mechanical check list by their technicians. It is part of the value-added approach they take to providing yard service to our customers and includes a host of items that could be safety issues if not addressed. "Customer feedback as a result of the expanded check list has been very positive," he told us.

Randy Ramsey of Jarrett Bay Boat Works concurred. "Communication is crucial to planning a service layover," he said. "We



Photo courtesy Baylis Boatworks



Upgrading the teak is just one of many boatyard tasks.

Photo courtesy Everett Bay

assign a service manager to each boat and get them out to see it well in advance. They will sit down with the captain and owner to discuss their needs and how best to address them and then work to meet the expectations." Ramsey gave us an example of the process they use.

"We have a boat coming in for a major refit," he told us. "Full paint, new electronics, revamping staterooms, underwater gear, engine repower and adding a mezzanine. It would carry a seven figure price tag when complete. We started the process two months ago by having the owner and captain go through the entire boat with the service manager. It took a full day. Then they

sat down and went through every aspect of the list they developed, put together cost estimates, developed a time frame to accomplish everything and came up with a projected date for completion. Then it comes down to resource management by the yard: scheduling manpower, suppliers, outside contractors, fabrication time and making sure we have room in the yard throughout completion. It's quite a balancing act and one that requires the customer's involvement throughout the process."

Ramsey says that it's important to establish whether they will be dealing with the owner, the captain (or both) up front. In most cases they work with the captain on

a daily basis when the boat is in the yard as most owners don't want to be bothered with the small details, but they do want to be kept informed. Constant communication is necessary because there is the potential for unforeseen problems to be encountered during ongoing work. A boat might be in for bottom paint, but during the stripping process, blisters might be found and that requires additional man hours, more yard time, additional materials and added expense. Parts availability from manufacturers or distributors might create unexpected time delays in completing projects, especially if it's for something that was discovered while working on another service item.

"This is when some yards have a breakdown in communications," Randy told us. "When you can't get in touch with the customer to explain your findings you can't move forward. When dealing with something that could be major we can't proceed without prior approval and that creates a strain for the yard. We understand that we are dealing with people's escape and we work hard to meet their expectations. The communication process is critical for us to be able to maintain customer satisfaction with the whole yard experience."

What about having some hands-on time at the yard? John Fitzgerald, president and CEO of Saunders Yachtworks in Gulf Shores, Alabama, says his staff welcomes the opportunity to have captains and owners visit the yard while work is being done. "We welcome the presence of our customers," he says. "We can give them a few guidelines to stay out of harm's way, but

we do want them to see the process of repair or refit as it's taking place. We consider the housekeeping and yard organization an element of our marketing," Fitzgerald says that this is so much a part of their program that a future expansion will include a lounge where owners and captains can set up their oversight operation while the boat is in the yard. "We want our customers to be comfortable observing what is going on with their boats," he reports.

We stopped by Bayliss Boat Works last week and spent some time with John Bayliss discussing this topic. He said his years as a captain have given him an interesting perspective on the owner-captain-boatyard relationship.

"We always try to look at a yard visit through the eyes of the customer," he said. "A lot of the responsibility has to be accepted by the yard and constant communication is part of that responsibility. We start with a list from the customer, which generates questions and suggestions from our end and it all has to be worked out well before the boat is



Saunders Yachtworks in Gulf Shores, Alabama is one of the top yards on the Gulf Coast.

Photo courtesy Saunders Yachtworks

brought into the slip at the travel lift."

John said that maintaining constant contact with the customer has been helped significantly with the use of email. "We like to use email because it creates a digital paper trail and we can work back and forth with the captain, the owner or both. Text messaging is also quite helpful because if we encounter a problem or just want to give the customer a quick project update we can snap

a smartphone picture and attach it to a text so they can see exactly what the problem is or where we're at in completing the project list. Photo updates are extremely helpful in promoting improved customer satisfaction. On extensive jobs, we will invoice the customer on a weekly basis and back up each invoice with photo support to document our progress. Visual verification is a fantastic way to keep the captain and owner in the

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loop when they are not on site and reassure them that their boat is getting every attention they requested and it deserves.”

Bayliss also agreed that managing a customer's expectations is important and it begins well before the boat goes in the slings. “Whatever the customer's work list might be, we have to plan for 20 percent more yard time than the job might require because it's rare that other things won't be encountered once the work has begun. As the service and safety experts, we want to do everything right on a boat's most important systems from engines to running gear to hull structural integrity before we get to appearance items like paint or interior work. The customer has to understand that this is a commitment we make to them.”

John had some good advice for captains and that is to prepare for your next yard visit while the boat is in use by keeping a “yard list” of items that you feel will need attention next time the boat is hauled for service, repair or retrofitting. Maintaining something as complex as the systems of a large sportfishing boat is an ongoing process and when you add in the level of creature comforts and décor associated with these

vessels, it requires technicians and artisans to keep up with it all.


American Custom Yachts boatyard in Stuart, Florida is perennially busy and their experience and expertise has a lot to do with it. “So many of our yard customers are boat owners we've known for years that it's repeat business,” Dominick LaCombe said during a recent phone call. “But even with people who know your company and its reputation that already have a level of trust in the quality of the work and your business ethic, communication is critical at every step of the process.”

Dom went on to tell us that whether it's a boat in for bottom paint or one like they have in the yard now that is getting a \$3 million dollar refit, the process is pretty much the same, just more involved with bigger projects. “It requires constant contact from the initial meeting between the customer, the service writer and service manager to layout the job, to fine tuning the list and schedule, to drawing up the final work orders and getting them approved,” he said. “The relationship with the owner or owner's representative, usually the captain, only gets closer when the project is underway. With

many projects it helps that we are also a custom boat builder so we truly understand how things went together and can explain to the customer how involved their project can be from experience and that helps develop greater trust.”

Dom told us that the more their representatives can relate to the owner and captain the smoother the job goes, even when the inevitable snags along the way have to be addressed. He says he has captains who will be at the yard almost every day and others that will stop in periodically, but are always available for consultation during the project. “That's probably the most important part of making a trip to the yard a positive experience for everyone involved,” he added.

We garnered similar responses and advice from other yards we contacted. The take away from all of this for captains and owners is simple. Like all relationships, the one with the people who are taking care of your pride and joy is based on open and honest communication. We do suggest that you refrain from marrying your customer service representative as a way to further the relationship. But then again, you never know.



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