

Owning Component Failure

by Steve D'Antonio

“**Y**eah, we don't make the pump, you know; we only install it. If it's not working, you need to call the manufacturer. Sorry.”

How many times have you heard that? In the face of a problem, if there's one thing that sets folks off, it's being told what *they* need to do, rather than being offered the assistance they need.

The quote is from a boatbuilder for whom I was a dealer at the time. I was commissioning a vessel built only months before, and the anchor washdown pump didn't work. When I called the builder, I was simply stonewalled. For any component that failed, no matter its age or amount of use, this builder's protocol was to leave it to the customer to make another phone call, or series of phone calls or e-mails, to track down the right person at the manufacturer. The customer or dealer was then responsible for the cost of removing, shipping, and reinstalling the part.

If you've experienced this “support” merry-go-round, you know just how frustrating it can be. You don't go to your car dealer to complain of a steering problem in your still-warranted automobile only to be told, “Oh, we figured out it's the steering box. Here's the invoice for troubleshooting it. You need to call Saginaw, Michigan.”

For a business, this scenario is like the proverbial death by a thousand cuts: a few of these cases every week could consume a considerable amount of staff time to yield results. In many cases, while galling in principle, simply purchasing a replacement pump is the less expensive and less time-consuming option.

The clincher is the boatbuilder's actions were reprehensible because it very likely chose the part and... *included its markup or commission.* As a former boatyard manager I made it clear to my clients and staff alike,

while marking up parts is standard procedure, it shouldn't be done arbitrarily; the customer, be it a boat owner, dealer, builder, or yard, must get something in return.

The customer should benefit from the experience of those making the selection, because they know what to order and what works best; and the customer should also have after-sale support. If there's a problem, the provider of the part stands by it, at the very least facilitating its repair or replacement if not actually doing the work. Don't ever tell the customer, and don't accept from a component provider, the all-too-familiar “We can't do anything to help you; you need to go to the manufacturer.” That's simply not true. Often you may only need to contact the manufacturer on your customer's behalf. Be sure to copy the customer so he or she understands your role as facilitator to set the support wheels in motion, and let your customer and the component manufacturer know what your expectations are, in writing.

If you purchased the component, *you* are the customer and *you* have the power; and if you are buying a lot of widgets, you have a lot of power to influence events in your and your customer's favor. In the example at the beginning of this column, I suspect that this boatbuilder purchased scores if not hundreds of these pumps a year, so he certainly had more pull with the manufacturer than I did. It's simple: if you chose the part and benefit financially from the sale, your obligation is to follow through.

If you manufacture a component that fails as a result of a manufacturing defect, is it acceptable to say, “We'll replace the part. However, troubleshooting, labor, and shipping are the customer's responsibility”? I encounter this “policy” all too frequently, and in most cases, it's not acceptable.

This scenario creates two problems: One, it lets someone off the hook for something that was manufactured incorrectly; giving folks a free pass on errors guarantees only more errors. Two, it saddles the installer with the unenviable burden of either explaining to the customer that the part manufacturer doesn't cover the labor for replacement, or, if he or she wants to keep the customer, the installer eats the replacement labor cost. With few exceptions, material warranties should cover reasonable labor for replacement.

Finally, make certain that if you install it, you own it. Clients of mine recently experienced a significant and potentially costly gear failure within a week of leaving the yard where the work was carried out. It cost them time, aggravation, and a change in travel plans, along with a cash outlay. When we made the initial conference call to the specialist who did the work, a highly respected vendor, to report what had been found, the response amounted to “Sorry to hear about that; let us know how you make out.” After hanging up, I thought, “Wait a minute. He's not taking ownership of this failure!”

My barometer for ownership of failure is to ask: If the customer were paying me a compliment on my fine work, would I accept it? Would I “own” it? Of course the answer is yes. To be consistent you must treat failures the same way. You must own them until you make them right. **PBB**

About the Author: *For many years a full-service yard manager, Steve now works with boat builders and owners and others in the industry as “Steve D'Antonio Marine Consulting.” He is the technical editor of Professional BoatBuilder, and is writing a book on marine systems, to be published by McGraw-Hill/International Marine.*