

The Importance of Professionalism

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Texts and photos by Steve D'Antonio

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Professionals who work within the marine industry must possess several attributes, chief among these is a curious mind.

A couple of years ago I received a desperate plea for guidance from one of my clients. He's one of the most level headed, even-tempered folks I know yet, his frustration was palpable, and understandably so. He took his boat to a service facility where a dealer came aboard to work on the water maker. Sadly, for the customer, the story of this water maker is a long one. It's the second one he's had in two years, the first,

when it was uncrated, looked as if it had been transported across the country in the back of a pickup truck. Ultimately, a review of the serial number determined that this “new” unit was years old. When the manufacturer was confronted on this they conceded, admitting that they had neglected to provide a new(er) serial number for the unit when it was sold. I’m not making this up. It was ultimately returned for a refund.

A new water maker was purchased from a different manufacturer and installed. Unfortunately, its performance was and has remained problematic from day one and support from the manufacturer has, at times been difficult at best. The latest source of the client’s frustration, and his request for assistance, was a result of a visit from a “professional” service technician *who is a dealer for this product*. His behavior left the client feeling very much less than confident. Among other foibles, he gave directions that contradicted the unit’s labeling and instruction manual, filters were not replaced because he didn’t have the correct tools, and after his departure it was discovered that valves were left in positions that not only prevented the unit from working, the vessel’s water supply had been disabled as well. Understandably, the client asked me “is this typical?” Sadly, and sheepishly I was forced to admit that it wasn’t atypical for this industry.



Boats are becoming increasingly complex, requiring that those working on them both maintain proficiency in existing skills, as well as being willing to learn new ones.

Whenever I'm asked this question, and it's not uncommon, I'm at once frustrated and embarrassed. I interact with and am exposed to the inner workings of marine manufacturers and service providers across the country and around the world, and while there are many good folks out there, providing good products and supporting them well, there is a large contingent of those that chronically fail to meet their, and my, customer's needs.

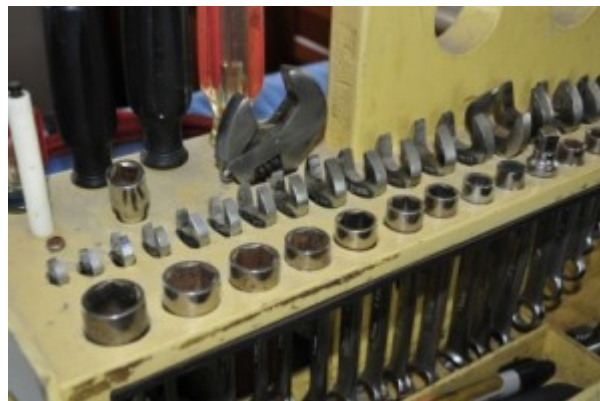
When a customer visits a dealer for a product, his expectations should be high, after all who should know more about it than someone who sells and services it day in and day out? Regardless of whether it's a dealer for the gear or not, there is an understandable expectation among consumers, especially new ones (which in itself is telling, old hands are inured to these trials) that the person working on the vessel or the gear is a trained, seasoned professional. Yet, in my experience, as an industry we routinely fail to live up to this expectation.



Some necessary skill sets have remained unchanged for many years, repowering for instance. Yet, it remains important for professionals to thoroughly understand and master these core assets.

While poor workmanship, inadequate customer care and ineptitude are factors in this case, the bigger issue, and one worthy of emphasis here, is the lack of professionalism with which our industry is plagued today. In my 25 years of experience as a marine mechanic and electrician, boat yard manager and now industry consultant I've seen the full spectrum of professionalism. In that time, after having worked with and managed hundreds of employees and manufacturers, I've developed my own definition for this term, one that applies specifically to this industry.

For folks in the marine industry to think of, and refer to themselves as, professionals, and all should aspire to this by the way, they must possess several key attributes. These include a willingness to follow manufacturer's instructions *to the letter*, they must take the work seriously, they must take responsibility for their actions and knowledge base, they must possess excellent attention to detail and they must be thorough and tidy in their work.



Attention to detail remains the bedrock of good work skills in the marine trades. The owner of this custom made tool box clearly possesses this attribute.

Above all else, however, they must possess what one of my best technicians used to refer to as "a curious mind". Without this final key attribute, it is very difficult to be

successful, and virtually impossible to be thought of as a professional.

At the risk of sounding melodramatic, lives depend on the work marine mechanics, electricians, FRP tech and welders, riggers, shipwrights and others do.



Electrical systems in particular have grown in size and complexity, placing a greater emphasis for compliance with vessel manufacturer and ABYC Standards when carrying out repairs and modifications.

What more incentive should we need to take this seriously, to treat it like a profession rather than simply a job, to continuously broaden our educational horizons? I would argue that our obligation to do the work we do well is a moral imperative. Beyond that, our customers have a right to expect it.

Many would argue that the root of the dearth of professionalism in our industry is related to education or the lack there of, and to a large measure I would agree. Indeed, there's a lot of talk about education in this industry, more talk than action in many cases, and there are a variety of educational opportunities, from classes and seminars provided by groups such as the International Boat Builders' Exhibition, the American Boat and Yacht Council, the American Boat Builders' and Repairers' Association and others, to the

specialized training offered by a host of marine equipment manufacturers.



Formal training and certification by equipment manufacturers as well as ABYC is now a veritable necessity. ABYC certifications are by no means a formality, each includes a rigorous 200 question exam.

Take your professionalism seriously by taking education seriously. While I encourage and embrace formal training from the aforementioned groups, today's economy has sadly gutted the education budget of many marine businesses. However, even before the recession hit, I counseled folks to stop waiting for an employer to make this move, I urged them instead to take education, training and professional development into their own hands.

Any marine industry professional or professional wannabe can create a self-education plan, and it takes only two attributes: a curious mind and the willingness to read.



While formal training is invaluable, marine industry professionals should establish a continuous program of self education. This often involves amassing one's own technical library, which often includes traditional, printed texts, manufacturer's service manuals and industry journals as well as electronic and on-line resources.

Read one industry text or professional journal every month. That's it. It could be anything from a book on refrigeration systems or an engine manufacturer's service manual, to a trade publication such as Professional BoatBuilder Magazine (which is provided at no cost to those in the industry), or *thoroughly* reviewing the tech pages of an equipment manufacturer's website. If you are an employer, make manuals and books available for employees to sign out of your professional development library (if they are willing to write a brief report on what they learned from the text, offer a tool purchase allowance, restaurant gift certificate or other incentive). Plan on doing this at home, on your own time, few employers will pay you to study; however, this practice will almost certainly pay dividends. In addition to enhancing your own sense of professionalism and expertise, engaging in a self-education program is a veritable guarantee for career advancement. It's a common refrain among true professionals, "I learn something new every day". To count yourself among them, you too must learn something new every day.

Postscript

Readers may be curious as to why I frequently write and lecture on the subject of improving product quality and customer service, as well as enhancement of professionalism and expertise from those who serve *our* customers. There are two reasons.

First, I act as an advocate on behalf of the customers, specifically for my clients with whom I consult on purchases of new and used vessels, refits, repair and maintenance. On far too many occasions I spend more of my consulting time managing their disappointment, frustration and anger about the products they've purchased or the service they've received, rather than helping them make good decisions. In response to the tumultuous economy, many industries are *increasing* quality and customer service to attract the dwindling discretionary funds. Too often I see our customers giving up on us and walking away to spend those discretionary dollars elsewhere. As an industry, we can't afford to keep doing that.

Second, I don't want to see my many friends and colleagues in this industry lose the opportunity to continue to do what they do so well and often love, and that is occurring too often. I receive calls and emails from folks I know as the best in the business, who are unhappy in their jobs because they are not allowed to do what they know is right for the customer. I'm also contacted by top notch professionals who have lost jobs. The refrain is all too familiar, the shop, yard or manufacturer for whom they work, often for several years, is cutting staff as a result of a smaller customer base, or it's closing its doors all together. They, and I, know their company chased good customers away with some of the undesirable practices I've discussed in my columns and

lectures.

I have the good fortune to work with some very creative, conscientious and skilled folks. They and the companies they own or work for are thriving. However, they are the exception and they won't continue to thrive if unscrupulous manufacturers and unprofessional individuals drive our customer base away.

As an industry we need to hold ourselves accountable for providing what all customers demand today...quality products, transparent and defensible pricing, excellent customer service and professionalism. As individual professionals, we need to hold ourselves accountable for continuing to grow and expand our expertise and we must treat each customer with the respect we expect when the roles are reversed.

I'll continue to wave this flag and beat this drum until I begin to hear my clients routinely praising our industry, its products and the professionalism of our services.

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