

## GEARHEAD

# Getting Back On Course

By Steve D'Antonio

“Yeah, we don’t make the pump—we only install it. If it’s not working, you need to call the manufacturer, sorry.” How many times have you heard that as a consumer? If there’s one thing that sets folks off, it’s being told, in the face of a problem, what they need to do rather than offering the assistance they need.

That quote is one I remember all too well. It came from a boatbuilder for whom I was a dealer at the time. I was commissioning a new vessel that had been built only months



*When a component or assembly fails under warranty, what sort of action should you expect from the marine industry?*

before, and the anchor wash-down pump didn’t work. When I called the builder, I was simply stonewalled and this was *de rigueur*. The protocol, when any component failed, no matter its age or amount of use, was to subject the customer (me in this case) to yet another phone call, or series of phone calls or emails, tracking down the right person at the manufacturer of the pump (or battery charger, starter, water filter, etc.), with the customer anxiously wanting to be on his or her

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way. The customer or dealer is then responsible for the cost of removing, shipping, and re-installing the part.

It's an unenviable scenario that's played out all too often. I've experienced it firsthand—the above description is one of many in my “consumer support” file, and I've heard similar versions from many of my clients. So many, in fact, that I recently penned an editorial on the subject for a marine trade publication, taking the industry to task for this pass-the-buck approach and advising them to see the error in their ways.

If you've experienced this “support” merry-go-round, you know just how frustrating it can be. What's especially irksome is the fact that the folks who are saying “you need to...” are often those who have sold you the part, and charged their mark-up. To me, profiting from the mark-up, which is perfectly acceptable, obligates them to support the product, and you, should a failure occur.

### HOW DID WE GET HERE?

I've often wondered how some of these policies evolved. The marine industry seems to march to the beat of a different drummer at times. Boat owners love their boats and are willing to put up with a lot to have them. When times were good, it wasn't unusual for boatbuilders and

boatyards to not sweat the loss of a customer here and there because there were often three to take his or her place. If you were unhappy with their “warranty” policy, your only recourse was to go elsewhere, voting with your keel as it were. If you weren't missed, the “victory” in departure was pyrric.

I suspect that those high flying times did foster a lot of bad habits in the industry, many of which live on today, and perhaps, because cash was more readily available, boat owners were willing to put up with more and often pay more. Times like this tend to spawn policies that are consumer unfriendly, one of my least favorite being, “labor not included.” When the wash-down pump fails, provided you successfully navigate the warranty maze, the manufacturer is likely to send you a replacement; however, the labor to replace it is on you. What? Why should you ever pay the labor to troubleshoot or replace a component or assembly that failed as a result of poor workmanship or a flawed design? It makes little sense, but it's frequently the norm. I recently encountered this scenario when several of my clients experienced failures of the same electronic product. After the second such failure (which eventually mounted to over a dozen), I approached the manufacturer. They agreed there was an issue with the product, which



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they assured me had been corrected, and while they offered to supply replacements, they refused to pay for the cost associated with replacing these components (i.e., the labor was not included). At first, being accustomed to it, I was unfazed by this lack of support, however, the more I contemplated it the more frustrated I became. Policies and behavior like this reward manufacturers for making and selling defective parts, or at the very least they get a “discount” on the cost of the corrective action.

## THE GOOD NEWS

The good news is, while it’s been hard on the industry as a whole, the recession has made competition within the industry much fiercer, which returns some of the power to the consumer. You can use that power to your advantage and to help the industry get back on course. You can begin by pushing back when a manufacturer suggests that “you need to” do something when a failure occurs in their product. In fact, make it clear that they need to do something if they wish to keep you as a customer, and with the proliferation of forums where folks can share experiences, manufacturers ignore customer’s needs at their own peril. By the same token, when a manufacturer does the right thing, give credit where credit is due and be sure to

share or post that info as well.

If, in the face of a failure of a warranted component, or a component fails prematurely even after the warranty has ended, don’t easily accept the old saw, “labor isn’t included.” Just because it’s become a standard policy doesn’t mean you should accept it as a fait accompli—it’s simply not right.

Finally, in all fairness, the boatbuilder mentioned at the beginning of this column wasn’t responsible for the pump failure. However, at the time they were a much better customer of the pump manufacturer than I was, and as such, they carried considerably more clout with them than I did. They could easily have facilitated the warranty claim by emailing (and copying me on the email) the pump manufacturer, alerting them to the failure and the need to take care of “our” mutual customer. And they should share my pain; doing so may have made them think more carefully about the warranty policies of their chosen suppliers. When I ran a boatyard, I routinely acted as the go-between for my clients, and I continue to fill this role for my consulting clients today, simply greasing the way for better service, and periodically reminding manufacturers to do the right thing. The maxim here is ‘don’t be bashful about asking for help from folks who are in a better position to get results than you are.’ 

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