

The Curious Mind of the Professional

by Steve D'Antonio

A few months ago, I got a desperate call from a client who had taken his boat to a service facility where a “professional” service technician (also a dealer) came aboard to work on the watermaker, the second one the client had bought in two years. The first “new” unit turned out to be years old and was unceremoniously returned to the manufacturer. The current watermaker, from a different manufacturer, has remained problematic, and support has been spotty at best. The technician had given directions that contradicted the unit’s labeling and instruction manual, had failed to replace filters because he didn’t have the correct tools, and had also left valves in positions that prevented the unit from functioning, disabling the vessel’s entire water supply.

“Is this typical?” my client asked. I was embarrassed to admit that it’s not uncommon in this industry. As a journalist and consultant, I frequently work with marine manufacturers and service providers across the country and around the world. My unvarnished observation is that, while there are many good vendors providing sound products and supporting them well, too many chronically fail to meet customers’ needs. The reasonable expectation among consumers, especially those precious newcomers to boating, is that the technician from a dealer or reputable yard is a trained, seasoned professional. As an industry, we routinely fail to live up to this assumption.

While poor workmanship, inadequate customer care, and ineptitude were factors in the watermaker case, they are also symptoms of a deeper affliction in the marine trades: a lack of professionalism.

During my 24 years as a marine mechanic, electrician, boatyard manager, and consultant, I’ve seen the full spectrum of professionalism—including its absence—in hundreds of employees and manufacturers. I’ve found that true or aspiring professionals in the marine industry possess several key attributes: They take the work seriously, follow the manufacturer’s instructions *to the letter*,

take responsibility for their actions, know their limitations, pay excellent attention to detail, and are thorough and tidy in their work. Above all else, however, they possess what one of my best technicians referred to as “a curious mind.” They have what I often referred to during employee reviews as “The Right Stuff.” Without this characteristic, it’s difficult to be successful, and virtually impossible to stand out as someone who treats his or her occupation as a career rather than simply a job.

Many argue that our industry’s dearth of professionalism is related to lack of training and education; to a large measure, I agree.

There are a variety of educational opportunities, from seminars at IBEX and classes from the American Boat & Yacht Council and others, to the product-specific training offered by equipment and materials manufacturers. While I encourage formal training from those groups, today’s economy has gutted the education budgets of many marine businesses to the point that they can’t afford for their employees to participate in these opportunities.

In this economic climate especially, I counsel workers not to wait for an employer to offer a training solution: as a measure of your own professionalism, take education and self-improvement into your own hands.

Any marine professional with a curious mind and the willingness to learn can create an effective self-education plan by reading one industry text every month. That’s it. It can be anything from a book on refrigeration systems or an engine manufacturer’s service manual, to a trade publication, or *thoroughly* reviewing the tech pages of an equipment manufacturer’s website. Do this at home on your own time. Few employers will pay you to study, but the practice will almost certainly pay dividends as they notice your professional growth and consider you favorably for advancement.

Employers with technical- or professional-development collections can help by

allowing employees to sign out manuals and books. They can also offer a tool-purchase allowance, restaurant gift certificate, or some other incentive to encourage employees to write a brief report on what they learned.

Whatever your position, I hope you resolve to learn something new every day. It’s the best economical way I know to improve the boating industry. In response to the tumultuous economy, many industries are *increasing* quality and customer service to attract dwindling discretionary funds. Too often I see our customers giving up on boating and spending their recreational dollars elsewhere. We can’t afford to keep allowing that to occur.

Colleagues and peers I know as the best in the business, tell me they are unhappy because they are not allowed to do what they know is right for the customer. Top-notch professionals report that the shop, yard, or manufacturer they work for is cutting staff or is closing its doors altogether. These people know their companies have often lost customers through some of the unintended and undesirable practices I’ve discussed. Even the most conscientious and creative professionals can’t hope to thrive if careless, untrained individuals in the industry frustrate the customers.

As professionals, we *all* need to continue to grow our knowledge and advance our expertise, and we must treat each customer—the accountant, the doctor, the plumber, the chef—with the professionalism we reasonably expect from them when the roles are reversed. Then I’d like to be able to tell my client, “*This is typical.*” **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 awaits the publication (by McGraw-Hill/International Marine) of his book on marine systems.