Gearhead

BY STEVE D'ANTONIO

Walk The Walk

Marine Industry Needs To Reform Warranty Practices

"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 line? If there's one thing that sets me off it's being told, in the face of a problem, what I need to do rather than offering me the assistance I need.

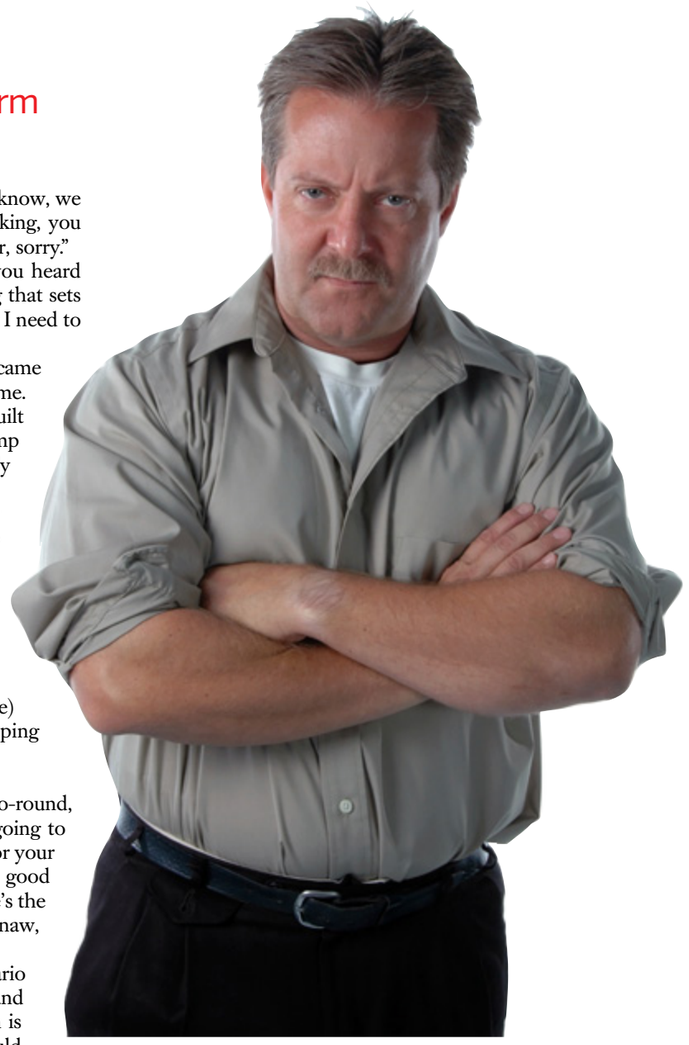
That quote is one I remember all too well, it came from a boatbuilder for whom I was a dealer at the time. I was commissioning a new vessel that had been built only months before and the anchor wash-down pump didn't work. When I called the builder I was simply stonewalled and this was typical.

For any component that failed, no matter its age or amount of use, the protocol 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, spars, etc.) and in many cases with my customer anxiously wanting to be on his or her way. The customer or dealer (me in this case) is then responsible for the cost of removing, shipping and reinstalling the part.

It's simply unfair.

If you've experienced this "support" merry-go-round, you know just how frustrating it can be. Imagine going to your car dealer complaining of a steering problem for your still-warranted automobile only to be told, "Oh, good news, we've figured it out, it's the steering box. Here's the invoice for troubleshooting it, you need to call Saginaw, Inc., in Michigan."

For boatyard operators and builders, this scenario reminds one of the proverbial death by a thousand cuts; if you have a few of these every week, which is certainly possible for a busy yard or builder, it could sequester a considerable amount of a parts manager's time to get results. While galling in principle, it's often less expensive and less time consuming to simply purchase a replacement pump.



Boatbuilders and yard managers need to establish a more customer friendly approach to warranty, rather than pass problems on to the equipment manufacturers. It may be commonplace in the marine industry but it's not fair, the author argues.

A MARKUP, TOO?

The clincher is, and I've explained this to the perpetrators on many occasions, their actions are morally unacceptable in that they very likely chose the part and they included their 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, must get something in return for that markup.

The quid pro quo should be that you are benefiting from the experience of those making the selection. They know what to order and what works best. If there's a problem, the provider of the part stands by it, at the very least facilitating the repair or replacement, if not carrying out the work himself. You should never accept from a yard, builder or component provider the all-too-familiar, "We can't do anything to help, you need to go to the manufacturer." That's simply not true.

Involvement of those who select, purchase and install the component (the boatyard, builder or other marine industry

contractor) should include contacting the manufacturer on your behalf. In many cases they can be an effective facilitator, setting the support wheels in motion and letting the component manufacturer know in writing what your expectations are.

Because the yard purchased the part, they are the customer and they have the power (if they are buying a lot of widgets, they have a lot of power) to influence events in your favor. In the example used at the beginning of this column, I suspect this boatbuilder purchased scores, if not hundreds of these pumps a year. They certainly have a lot more pull with the pump manufacturer than I did. It's that simple–if your yard or builder chose the part and benefits from the sale financially, it has a moral and business obligation to follow through.

MORAL OBLIGATION

While I'm on the subject of moral obligation, for manufacturers of components that fail as a result of a manufacturing defect, is it acceptable for them 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 it's infuriating. In most cases I believe the answer is no, it's not acceptable. This scenario creates two problems:

It lets someone off the hook for something that was, in most cases, manufactured incorrectly. Giving folks a repeated free pass on errors guarantees one thing, more errors.

It saddles the installer with the unenviable burden of either explaining to the customer that the manufacturer of the part that failed doesn't cover the labor for replacement, or, if he wants to keep you as a customer, the installer eats the replacement labor cost. With few exceptions, material warranties should cover reasonable replacement labor.

Finally, in a similar vein, make certain that those who install gear for you "own" the installation. 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 changed travel plans along with a cash outlay.

When we made the initial conference call to the folks who did the work–a highly respected vendor and specialist–to report on what had been found, the response was disconcerting at best. It essentially 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 for those in the marine industry goes like this: Ask yourself this question, if the customer was paying me a compliment on my fine work, would I accept it, would I "own" it? Of course the answer is yes and thus, industry professionals must treat failures the same way, they must embrace and own them until they are made right. As a boat owner, you should expect and insist upon this approach.

Ask Steve

BATTERY BANK SWITCH

Steve, I hope all is well with you. I have a question for you, and I would appreciate your guidance. I have a Shannon 38 that I bought new in 1986. It has the standard battery switch (off/both/emergency/single). I have some old articles where you suggest a separate starting battery with its own switch. I like that idea. I just purchased three new Gel-Tech batteries, and I would like a simple diagrammed arrangement, which is more up to date. I do not have any sophisticated electronics. I just want a simple set up that is reliable. Do you suggest getting rid of that switch? Is it possible to have individual switches for each battery? There are many heavy wires connecting the three old batteries in parallel. There is an old ProMariner charger from that era, and I wonder if it was doing its job on all the batteries. I ask that question because I had three Lifeline batteries, which did not survive very well. They would accept a charge and in two days the voltage in isolated batteries was 5–7 volts. I would be happy if I could have two new batteries working any small lights and simple things, and one for the engine. I will carefully look at all those cables and try to figure out where they are going. I only wish that my boat was close to your place–I believe that I could understand logical sequences if presented by you. I would be grateful for your help with any good instructions and diagrams. Many thanks.

Anthony Badalamenti
1986 Shannon 38
Greenport, New York

Anthony, you've posed a series of excellent and important questions. While there are many ways of arranging a vessel's battery banks, the one you've referred to, wherein a dedicated starting bank remains isolated from the house bank at all times other than when emergency paralleling is required, has served thousands of boats very well. I've sent you a diagram depicting this arrangement. Ultimately, this arrangement would leave you with three ON/OFF switches, one for the house bank, one for the start bank and one to parallel the two.

As far as the batteries you are using, if they are of the SVRLA variety, AGM or gel, in order for them to perform properly and last as long as possible, the charge source should be one that is specifically designed for their requirements. This includes the alternator regulator as well as the shorepower charger. If you used your stock charging system set up with the prematurely deceased Lifeline batteries, then the results weren't surprising.

If the alternator's regulator is not external, i.e., separate from the alternator, then it can't be adjusted to match the needs of these batteries. It, and likely the alternator, would need to be replaced with those that are specifically designed for this purpose. The same holds true for the shorepowered charger; if it does not have a gel setting (both it and the alternator regulator should also have temperature compensation probes that are attached to the batteries) then it, too, would need to be upgraded.

Finally, you should have a means of monitoring the house battery bank's state of charge. This requires an amp-hour meter, as opposed to an ordinary voltmeter. The amp-hour meter will provide you with a gas gauge of sorts for your battery bank, letting you know how full or empty it may be, and when it's time to recharge or cease charging.

For more information, visit www.passagemaker.com and search on these terms: battery bank upgrade, battery charger selection and battery charger installation. Additionally, visit www.stevedmarineconsulting.com/ezine/index.php?p=13, for my piece on Advanced DC Charging Systems.

—Steve D'Antonio

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Gear Products

> Lock and Load

Vibration is a fact of life on motor vessels. One of its most undesirable side effects, besides what it does to the crew, is damage to gear. That damage is often indirect and insidious and comes in the form of loosened nuts, bolts and other fasteners. Self-locking fasteners are one solution. Another involves the application of thread locking compounds, pastes or liquids to existing fasteners. Vibra-Stop is just such a product, and it has special attributes that make it especially attractive. Unlike some other thread locking compounds, Vibra-Stop never hardens. It maintains a flexible resiliency, which means fasteners can be adjusted or even disassembled and reassembled without the need for reapplication. Additionally, parts can be coated with Vibra-Stop and then stored indefinitely, pre-treated and ready to go. Available in a brush-on liquid (starting at $18) or an aerosol spray (starting at $25). Visit www.tectorius.com. *—Steve D'Antonio*

> Green Scream

Thanks to government regulations, the recreational boating world is moving away from copper-based bottom paints to water-based paints without copper, but there is another green alternative. The Sonihull antifouling system works by manipulating ultrasonic energy fields below a boat's waterline, which prevents algae. With nothing to snack on, barnacles and other growth stay away. More than 7,000 Sonihull devices—a control box and a transducer (or transducers) attached to the inside of a hull's outer skin—have been installed on boats ranging from small powerboats and sailboats to megayachts. PYI, which distributes the system, says Sonihull extends the intervals between haulouts and reduces the need for in-water cleaning. Sonihull Mono costs $2,195, while the Sonihull Duo (two transducers) goes for $2,995. Visit www.pyiinc.com. *—Peter Swanson*

> Genset Get-Home

Reasons for engine failure can range from defective components or deferred maintenance, to improper assembly or contaminated fuel sources. Regardless of the cause, when it does occur the alternatives are narrow indeed, especially to those who rely on single-screw systems. They must call for a tow or use another means of propulsion, usually a "get-home" engine. But many cruising vessels don't have the space for a get-home. ABT TRAC, long known for its ultra-rugged stabilizers, thrusters and integrated hydraulic systems, has recently introduced a get-home system that relies on hydraulic power. Using a PTO pump connected to your generator, the ABT TRAC hydraulic Get Home Drive rotates the vessel's existing shaft and propeller. Available in 25hp and 60hp units, suited for 2- to 3-inch and 3-to 4-inch shafts respectively, the product embodies impressive features, including a soft engagement system that prevents chatter and grinding, remote engagement, nine hydraulic motor choices and two different gear ratios to obtain maximum performance. Perhaps most impressive of all, the Get Home Drive can, once the generator is running, go from primary engine failure to get-home propulsion in five seconds or less. Pricing is determined case by case. Visit www.thrusters.com. *—Steve D'Antonio*