

NATCHEZ ON THE WATERFRONT

BOATING – THE BEST THERAPY FOR WHAT AILS YOU

We are going boating. “YEA!!!!!!” cry the kids, and smiles are aglow throughout the family.

Most people love to go boating. Many like to take others and many just like to go along for the ride.

There is nothing like going sailing on a bright sunny day with the wind in your hair, the aroma of the water everywhere and the sound of the boat's hull gliding through the waves. Likewise, going fishing and either catching a few hours of communing with nature and one's thoughts or landing a marlin or just a snapper or other fish makes one pause – as, for some of us, does going waterskiing on a body of water as calm as glass as the sun comes up and fills the horizon. These are just some of the experiences that boaters thrive on and which help refuel their interest in boating.

The marinas are the access point for these experiences and the successful marina operator is focused on insuring and enhancing the hospitality experience of boating. Boating takes on all sizes, shapes and approaches. Some love their small dinghies to sail or row. Others like jet skiing, while some appreciate larger boats and of course there is the mega and supper yacht boating experience.

The common thread is to *make it enjoyable* – not a hassle; to allow usage and fulfillment of desires without or at least minimizing hassles.

Marina operators cannot control the weather, although I dare say some may disagree. And they cannot keep things from breaking. Well, in point of fact, the more things break the more service that can be provided, which is a significant revenue stream. But no one longs for a boater to have trouble and suffer from breakdowns and hassles.

What can marinas do to help foster and encourage great boating experiences?

There are many ways depending upon the area and the nature of the geographic locale and type of boater. Encouraging the boater to make use of his boat is one way. This can take the form of more fully utilizing one's website if the facility has one – or even a good excuse to create one. Posting current weather conditions allows customers to get meaningful information. The more technically sophisticated marinas are going to live webcams or weather stations that provide real time weather conditions along with weather station forecasts. Some have decided to include the webcam as part of a marketing approach as well as security system, and one can rotate the camera showing views around the marina and allowing customers to actually see their boats.

Having a live, happy and helpful person at the end of telephone works wonders. How many of you hate voicemail? I do WITH A PASSION. There is nothing more infuriating than getting voicemail vs speaking to a live person. But if you have someone manning the phones, make sure that they can be helpful and provide information. Just answering the phones with no idea of what is going on is equally frustrating. For instance, in the launching and hauling period of seasonal facilities, it is surprising the number of phone answerers who have no idea of what has or is expected to happen. Usually there is a schedule sheet that tells when a boat is to be hauled or launched that day, as well as what actually happened over the past days. One would think that providing such basic information to the office

personnel that are answering the phones is a basic approach, but you would be surprised at the number of facilities that do not.

Have the phone person follow through on the calls and messages, even if it is to say that one still does not have an answer. At least the boater knows that someone cares about THAT BOATER. Boating is a personal business. The more that a facility can provide the personal touch, the more customer loyalty is built up, and the better the word of mouth reputation spreads.

When are boats most often used? Answer - on weekends and holidays. And when are the marina's mechanics, general manager and/or owner (particularly in the non mom and pop facilities) most often NOT around? On weekends and holidays. What is wrong with this picture? Many times there are small issues that arise - a dead battery, a loose wire, the need for a new spark plug, etc. A mechanic on duty at these times can make a boater's anticipation of joy and pleasure come true as opposed to the frustration of not realizing their expectations. While the boater may or may not directly blame the marina for not being available to solve such weekend problems, the fact is that the experience makes boating less enjoyable, which discourages use of the boat, the facility or both. And the discontent or frustration can often be taken out on the marina.

All too often many facilities tend to lose sight of trying to make the customer as happy as possible, even when things go wrong. The airline business is a classic example where many airlines have just forgotten about, do not care or can't be bothered to provide those extra touches of a pleasant smile, helpful voice and an approach to try to find a way to help. Some have actually realized that it is a service business, even though the selling of seats has turned into a commodity. One of the largest US airlines has suddenly woken up to it and is providing extra training for their sales personnel to "meet and greet" their customers with a friendly smile, helpful voice and a pleasant tone, particularly when things are not going right. They have even instructed the captain to keep the passengers informed when things are not going right. Wow - what a revelation!

Try walking into your marina in disguise and see what you find. Many times I have walked into an office and found the "office person" on personal business and ignoring those in the office, or is loudly chomping gum with as much interest in talking with you as a polar bear has to be on a tropical island.

These are a small sample of things to manage, but in the day to day hustle and bustle many times they are overlooked.

Another approach is to provide meaningful service. Let customers know when repairs have been completed or if things are running behind or ahead of schedule. For whatever the reason, touch base with the customer and let him or her know. Don't you hate it when you go to the doctor, you're kept waiting, you finally get to see him or her and you are told to call the office in a couple of days and you will be told the results of your tests. Wow! The doctor is really doing the patient a service!!! I find it annoying as all heck. Yet some marina facilities fall victim to the same approach. "Call me in a day or so and I will give you an update," doesn't win friends. Does it make enemies? Maybe, maybe not, but it just seems to harden a divide. And when the boat is returned from the service, MAKE SURE IT'S CLEAN. When you pick up your car from an auto service department these days there is a paper mat for the feet and the car usually has been cleaned at least in the area of either the work and/or the driver's seat (at higher quality centers increasingly the entire car has gotten a wash). Ever get into a boat and

find tracks from the mechanic working on the engine? Unfortunately we have witnessed this all too often.

And when undertaking the service, if one finds another problem, large or small, bring it to the owner's attention and ask if he wants it taken care of. More often than not he is appreciative that you are actually thinking about him and his boat - and it does not hurt the bottom line of the service department as well.

And what about customer appreciation day? Set aside a special day each season to honor your customers, bring them together for a free hotdog, some chips and a soda, or more. You would be surprised at how successful that is, and the customer can bring the whole family and make new friends with other customers, which then encourages more time boating and at the marina.

For transients and visitors – offer a concierge service. It can range from a dedicated employee to simply prepackaged material with destination points to just a helping hand and asking if you can help them with any needs, suggest some restaurants, places to shop, etc. In at least one transient marina I know of they offer a welcome bag filled with goodies including a list of restaurants, what movies are playing, places to shop, hike, etc. These are the types of things that help turn the marina into a home away from home and not just a place to park one's boat.

But most importantly, just having bright, helpful, eager to help and friendly staff walking the marina and being your ambassadors goes a long way to making boaters feel really welcome and sets a great aura for the marina – including the person that they come in contact with first, and the last person they approach when they leave . That warm friendly fuzzy feeling at the end of the day creates a lasting impression for the facility and goes a long way to making the boating experience the cure as opposed to the cause of the headache!

Happy boating!!

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