PARTING SHOT

Show Your Work, Not Your Business Card

by Mike Telleria

I've been working in the boating industry a long time and have interacted with many surveyors over the years, so I hate to admit I didn't know, until now, that there are literally no formal requirements for marine surveyors. The topic came up during a recent conversation between some of us engineers and owners of the boatbuilding company we work for. A surveyor had been hired to inspect one of our boats, which had been surveyed by someone else just months before. The new guy pulled information from the first surveyor's report, dropped it into his, and commented that what the *other* surveyor found months ago was proof we don't know what we're doing as boatbuilders—a total hatchet job.

"What is it with these surveyors?" one of the owners asked. "Don't they have to meet some minimum level of qualifications or code of ethics?"

We all looked around at each other with the same dopey I-really-don't-know expression on our faces. We all had assumptions, but not one of us knew for sure what is required (if anything) for people to call themselves marine surveyors.

First stop, Wikipedia:

Marine surveyors use many credentials, letters, and terms such as accredited, certified, qualified, ACMS, AMS, CMS, *etc. There are many ways to train to become a marine surveyor including taking correspondence courses, apprenticing, or simply opening a business.*

Well, there it was: "simply opening a business." Just to be sure, I double-checked. "There are no federal or state requirements to become a marine surveyor," says Joe Lobley, a longtime surveyor and the most recent past president of the Society of Accredited Marine Surveyors (SAMS). A business card, a phone, and a willing customer, and anyone can be on the way to a career as a professional marine surveyor.

Thankfully for all of us, there are organizations like the SAMS and NAMS (National Association of Marine Surveyors), both of which offer professional standards and a solid path toward genuine credibility for their member surveyors. But there are also what I'll call "less rigorous" outfits that are reportedly mail-order certification mills, making it very easy for anyone to quickly and cheaply become a "certified" marine surveyor.

The mixed, often negative, impression of the yacht surveying profession has inspired some who inspect boats and write reports, just like surveyors do, to differentiate themselves, calling themselves consultants. They deliberately choose not to align with SAMS or NAMS, lest they be branded a "surveyor." If you ask them, "Are you a surveyor?" they will say, "No. And I never will be!"

While it's hard to argue against the merits of SAMS or NAMS, a well-earned and carefully cultivated professional and personal reputation can flourish without such certification (without suggesting superiority to those who embrace it). Some of these consultants who avoid the "surveyor" label are very successful, flying business class around the globe, giving talks, inspecting boats, and advising and training boat owners. Not bad!

Although it may seem ridiculous that there are no statutory requirements for recreational marine surveying, it actually makes sense—it's not so different for boatbuilders. Aside from some basic legal requirements for small boats established and enforced by the U.S. Coast Guard, there are no statutory requirements for recreational boat builders in the United States. The entire recreational boat enterprise—including builders, surveyors, and many others—largely operates outside of a binding regulatory structure. We can pretty much do whatever we want. It reminds me of something one of the owners said during my interview for my present job: "Our philosophy here is pretty simple: Just do the right thing."

In the years since, I've learned that doing the right thing is a lot more complicated than it sounds. For a boatbuilder, it means keeping up with, and meeting, American Boat & Yacht Council's (ABYC) and other highly respected organizations' standards to make sure our boats are safe. It means putting egos aside and really listening to others—including surveyors and consultants—who can help raise the bar in terms of safety and quality. It means sometimes telling a buyer "no" because what he is asking for is outside our comfort zone or contrary to our personal or corporate best practices.

I've come to realize that surveyors are in the same boat as we are. We can follow ABYC to ensure safety; they can align with SAMS/NAMS to enhance competence. We can both make safe, smart decisions, even if they sometimes disappoint the clients who pay us. Ultimately our boats and our surveys should speak for themselves and for us. Our products are all we've got.

"It takes years to build a good reputation," Lobley says, "and only one bad survey to ruin it." It's the same for us. One lazy, incompetent effort that results in a lousy boat can tarnish an otherwise sterling reputation. But I like to look at it another way. To me, every boat is an opportunity to remind the world of what we can do—and I think it's great when a good surveyor with the same attitude comes along and helps us raise the bar even higher. PBB

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