

# Hands-on boater training called key to growth

Schools are doing their part, and some formerly reluctant dealers seem to be warming to the concept

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For the last several years the industry has been wrestling with the issue of how to increase boating participation. Through the Grow Boating Initiative, leaders created task forces to address water access, developed a dealer certification program and embarked on a marketing campaign.

However, some say not enough has been done to tackle another key factor in keeping existing boaters and attracting new people to the sport: hands-on training for boaters.

"I think there's definitely a need for hands-on education," said Capt. Russ Cohen, founder and president of Boatboy Marine Training in Moorestown, N.J.

Many states have laws for mandatory boater education, but Cohen and others say these classroom-based courses aren't enough.

"People think they can learn what they need from a book," said Tim Dowling, president and owner of the



Annapolis Powerboat School. "They find it is harder than that; they run into trouble, and they go boating less and end up selling the boat."

Capt. Rick Kilborn of Boatwise LLC in South Hampton, N.H., believes hands-on training "does a tremendous amount" for the confidence level and temperament of the entire family.

"It just changes the whole day on the water," he said. "People tend to stay in boating as opposed to giving it up for other activities."

Each of these schools provides training on the customer's boat to teach them the nuances of their individual craft: how the boat handles, anchoring, fueling, emergency scenarios, running aground, navigation and docking.

"Docking is a big one," Dowling said. "People have bad docking experiences. They do some damage to their boat, and they're afraid to go out again."

Cohen says he and his wife, Lois, and his cousin, Michael Friedrich, started Boatboy in 2001 after seeing the diffi-

**Newcomers to boating learn the fundamentals at Boatboy Marine Training in Moorestown, N.J.**

culties other boaters were having on the water and at the docks.

"We would constantly see people having issues — people screaming at the dock, husbands screaming at wives," he said.

None of that makes for an enjoyable experience on the water, he said.

Part of the problem, according to Dowling, is the lack of available time for people to perfect their boating skills.

"Twenty years ago, people seemed to lock in on one activity and that's what they did," he said. "Devoting a full weekend to learn a new activity like sailing wasn't as hard as it is today. Today, there are many activities and they spend less time with each one."

Kilborn, from Boatwise, said hands-on training can help reduce the learning curve.

"A good instructor can teach them more in two or three hours than they can learn in months on their own," he said.

Boating school operators say one of the biggest obstacles to hands-on training for boaters is the marine industry itself.

"Every ski slope has a school at the base of the mountain," said Boatboy's Cohen. "They put education at the forefront of the hobby. We [in the marine industry] don't promote it; we bury it."

"We've talked to many dealers to work out a combined effort," said Dowling. "We got a very cold response from the industry. The salesmen selling the product don't want the stigma that you need training to operate a boat."

Phil Keeter, president of the Marine Retailers Association of America, agreed.

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## TowBoatU.S. announces changes in Wisconsin, Maryland

TowBoatU.S. announced a new Wisconsin location and new owners for its Solomons, Md., location.

Capt. Jack Manley, a former Great Lakes Shipmaster, tug captain and Chicago policeman, opened TowBoatU.S. Kenosha, Wis., an on-the-water towing port that provides assistance to recreational boaters.

Located at Kenosha Harbor, this is the seventh TowBoatU.S. location owned by Manley. The other six ports are located in Chicago; Waterway, Ill.; Waukegan, Ill.; Michigan City, Mich.; New Buffalo, Mich.; and Hammond, Ind.

TowBoatU.S. Kenosha is equipped with two response vessels, a 21-foot Triumph and a 25-foot Steiger Craft. Onboard each is a full complement of towing and salvage equipment including extra fuel, engine fluids, pumps and battery "jump packs" to handle dead batteries.

Capt. Manley is a retired USCG Reserve officer and a member of Friends of the River, Friends of the Lakefront and has affiliations with several local yacht clubs.

Capt. Mike Shaw and his wife, Deirdre, are the new owners of TowBoatU.S. Solomons, Md., located at Harbor Island Marina. For the last six years, Mike Shaw was the company's hired captain before purchasing the business from former owner Jane French.

TowBoatU.S. Solomons is equipped with two response vessels — a 29-footer and 32-footer.

The Shaws have been Maryland residents since 1998, when Mike Shaw was running his own head boat.

"Most dealers have never been very good about offering hands-on training to customers," he said. "I think dealers were worried that it would make customers think boating is unsafe, or it would be a deterrent for them to buy."

But Keeter says more dealers are starting to catch on to the value of hands-on education for their customers.

"Since Grow Boating, the industry has recognized the need to change," he said. "Some dealers realize the need to offer training. They're more responsive now than they have been."

The sluggish economy has contributed to this change in attitude, according to Kilborn.

"Six or seven years ago, the industry was flush," he says. "People have to fight for new customers now. They put high value on every single customer they have."

"There are a few quality dealers that are taking the initiative to make training part of boat buying," Dowling said.

Among those is Clark's Landing Boat Sales of Chester, Md. The dealership formed a partnership with Annapolis Powerboat School last fall. Customers who purchase a new boat (30 feet and larger) can receive a full-day "Cruise with Confidence" course from Annapolis Powerboat. The course provides personalized and individual instruction aboard the customer's boat, focusing on close-quarter handling and docking.

"We are confident that this course will help new boat owners fully experience the many joys of the boating lifestyle," said Paul Lash, assistant manager of Clark's Landing.

The dealership was already offering its own "Captain's Orientation" program before it teamed up with Annapolis Powerboat School. This is a basic hands-on instruction, given at the time of delivery, and covers systems, safety and how to operate the boat.

However, basic instruction may not be enough, especially for first-time boaters. Lash said the "Cruising with Confidence" course through Annapolis Powerboat takes the dealership's orientation to the next level.

"We're trying to making boating, particularly in a small cruiser, available to first-time buyers," he said. "Anyone with a little bit of instruction can operate a twin-engine powerboat."

"It's all about customer retention," Lash added. "I don't want to sell them one boat. I want to sell them every boat they ever buy. That means their initial experience and every experience has to be good."

Lash said the hands-on program is good for his business, good for safety on the water and good for the health of the marine industry.

"I feel the industry should be moving in a more positive direction as far as training goes," he says.

Cohen, from Boatboy Marine, also believes dealers and marinas should do more.

"I'm not advocating mandatory hands-on education; I think that could be a detriment to the industry," he said.

"I'm advocating and pleading for the marine industry to recognize how important hands-on education is to the industry's success."

"Every marina, dealer or broker must offer some form of hands-on education to their customer," Cohen said. "They should pay for the education, supplement it or at least offer it from a licensed, reputable company with a real curriculum for a fee to their customers, so they have an opportunity to actually learn hands-on on their own boat, in their own waterway and at their own dock how to safely operate their expensive new purchase."

Boatwise's Kilborn says this is espe-

cially important because a lot of people with money to spend are buying larger yachts as their first boat. They're driving 40- or 50-foot yachts without the benefit of first mastering some basic skills on a more manageable, entry-level boat.

There's no argument from Keeter. Hands-on boater education will only help the industry, he said.

"It's a right thing and it's a necessary thing and I think it makes our customers stay with us longer," Keeter said. "I think it makes them enjoy the boating experience more."

"If you don't get people on the water, then they're going to do something else, and that's going to hurt the

whole industry," said Annapolis Powerboat's Dowling. "If they keep boating, eventually it becomes a lifestyle."

And, said Keeter, "You're going to sell more stuff for the boat — flares, new life jackets — without the hard sell."

The MRAA president says dealers selling boats 25 feet and up are doing a better job of incorporating hands-on training into the boat-buying experience, but he said those selling smaller boats could do better.

Keeter said trade associations can help by constantly reinforcing the benefits of hands-on training.

"I don't see any downside to this," he added.

