

Boat repair: do-it-yourself versus professional help

When it comes to boating repairs, industry experts say the rule of thumb comes down to one simple phrase — “common sense.”

“For the most part, it seems to be fairly obvious when it’s something you can take care of yourself and when it’s something you need to let a professional handle,” said Paul Leman, sales manager at Long Lake Marine in Traverse City.

“What I tell customers is that their primary responsibility lies in taking care of the basic maintenance of their boat, and if they keep up with that, then they can most likely enjoy a hassle-free experience,” he continued. “Just like with a car, prevention and attending to

the scheduled care can take you a long way.”

Leman says that one of the primary areas of care is in keeping your boat clean. Because a boat is constantly in water and being doused with spray and exposed to algae, its fiberglass finish will oxidize if not properly cared for. Having a professional do the work can cost \$20 a foot or more, but if proper care is taken to wash down a boat after use — or at least wipe it down with clean toweling — and a job is given to the boat once a season, that can be avoided. There are also numerous specialty marine cleaners available for extra assistance.

If you can, or know how to change the oil in or do a lube job for your car, you can usu-

ally do the same for a boat, provided you have a proper place to dispose of the oil when you are finished.

Leman adds that the replacement of starters and alternators may also fall into the category of repairs boaters can do by themselves.

“The bottom line is that the boating season here is short, so most boaters choose to let the repair work fall to those who do it for a living,” said Leman. “There are a number of things you can do, from scheduled maintenance to winterization, that can save a few dollars and that people genuinely enjoy doing, but the basic piece of advice is that if it involves any kind of major diagnosis or work, take the boat in and let the pros do it. Your safety is always

worth a few extra dollars.”

Price is not always the sole consideration when it comes to doing repairs. Motors and engine systems have become increasingly tied to computers, and tinkering with a boat’s fuel-injected engine has become a lot more complicated than in the past.

According to Steve Bajtka of Onekema Marine, “Many people have a good sense of what they can and cannot do for boat repairs, and it’s fairly easy to get expert help from authorized service dealers. How many hours a season you’re out with your boat often determines your needs beyond the basic maintenance and prevention jobs that can usually be done by the boat owner.”

Rick Allen of Grand Bay Marine in Traverse City also notes that computerization has had an impact on owners working on a boat’s more sensitive operational parts, but that most boats are now being designed and built so that their owners can have relative ease in doing small repairs such as checking oil

and fuel levels and changing spark plugs. Easy access to do these things, as well as to get at the engine, has assisted with this, as do features such as snap-off carpeting, which may often cover an engine compartment.

Like Leman, Allen believes strongly in encouraging boaters not to waste time when they detect a problem out of the ordinary with their boat.

“When you’re out on the water with your boat, you really don’t have the ability to get towed in like you would with a car if something goes wrong,” said Allen. “In most cases, you’re going to be fairly isolated and probably have your family with you, and getting help can be a lot more complicated. That’s why it’s wise to get problems checked out when they first start. In most cases, you can get them taken care of and then you can get back out with your boat.”

“You make a substantial investment in your boat, so

See **REPAIR**, Page 11 ▶



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