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September 27, 2021

By Wanda Kenton Smith

Some might say it was fate that brought service expert Valerie Ziebron to carve out a career in the boating business nearly 20 years ago.



Valerie had just finished teaching an automotive workshop as a service and parts trainer for her client Chrysler when a boating industry outsider stopped by and said he and his crew had been listening and watching from the back of the room. They felt the boating business could really benefit from her training experience and expertise.

Intrigued, Valerie popped into marine dealerships over the next few months to gauge the similarities and differences from automotive. She tested the waters, did a little training, and liking what she saw, totally switched gears and throttled forward, never to return to her automotive roots.

Today, Valerie is touted as one of the marine industry's top service training consultants. Self-employed for over 30 years, she has built a blue-chip roster including former clients and automotive leaders Chrysler and GM, along with an impressive array of engine and boat manufacturers, countless retailers, 20 Groups, trade associations and even an occasional accessory company, along with a smattering of RV clients.

In addition to consulting, she provides boat show support and is an in-demand keynote presenter at leading national trade conferences.

Boating Industry: What do you consider your major professional achievements in the marine industry over the past 20 years?

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Valerie Ziebron: When I hear from past workshop participants who share success stories, I thank God for putting me in the position to share "Golden Nugget Best Practices" that help people have more fun, enjoy better profitability, and create happier customers in their dealerships.

BI: How do you stay abreast of new developments?

VZ: I'm a pretty curious person which tends to serve my work well. The beautiful part of facilitating a workshop is I get to hear from front line dealership workers on what's working for them. Oftentimes, I'll hear about a new app or technology from a participant and then I'll reach out to the company for a demo. I enjoy connecting people with solutions and vice versa.

BI: What important lessons have you been taught firsthand from boat retailers or other industry stakeholders?

VZ: 1. Take care of your people and treat them the way you want them to treat your customers.

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BI: If you had only five top recommendations to share with a boat retailer about how to improve the service business, what would that include?

- VZ:** 1. Clarify your shop's organizational chart and job descriptions and follow that chain of command.
2. Use your open RO list daily to schedule and communicate
 3. Pre-pull parts and stage work for tomorrow every day without fail.
 4. Constantly improve your processes.
 5. Use a texting app.

BI: What's the biggest mistake most boat retailers make in the service department?

VZ: Many underestimate the importance of the service writer. The advisor will spend more time with your customers than anyone else. Do you want your shop to be profitable? Do you want to attract – and keep – excellent techs? Do you want loyalty from your customers? Do you want sales leads and quality trade-ins from service? Those things – and more – are all on the shoulders of the people you choose for the service writer role. This position requires support, training, and compensation.

BI: What's the major short-and-long term challenges facing boat dealers today in their service department?

VZ: Short term, we have a steep increase in service work with people boating more than ever, new boat inventory coming in with quality control issues requiring far more warranty, and parts shortages due to supply chain issues, along with workforce shortages.

Long term, the workforce shortage is our biggest challenge – especially with techs. Every dealership should be actively involved in growing our next generation of technicians. Get involved with your local schools, offer job shadowing and apprenticeships. You must grow your techs for tomorrow.

Unfortunately, not enough of us in the industry are doing enough now to ensure we have young people ready as our current skilled techs age out and retire. Don't let the wisdom of these career marine technicians go out the door when they wheel their tools out for the final time!

BI: How can service departments thrive and survive in a period of supply chain shortages and other challenges?

VZ: Focus on the things within your control ... and the number one thing within your control is communication. Customers might not be happy with what you have to tell them but waiting for them to repeatedly reach out to you only gives them a person/place to direct their anger. Make sure they know what you are doing (and facing) on their behalf, even if it's bad news.

RECT (Repair Event Cycle Time) has gotten out of control for a lot of stores. It's more important than ever to focus on what you can do with the boats you can do it with. This includes prioritizing quick service, performing diagnostic/parts ordering ASAP and leaning on texting. It also means we must keep a pulse on our stress levels and not allow our teams to get overwhelmed.

Give everyone an extra dose of empathy and grace; both team members and customers.

BI: What best practices have emerged from the pandemic among service departments?

VZ: It's forced dealerships to lean on technology more than before. Texting apps are a game-changer, but a lot of shops are still underutilizing them. The shops that are embracing texting to its fullest can do so much more with less staff. But that means fully embracing it: sending communications, photos and videos, getting approval, and getting invoices paid and boats picked up, all with the app. You won't get 100% of your customers to use it but you'll get a lot, and many of them will be much happier.

Same thing with parts. Getting a parts order or even ship store purchases picked and paid without having to physically see a parts person face-to-face is incredible.

The more we can do to make boating more convenient, the more people will stay in boating AND the more money we will make. Some of the 'touchless' practices that were born of the pandemic will likely stick around.

BI: With employment, recruitment and retention a major issue, how can dealers attract and retain top talent in the service department?

VZ: Don't be a revolving door; be the kind of shop that a tech can be happy at for life. Most of the best techs are not looking for a buck more an hour; they want a shop that has its act together, that doesn't have drama, that gives them what they need. They want a shop with clear direction where they can do an honest day's work with the information and the parts they need, enough time and support and where they are not getting pulled off a job "for one minute" to help some other department or person. If you are that type of shop, your techs will stick around, and others will want to join them.

The job of marine technician is hard enough without all the other frustrations. One of the techs I interviewed recently put it this way: "I'm a technician, not a mind reader or a magician."

BI: A few final questions on the personal side. Tell us about your family and favorite pastimes.

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BI: Any favorite sayings?

VZ: "The Earth was made round so we don't see too far down the road." Also, "This too shall pass," and, "The only people who like change are wet babies!"

BI: Who's your professional mentor who helped shape and/or positively influenced your career in the marine industry?

VZ: Without professional trainer and facilitator Jim Million I would never have become a trainer/facilitator or consultant. Jim is one of the most talented and humble individuals I've ever known. I'll never forget the advice he gave me decades ago, and I still remind myself of his sage words whenever I'm about to speak to a group...

"The most important thing for you to do is to love your audience."

When he gave me that advice, it wasn't what I was hoping for, but it's proved its value time and again. Everything else falls into place when you love your audience or the people you work with. You'll put in the extra effort. You'll be prepared. You'll listen and care. It all works out if you love them first and foremost.

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