

Peter Granata

President, Granata Design

Peter Granata was a self-proclaimed “water baby” whose earliest youth activities in the Chicago area involved swimming on local park teams, playing on rowboats during family vacations to Wisconsin and spending time on Lake Michigan. In his later teens, that ‘water gene’ eventually enticed him to visit Smith Marine in Berwin, Ill. where he and a buddy pooled funds to jointly purchase a 15-foot boat with 50hp Merc engine.



By Wanda Kenton Smith

While the love of the water was always a driver, Granata’s first business venture after attending the University of Illinois at Champaign/Urbana and the Chicago campus involved the development of a design patent in the automotive industry for a power-operated seat device. Despite best efforts, the timing was pre-mature and he lost every dime of his investment. He quickly shifted into survival mode, opening a candle retail store that eventually grew into a six-store enterprise.

During that period, he revisited Smith Marine and bought a second boat, establishing a friendship with owner Bob Smith whose high-volume dealership was quickly expanding. No doubt, Smith saw promise in the young entrepreneur and suggested he consider boat sales. Granata considered the unique opportunity to mix his passion for boating with a meaningful career and eagerly took the plunge. He found himself surrounded by a great team of veteran sales professionals, all of whom took him under their collective wing and taught him the ropes. Granata took to sales like a duck to water; in his second year, he was named top salesperson for the Cruisers Inc. brand.

During his 4.5-year tenure at Smith Marine, the dealership acquired Classic Boats, a manufacturing business owned by a family member. Granata was enamored with manufacturing and design and convinced the ownership to allow him to work both sides of the business. He clocked in

from 9 am to noon at the retail store, dove in deep at the manufacturing plant until 5, and returned to the dealership to finish the evening shift.

Based on keen observations and lengthy conversations with boaters, Granata had a vision to pursue new boat design. With the encouragement of Smith, he doggedly pursued his dream and it paid off. His original design, the Classic 210, made its debut at IMTEC in September 1973 as a new 1974 model. A 21’ cuddy cabin, it featured a bunk, marine head, sink and ice box in the cabin, along with two innovative sleeper seats, plus a motor box with two flanking jump seats. Demand skyrocketed as dealers purchased and sold out the first year’s production. Granata’s design kept the plant busy for several years.

That heady experience proved a watershed moment that opened the door to launching PCG Design, which later evolved into Granata Design. While he always had a natural affinity for design that began in automotive, he learned the marine trade working in the trenches alongside dozens of leading boat manufacturers. Over the past 50+ years, his creative concepts and accolades have been significant, including 10 patents: the first in 1966 through the most recent in 2019. He’s won scores of top honors for clients including a Zenith Award for Four Winns; Boat of the Year for Mastercraft; and multiple Boat of the Year recognitions for Cobalt, among others. Boating Magazine has spotlighted top recreational marine designers over the years, citing Granata as among the industry’s foremost ‘movers and shakers’ and ‘game-changers.’

Despite his belief that Covid has driven a backlog of orders causing design to presently take a backseat to production and order fulfillment, Granata continues to throttle forward and push new boating concepts alongside colleague, designer and illustrator Phil Stark. As has been his goal since Day 1, Granata continues to unapologetically focus on “giving the guy in the boat what he wants from his day on the water.”



For 50+ years, Peter Granata has remained at the helm of new boat concepts and design.

Boating Industry (BI): What’s your design strategy?

Peter Granata (PG): My design strategy isn’t to focus on the manufacturer. I focus on what’s best for his or her clients and that takes care of the manufacturer. It’s a concentrated strategy that technology teams, engineering departments or even marketing whiz kids can’t reproduce. It’s always been to create designs that sell more boats with those consumers bragging about their purchase. Sales producing product design. Aspirational design is key: what are the customer’s aspirations?

BI: Based on your experience, what is the genesis for new ideas, design concepts and technological innovation within the recreational marine segment ... who and what drives it?

PG: Consumer trends drive it, many of which are found in the automotive industry. Lately, the design innovation seems to be focused on the design of electric vehicles. The problem is the automotive design efforts are only proclaiming a design identifying the “magical” electric vehicle, instead of developing designs relatable to the consumer. In other words, it’s about the car, not the client.

Recently, I read of a boating design team’s mantra to make every boat look like a Ferrari. Consumers in our industry have specific aspirations; not all want a Ferrari.

BI: Your design focus has addressed anything above the waterline that can be seen and touched by the boating consumer. In those areas, what have been perhaps the most important product and design development(s) of your career?

PG: Forward-facing bow seats; flip-lip captain's chair; custom steering wheels; wrapped dashboards; custom instrumentation; pickle fork hull appearance; reverse transom and sheer lines; and above all, concept boats.

BI: What is your strategy for continued success?

PG: I study and read everything about the automotive industry, because they lead the boating industry in styling and strategy. I stay in touch with the brilliant auto designers and continue to monitor the marketing efforts in that field.

What innovative design can do is make the automotive industry start watching the boating industry for a change.

BI: Who's your design mentor?

PG: I watch the well-known automotive designers and how they created and/or responded to market changes. Jack Telnack, head of Ford Motor Company, stands out. He created a revolutionary design in the first Ford Taurus AND worked on Trojan Yachts. He obviously enjoys "out of the box" design ideas and loved boats.

BI: Any mentors within the marine industry who helped you along your business development and career path?

PG: So many! Roy Thompson. Terry Bogart and Bill Ek, Cruisers; Bob Smith, Classic Boats; Pack St. Clair, Cobalt; Leon Slikkers, Tiara; Earl Bentz, Caymas; Eddy Smith and Kris Carroll, Grady-White; Bob Long, Wellcraft; Jeff Napier, NMMA; Jim Hoag, Bayliner; Dick Eich, Larson; Bob Steinway, Bayliner; Paul and Duane Kuck, Regal; Victor Porter, Thunderbird; Dick Genth, Chris Craft; Peter Stamas, Stamas; John Dorton, Mastercraft; and Dan Bramhall, Cobalt.

BI: As you consider your boating industry career, what are the biggest challenges you've faced?

PG: It's an ongoing challenge. Most product de-

velopment strategies, both in and out of boating, combine design with engineering. Few realize that the engineering department is a challenging fit with the design department. Design is about the client. Engineering is about the company. Nuts. Bolts. Costs. Numbers. Engineering determines how a boat stays afloat on the water. Engineering determines if the company can afford to make a boat. Design looks at the customer, the way the boats is used, who his family is, and above all what he wants to feel when he's at the helm. What does the boat say about him and who he wants to be seen as?

BI: What advice or words of wisdom can you share with the industry about the importance of ongoing R & D and investment when it comes to new product design?

PG: Maintaining an ongoing effort to develop concepts is vitally important to a company's future. An executive in the boating industry is not unlike many other executives in the world. One must deal with the "today" company and plan for the "tomorrow" company at the same time. Ignoring a continuing design effort places you in a reactive position to your competition, and relegates your company to a sub-standard ideal. In other words, with no advance planning you're relying on poor planning.

Design is like stocking a store shelf. When it's time to grab something new, you'd better have the shelves stocked with innovative ideas.

BI: What's ahead? What do you see on the short and long-term horizon when it comes to new product design and development with the recreational boating niche?

PG: I'm dismayed at the lack of elegance in much of today's product. In the short term, it appears that the inclusion of technology remains at the forefront of the buying decision process. Long term, I believe that the consumer will eventually treat technology applications as an expectation rather than a "WOW" factor. When that occurs, we will see a move back to personal taste.

BI: Besides your primary role at Granata Design, what other marine initiatives have you been involved in over the years?

PG: Probably my favorite involvement was president of the Marine Design Resource Alliance

from 1997 through 2008. It was 501(c)3 organization that partnered with leading boat manufacturers to award scholarships to design students. Its goal was to foster future designers with forward thinking innovations that would make sure the boating industry didn't get left out. 2009 took its toll and the MDRA was disbanded. I still think it should be re-imagined and resurrected because the boating industry needs innovation.

BI: Speaking of young designers, what's your advice to those seeking to launch a career in the boating industry?

PG: Understand that when a company hires you, you will be attached to "engineering" – companies always fall prey to the idea that it's 'design and engineering,' and 'sales and marketing.' Successful design knows no such boundary. Take your lead from marketing; learn as much as you can from engineering, but never take your eye off customers' aspirations.

In the end, a successful designer is someone who has satisfied the sales department. Your primary job is not "saving the company money;" your job is to ensure that the company has the best opportunity to make money.

BI: Besides your boating industry career, you also dabble in residential design?

PG: Design, the way I approach it with an aspirational focus, translates to almost any usage. How will the product be used and how will the owner want to be seen?

Doing homes has been a hobby for many years and I got so many requests to help someone building a home or remodeling, that I put a shingle out. I've done almost 20 different projects in the form of condos and residences in Telluride, Chicago, and Hilton Head Island. I work with architects the same way I work with engineers in the boating industry.

BI: Do you presently own a boat?

PG: No, I'm shopping!

BI: Outside of the work environment, what do you do for fun?

PG: Bike and eat cookies.

BI: Mantra or words you live by?

PG: Keep a smile! ●