



Editors Pick:



Marine Connection, Inc. #14

I don't live in Florida, but if I did, I'd like to be a Marine Connection customer.

Don't get me wrong, I'd be honored to be any Top 100 Dealer's customer. As a Top 100 evaluator, that's important. Part of the evaluation process involves us putting ourselves in the shoes of the applicants' customers and evaluating that experience. But there's something about Marine Connection's approach to taking care of its customers that makes me believe I'd feel particularly at home there.

The West Palm Beach, Fla.-based dealer offers small boat buyers a level of customer service that rivals many of the industry's top dealers. I love the idea of the Live Chat function on their Web site, which allows boat shoppers and customers to communicate back and forth with the dealership online in real time. I'm wowed by their quality assurance program, through which new and serviced boats are given three full systems checks before being turned over to the customer. And I can almost feel the confidence it would offer me, as a new boat owner, to be given the operations manager's cell phone number as a round-the-clock contact.

The dealership delivers this incredible customer experience profitably and professionally. Its executives understand the importance of having processes and procedures in place to deliver a consistently positive customer experience – but they also know real satisfaction doesn't stop there.

"Our most unique customer service initiative has to be our willingness to break our own rules," says owner Mark Lassila. "As our business becomes bigger, inevitably that comes with more rules, guidelines, policies and procedures. But we have never let those get in the way of taking care of the customer. Rules are necessary, but not ... at the expense of the customer."

Lassila actually discovered how to turn a profit in the boating business in his early teens, selling used aluminum boats through the newspaper. He incorporated Marine Connection soon after graduating from high school and took the company international before he turned 20.

The dealership's roots are in the used boat export business, and that experience has served it well. Like a growing number of Top 100 Dealers, Marine Connection offers a certified pre-owned boat program. Its program features a 100-point inspection, a 90-day warranty, a free first scheduled service and a Very Important Boater membership. In addition, the company

keeps an eye out for vessels on its trade-in waiting list and sells pre-owned units through its eBay store.

But that's not the main reason its former business has created such a strong foundation for the company today. Lassila explains that in the export business, you sell most of your units through a short list of buyers, which requires gaining their trust and keeping it by delivering satisfaction.

"Our customers trusted that even though most were buying boats sight unseen, our descriptions were honest and complete, the boats would ship on time, and there were no surprises," he says. "Even when it wasn't easy or convenient for us, we made sure our customers always had that trust. And as the markets and economies changed, we kept learning new ways to keep up that trust."

As Marine Connection celebrates its 20th anniversary this year, it's clear the company has continuously grown and developed over its history. In the past three years alone, the company and its Top 100 ranking have improved by leaps and bounds. In its first year, the dealership placed 49th, last year it jumped six spots to 43rd and in its third year – one in which Marine Connection's local marine market of West Palm Beach, Fla. was hit incredibly hard – the company has leapfrogged 29 spots to No. 14.

If you could read Marine Connection's application, that wouldn't be a surprise. With more than 20-percent revenue growth and 14 concrete improvements in 2006 – six of which represented industry innovations – five detailed and aggressive short-term goals and three specific long-term goals, the dealership has boldly carved a path for itself, one that won't be easy to travel.

While Lassila notes in his application that "it seems like getting to our 30th anniversary is going to be a lot tougher" than its 20th, I'm confident they'll get there the same way with the same commitment to their customer and to the goal of always getting better.

"Above all, that is what has set us apart for 20 years: our ability as a company to never stop learning, and to never be satisfied with the status quo," concluded Lassila.

To me, that's what being a Top 100 Dealer is all about. ♪

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