

The Irish Boat Shop

At this dealership, marina and boatyard, employee education is the company culture!

By Mike New, ABYC Education Director



At the top of the state map of Michigan, not all the way up to the Upper Peninsula, but up near the tip of the ring finger of the Michigan mitten, you will find one of the finest boat dealers, marinas and boatyards in the country. Harbor Springs and Charlevoix, Mich., are home to The Irish Boat Shop. Both locations of Irish serve the marine needs of Lake Michigan and Lake Huron. While the boating season may be short, these folks love their boats and the boating lifestyle more than most people would believe. This area sports some of the most active and most beautiful boats in the country.

To give you a snapshot of Irish, I will give you all the numbers that best describe a marine business, but that will only tell you a small part of the story. To truly appreciate Irish, you would have to look closely at the folks who work there.

The Irish Boat Shop has provided service for recreational boaters in Harbor Springs since 1961 and in Charlevoix since 1971. With modern facilities in both communities, few other operations on the Great Lakes offer such a



Kirk Wilson, ABYC Master Technician.

range of available services and wealth of experience. At each location, sales, chandlery, dockage, storage and complete service are integrated to assist and assure their customers' enjoyment of the boating lifestyle.

Irish employs 45 full-time, year-round employees and expands to about 65 employees during the "busy season." Between the two locations, Irish stores about 850 boats, has 320 slips and services many transient and non-storage customers. As an example, in 2006 Irish completed more than 7,500 work orders in the two service departments. Irish Boat Shop total sales are about \$10 million annually.

Irish is a Sea Ray and Boston Whaler Master Dealer, Mercury Platinum Dealer, Yanmar Large and Small Engine Dealer, Great Lakes Hinckley Authorized Service Center and a cer-

tified Michigan Clean Marina. Irish also sells and services J/Boats, Vanguard Sailboats, Zodiac Inflatable and Yamaha Outboards. They are certified to sell and service Simrad, B&G and Raymarine electronics and a host of other systems.

Dave Irish founded the boat yard in 1961. Dave has built something at Irish that is more than pilings and piers. He has constructed a company culture of excellence that is built around the idea of valuing and enabling employees to be the best they can be and to do the best job that can be done. Dave believes in education and puts his money behind his beliefs.

Irish Boat Shop values education and has always believed in the necessity of educating employees so that they might do a better job serving their customers. Education in



Irish Boat Shop employee Don Hicks is one of three ABYC Master Technicians.

the marine industry can take several forms. To achieve the dealer status that Irish has with the brands it represents, it is required to have technicians attend the factory schools. That is the extent that many dealers go with education, but it is only the beginning at Irish. At least 13 technicians at the Irish Boat Shops have taken an ABYC class. These classes range from introductory “Basic Engines” to advanced “Electrical Certification.” There are eight ABYC certified technicians on the Irish staff – two of the eight have two certifications and Bill Brecheisen, Kirk Wilson and Don Hicks are all ABYC master technicians with three certifications. Five technicians at Irish have achieved an electrical certification. When a technician at Irish repairs an ignition system, installs a chart plotter or works with an inverter, you can trust that the job will be done right every time and your boat is ready to enjoy safely.

Michael Esposito is president of Irish Boat Shop and is responsible for both yards. We had a chance to talk, and Michael told me about the challenges they face repairing, maintaining and delivering modern boats. Michael believes “an educated and

trained staff is essential in all aspects of our business. This is most evident with the service department disciplines of mechanical, electrical, electronics, painting and FRP repair. Technology continues to change at an amazing pace. A good mechanical technician used to be able to work from experience to diagnose and repair engines, but now they need a laptop for most engines. We pride ourselves at being able to properly service almost anything that comes our way but, in order to maintain that level of service, we also need to maintain a high level of training.”

“The three technicians who have obtained the ABYC Master Certification are long-term employees and consistently have very high billable hours. This is because it takes a dedicated work ethic to strive for certification. Coupled with a high level of skill and knowledge, these employees spend less time scratching their heads. They can take on a wide variety of jobs and still have very small call-back rates.”

The technicians obviously benefit from this education. A question every marine service manager in the country will now ask is, “how much does the company benefit from this training?”

This is an important question and a very valid concern. Many marine dealers are, in fact, small, locally owned businesses that must show a profit on a regular basis in order to make every payroll and pay every bill. The “bottom line” and “cash flow” are the kings and end up the major concerns almost every day. It is hard for these folks to see the larger picture and realize education pays.

In order to demonstrate how deeply Irish believes “education pays,” I had to dig a little deeper. The following benefits are excerpted from the Education and Training section of the Irish Employee Handbook.

“Irish Boat Shop actively encourages continuing your education.”

“When the company sends an employee to an out-of-town course or seminar it will include an education per diem payment, an arrangement for transportation and for reimbursement of reasonable and necessary expenses.”

“When salaried employees attend seminars, courses, or boat shows, their salary is continued, and expenses are reimbursed.”

“The Company will grant full reimbursement to all full-time employees for tuition, lab fees and book expenses for job related courses.”

Michael Esposito explained that they treat this policy with a very liberal attitude; in fact, they have recently put one of their bookkeepers through a full bachelor’s degree program and another through an associate’s degree program.

Irish invests a lot of time and money into training and educating their employees. Michael concluded by telling me, “Yes, education costs money, there is no doubt about that and there is always the ‘I’ll train them and they will go work for someone else’ risk, however, I believe it is really impossible to argue against continuous

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training. If you don't have trained, skilled employees, what you have instead are untrained and unskilled employees!"

The demands for qualified and trained technicians will become even greater in the future. Mike explained to me that the ever-changing technology in marine engines makes keeping qualified technicians a challenge. The new Verado outboard from Mercury is an example. Even though Irish is a Boston Whaler Master Dealer and a Mercury Platinum dealer, in addition to all the existing training requirements, Irish had to send two technicians to Verado School and purchase two laptops with software before they were allowed to receive Boston Whaler product with the Verado engines. There is another side to this, however, that will benefit Irish in the long run. When Irish sends a previously trained technician to the Verado School, they are prepared to do very well and learn a lot. That gives Irish a huge step up on other dealers who have not made the commitment to training. They will not get that product line and will not be competent to service it in the future.

Certainly Fly-by Wire electronic controls, EPA exhaust emissions legislation and EPA evaporative emissions legislation will only make engines increasingly complicated in the future. The boats being built today and in the future will require a highly trained technician to service them. Small shops that deny this reality will not have the ability to do the job in the future that they have done in the past. If marine businesses do not make the commitment to pay for the training and education of their technicians, the work will migrate to those shops that do.

The Irish Boat Shop is doing good business in a remote boating area with a limited boating season. They employ 45 to 65 people and spend a lot of time and money to train and educate that work force. They are able to perform almost every marine job they are presented, they are able to charge a good rate for their time and their customers are happy with the results. They prove it by growing the business every year. Dave Irish and Michael Esposito understand the need to present the boat owner with a trained marine professional at every point of customer interaction and that customer will respond with increased business, loyalty and referrals.

ABYC is proud to have Irish as a member and to have had the opportunity to work with them over the years. We learn from them as much as their technicians learn from our faculty. Irish Boat Shop is one of the marine businesses who are "doing it right." Their leadership is an inspiration to the marine industry. Irish will be ready for any boat that ships to their yard or cruises to their dock. I doubt there are many dealers who can make that claim. Can you? ■