

The Broker/Crew Relationship

by Trish Cronan, from OnboardOnline.com

For as long as yacht charters have been cruising the oceans, the broker/crew relationship has been, on a good day, making those involved swoon with delight and, on a bad day, making them want to jump overboard and swim as fast as they can toward another profession. Recently, I wrote to a crew, "I want to clone you. I wish every charter crew was like you." I'm sure that many a crew has shouted out a similar statement like, "If only all charter brokers could be like you."

As charter brokers, we are only as good as the crews we book. Even if we have given 150 per cent in service, an unhappy charter guest reflects poorly on our service and expertise. So we all want to work with crews that make us look good and enhance our professionalism. I asked my CYBA (Charter Yacht Brokers Association International) colleagues what qualities in a crew create a well-greased team where both the broker and the crew are satisfied.

No surprise – communication tops the list. "I would clone any crew who lets a broker know the guests are safely on board (just a quick email will do), sends a mid-week update if possible, and sends a follow-up email saying how they think the charter went," says Sherry Yates of Yates Yachts.

June Montagne of Yachtzoo expands on this: "An email summary of details of all the guests on board – likes, dislikes, time spent onshore, drinking habits, etc." is very helpful. If the crew leaves the industry and the guests charter again, this is invaluable information for the broker to pass along to the next crew.

Keeping the broker in the loop wins a broker's allegiance. Kathy Mullen of Regency Yacht Vacations reinforces this: "My favourite crew always copied me on the emails they sent the client so I knew what the plan was and if there had been any adjustments in meeting point. Then when the clients arrived they usually did a quick, 'We're off the dock' photo and emailed it to let me know all was well. That sort of teamwork makes me relax and feel comfortable that the crew would let me know if something is a problem."

Informing a broker about changes and problems is key. If the yacht needs to remain in a port for two days because of mechanical issues, the broker wants to hear this directly from the captain. Recently, a charter client reprimanded me for not telling him that the chef had changed. I was embarrassed to say that this was news to me as well. No broker likes to learn about changes from the client instead of the captain.

Nothing rankles a broker more than a crew questioning the guest about the gratuity or discussing and hinting about the gratuity during the charter. Every good charter broker informs the client about gratuity at the time of booking and probably mentions it at least three more times in emails.

Emily Mack of VI Sailing suggests that crews use their charter broker as a resource when they are dissatisfied with the gratuity. She believes that expressing disappointment directly with the client could drive the client away. The broker can delicately inquire if the service met their expectations. Bottomline, though, is that sometimes the gratuity does not match the service – some clients are just better tippers than others.

Last year, I had a charter on a large sailing yacht, and three months later I was talking with the

captain and asked if she'd heard from the guests. It was only then that she mentioned that she had just received the gratuity. I was stunned that she had never said a word to me. Her comment to me was: "We certainly wouldn't make a big thing about it, because all tips are discretionary. They didn't bring the cash with them and wanted to send the tip via wire transfer, so we gave them our bank details. We didn't hear anything from them for a couple of months and then out of the blue we got an email and a generous tip by wire." Kudos for her discretion in not discussing the discretionary gratuity.

I compare this with the captain of a large yacht who called to complain that the tip was only 10 per cent and wanted me to tell the guest that was sub-standard and did not match the service rendered. Or the report from another charter guest who complained that the captain told them at least a half-dozen times that they average 20 per cent in gratuities. The client actually left less than he planned, as he was offended by the not-so-subtle dunning.

Occasionally, as brokers, we hear a complaint from the client that could have been fixed so easily if only the client had told the captain. Things like having dinner at an earlier hour, wanting better cabin service, or wanting the AC to be colder. Despite encouraging clients before the charter to voice any complaints, there are some clients who just don't want to rock the boat.

Mullen suggests that the captain should sit down with the guests on the second or third morning of the charter and ask, "Are we meeting your expectations?...Is there anything you want done differently?...Or is there anything we are not doing that you do want?" This encourages the client to speak up without it being negative.

Conversely, crews are often reluctant to offer feedback to the charter broker about what the broker could have done differently to make the charter better. I can see a few captains rolling their eyes and hear them calling me crazy on this one. In fact, when a captain recently complained to me about some mistakes another broker had made, I suggested that he talk to her. "No way!" he said. "She'd probably blackball me and tell others."

The truth is that we can all use feedback. If something is going to make a charter guest have a better experience, the majority of charter brokers want to hear it. As brokers, we appreciate crews who can listen to constructive criticism that the guest shares with us without becoming immediately defensive. We respect crews that will "try on" the comments and see if they fit and can learn from them.

Brokers and crews rely on repeat charter guests – it's always easier the second time around. Sharon Bahmer of Luxury Charter Group states, "It's the brokers responsibility to bring a successful charter to the boat, but it's the crews responsibility to have them booking their next charter the day they disembark!" She goes on to say that it does not necessarily take sales skills – it's passion, enthusiasm for the job, and fascination for the location.

Speaking of repeat charters, all brokers praise the crews that have the integrity to refer the repeat charter guest back to the broker if the client makes a direct inquiry to the captain. Although it is a matter of contract and good business sense, there are times when this does not happen. Personally, I do not know how often this has happened to me. I only know about the incidents that I have discovered, and the damage to the crews' reputations far outweighed any extra cash that they may have pocketed.

And last of all, a little thank-you goes a long way. So many crews that I work with fire off a quick acknowledgement after I've booked the charter and again when the charter ends. I am always so surprised when there's silence on the other end of cyberspace.

I hope that the practices I have been discussing seem like Chartering 101 to many crews that are reading this. If so, I want to clone you, too. I look forward to hearing comments from crews about things that they wish most charter brokers would do. We are, after all, committed to the same thing – happy, repeat charter guests and a thriving business.

10 Tips for Crews to Enhance Relationships with Yacht Charter Brokers

1. Keep the broker in the loop on all correspondence.
2. Contact the broker once the guests are on board and during the charter, if possible.
3. Inform the broker of any changes on board, mechanical issues, or problems that occur during the charter.
4. Send a charter summary after the charter ends.
5. Check in with the guest during the charter to ensure that you are meeting their expectations.
6. Never discuss gratuity with the guest (unless asked).
7. Offer the broker feedback about what they could have done better to ensure smooth sailing.
8. Team up with the broker to secure repeat charters.
9. Always refer any repeat direct inquiries back to the broker.
10. Send a quick “thank-you” for the business.