

From the Crew's Mouth: *What Makes a Good Broker*

by Trish Cronan - from *Onboard Online.com*

Last month, I polled my fellow charter yacht brokers to get their take on what crews could do to enhance their relationships with brokers. This month, I flipped the coin and asked crews what brokers could do to create a positive team with crews. I fired off emails to a dozen or so captains, asking them to think about the brokers that they liked to work with the most. What do these brokers do that they wished all brokers would do? Or conversely, I wrote, think of the worst brokers you have worked with – what did they do wrong or what did they neglect?

As emails trickled into my inbox, the words of my editor echoed loud and clear, “Maybe we should have a crew write this article.” Some crews were exceptionally positive with their suggestions and embraced brokers as part of their team; others requested anonymity out of a concern that their candor would alienate them from brokers, and others just preferred to plead the fifth. Personally, I had to fend off my own “yes, buts” and “what ifs” and just try and listen as a writer, pretending that I have no vested interest in this occasionally thorny relationship. I tried to cull the repeating themes that were voiced and identify the areas that most crews agreed upon. I also tried to discern which comments might just be the lone opinion of a single person.

So for better or worse, I am married to this article. The truth is that I learned some valuable lessons along the way. I’m committed to re-inventing some of my own practices. See – you can teach an old broker new tricks. And to do that, it requires open, positive dialog. Here’s what I learned about the crew’s perspective.

The words of Captain Jim Grant of the Sunreef catamaran, *Catsy*, resonated in every email: “A good broker makes sure the guests are a good fit for the boat”. Brokers need to do their homework, take the time to attend the shows, get to know the crews, and understand what type of guests will thrive with each crew. Jim says, “I’m gregarious and love to spend time laughing with our guests. I see myself as a camp counselor... a charter guest that would not be a good fit is one that the guests are expecting megayacht, quiet, white glove style service.”

Bridget Berman-Kane, chief stewardess on the 111 ft. *Westport*, *Symphony*, notes that matching guests with the right crew is important on any size of yacht even though many brokers do not interview the crews on mega yachts. “One has to remember that even on vessels over 100 ft., the experience is still very personal,” says Bridget. “Your crew can try to make themselves scarce when necessary but they won’t be hidden all week. The crew are very much a part of the experience on any vessel.”

Captain Rich Cassarino of the 75 ft. catamaran *Zingara* raised the issue of the broker creating realistic expectations and not over promising, and this was reiterated by many captains. One captain shared the story of a tandem charter where the broker promised the guests they could have all of their meals together on one yacht. The broker never discussed this with the crew, and from the crews' point of view, it was logistically impossible. It was a lose-lose for everyone. The crew was frustrated that they could not meet the guests’ expectations, the guests were upset that they had been oversold by the broker and kept pressuring the crews to fulfill their request, and the charter industry probably lost what could have been a repeat client.

A few captains wondered out loud if a broker over promises just to make the sale. Others thought that it stemmed from the broker being uninformed about the yacht, the crew, and the sailing area. One captain said, “A good broker should know what is possible on a seven-night

itinerary on any given yacht in a sailing area. If they don't, then they should consult with the captain early on in the selling process and utilize his expertise."

An area where brokers and crews wrangle the most is the issue of gratuities. Most crews agree that brokers need to pay more attention to this matter and spend time explaining the gratuity to guests. Simply listing an amount on a form is not acceptable to most crews. They want to know that brokers are proactively informing their clients about the importance of the gratuity. Although it can be described as discretionary, crews do not want to hear it called "optional". Long time Caribbean Captain Tim Schaaf of Jet Stream suggests, "If the broker copied the crew with whatever documentation that broker sent with regard to the tips, that crew would, at least, know that the broker really did work hard, and that would be a good thing." It is important for a broker to explain to the client that it is part of their expected expense. They also need to be willing to follow up with the guest if the tip was sub-standard, simply to determine if there was anything lacking with the service.

The amount of recommended gratuity varies throughout the world. MYBA suggests 10 percent, and captains list if they agree with this policy on their specification sheets. In the BVI where the majority of yachts are in a moderate price range, most crews believe that 15 to 20 percent is standard and think that brokers should consistently adopt this. One captain suggests, "The only real solution to this is to suggest on your website, in emails, and in phone conversations, a minimum of 15 percent gratuity, with the idea that you should list it as 15 to 20 percent. At the very least, we can agree that all parties have been informed of the same amount, and hopefully the client will grant the crew the same amount the broker made doing the deal."

All food preference forms are not created equally, and although the crew can always get additional details from the guests, a comprehensive and detailed form saves time for the crew. Rich on Zingara appreciates a broker that advises the client about their requests on the form, letting them know if certain things are likely to be at additional cost or unavailable or if some things are impractical. This allows the crew's first contact with the guests to be 100 percent positive and welcoming rather than starting with a negative or telling them something is going to cost more.

Many crews have their own preference forms which get them the exact details that they need and appreciate brokers that allow them to use it. The broker can still handle the processing of the form and even brand it with their logo. As Captain Schaaf related, "Almost nothing affects the outcome of the charter as much as the food and drink, and these are dependent upon a well completed preference sheet. The fact is that many preference sheets lack essential information." If using their own form, then brokers need to personalize it for the yacht they are booking. Don't have waterskiing on the checklist if the yacht does not offer this.

Guests need to be better informed about the additional expenses that will be charged to their APA (Advance Provisioning Allowance). The captain of a 150 ft. Heesen thinks it is unfair for the crew to have to explain that fuel for the generator or electricity at the dock is an additional charge. Although it is outlined in the contract, a good broker supports the captain by reviewing this with the client in advance of the charter. "No one likes surprises when it comes to money," noted this captain.

Everyone agrees that information about the client is paramount. Crews appreciate brokers who go the extra mile to inform them on what they have told the guests upfront. One crew stated, "Not only the facts of who, what, where, and when, but also the broker's intuitive sense of what the client is like and what we may expect." Another crew suggested that it would be helpful if

the broker shared with them why the client chose their yacht over another – what were the features that they liked.

The issue of broker etiquette and attention at charter yacht shows was frequently voiced. Crews put considerable effort in preparing for a charter show, and it is disheartening when brokers pass them by. Comments like, "We saw your boat last year and don't need to see it again – we know you are great" or "I send your brochure out all of the time" or "I took a look during the Yacht Hop last night" are heartbreaking words to hear. Crews want the opportunity to showcase their yacht and have personal conversations with the brokers.

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The issue of mutual respect was raised in a couple of different ways. One crew wrote, "When booking a yacht, be aware of how long it's been since the crew has had a break. Although the specs say that they do 24-hour turnarounds, checking in with the crew to make sure that they want this fifth charter in a row shows compassion and that you really care about the crew's sanity." Crews appreciate being contacted personally by the broker before a charter is booked if there is something unique about the charter requests. One megayacht crew expressed frustration that their large central agent discouraged that, preferring that all communications are channeled through the agent. "Things just get lost in the layers," was the comment.

"We love feedback, too. It's great to know if we are getting it right and if there is something we can improve," says Chief Stew Bridget. Another captain stated that he felt that brokers always sided with the client when reporting complaints or dissatisfactions and suggested that brokers need to be impartial in sorting through negative feedback, granting the crew the same respect that they grant their clients. The worse case scenario for any crew is to have the broker discuss a problem with other brokers, never giving the crew the opportunity to share their side of the story.

A few crews also expressed that they would like to know more about how a broker is promoting them. Is their yacht a good fit for the broker's clientele? If they do promote the yacht and are not getting bookings for it, is there something the yacht can do to improve? Another said, "Other than viewing your website, yachts rarely see your direct marketing efforts and need to know that you are a consistent, viable player in the business." And the final words of wisdom from a veteran captain: "One of the ways to be a team is for both sides to understand what the other is doing. Brokers spend their time interviewing the crews at yacht shows. What about sharing what they do? If nothing else, it makes us feel like an equal player, a part of their team."

A special thank you to all the captains and crews who care so deeply about this industry and took the time to share their thoughts. In the end, I read and re-read about 40,000 emailed words, seeking the gems of agreement. I hope that I did you justice... let the conversation continue.

10 Tips for Yacht Charter Brokers to Enhance Relationships with Crews

1. Ensure that the yacht and crew is a good fit for the client.
2. Create realistic expectations in regard to the itinerary, activities, and crew service; consult with the crew before making promises that stretch beyond “reasonable”.
3. Provide the crew with a detailed Food Preference Form and review it with the client prior to forwarding it to the crew; be willing to use the crew’s preference form if they request to do so.
4. Provide as much detail about the client as you can; why did they book this yacht and crew? What do they expect?
5. Educate the client about crew gratuities; make recommendations consistent with expected gratuities for the part of the world that the charter is in; and follow up with the client if the gratuity is less than expected to determine if the service was less than expected.
6. Provide feedback to the crew after the charter and acknowledge the crew for a job well done; say thank you.
7. Address complaints with the crew and not with other brokers; allow the crew to express their point of view, granting them the same respect that you give your clients.
8. Make an effort to view all yachts that are in a charter yacht show.
9. Let yachts know what marketing you are doing with their yachts.
10. Be knowledgeable about the yachts, the crews, and the destinations.