

Boating Tips

Personal Flotation Devices

So there I was, sitting with the admiral (not my wife)... the real Admiral Paul Zukunft of the 11th District Coast Guard, which includes 3.2 million square miles of open ocean as well as California, Nevada, Arizona and Utah. He gave me an hour of his valuable time. Toward the end of the interview we started brainstorming about safety. We settled on the most important factor in boating safety: lifejackets.

It is a well-known, documented fact that if more (recreational) boaters wore personal flotation devices (PFDs), there would be fewer boating fatalities. We discussed what we could do on both the public and private sides to promote the wearing of lifejackets. How can we convince the general boating public to wear their lifejackets while underway? (FYI... I tend to look at things from a "marketing" perspective.)

Remember when you were a kid and rode your bike around like a freaking maniac? (Or was that just me?) Did you wear a helmet when you were a kid riding that bicycle? I certainly didn't! Nor did my older brother (some influence). HA! In fact, if one of our guys wore a helmet, we'd throw him out of the gang!

Look around today: you hardly see any kids (or adults for that matter) riding bicycles without

helmets. (I've seen many a Mom in my (current) neighborhood chasing down kids without helmets.) Whoa... It's like the sound of fingernails on a blackboard. (Don't want to go there.) HA!

How about skiing and snowboarding? When I was a young skier, no one wore helmets. Now look up at the slopes. Nearly all snowboarders and a large percentage of skiers are now wearing headgear. They loook maaavelous!

Fashionable Safety

In my opinion, all three of these consumer phenomena are rooted in the same motivator: fashion/style! That's the key. The fact that you may actually save your life by wearing headgear in these activities was an afterthought. So where does this history lead us with PFDs?

We do have some "early adapters" to inflatable vests in the "sailing" category around the SF Bay. You rarely see these folks out without their inflatable lifejackets on. Though these folks could generally care less about fashion/style, they are very much into safety and rightfully so as sailing is a serious endeavor.

Another category of early adapters is bass boaters/fishermen. These boats are very high performance and you can get thrown out of one in a heartbeat in a worst-case scenario. Also, standing



up, fishing and absorbing wakes from passing boats can send an experienced fisherman into the drink in no time. Again, fashion/style not an issue. However they do make "camouflage" vests for hunters/fisherman. Now that is a fashion statement. HA!

There is a website called www.suspenders.com where you can see any number of stylish, affordable, inflatable lifejackets. I'm convinced that the progression in both snowboarding/skiing and bike riding started through fashion/style. In my opinion this could be the most effective way to get people to wear their lifejackets and feel good about wearing them at the same time. Picture it... You're waiting for your wife to get ready to go boating and she can't decide which PFD goes with her outfit. (What a nightmare!) HA!

Every time I do a lesson at Pacific Powerboating I demonstrate the advantages of buying and wearing inflatable lifejackets. First, I make the client don one of those orange lifejackets. Then I ask them about the freedom of movement they have and if they feel like a "dork." The answers are invariably very little and yes.

Now, don't get me wrong. I'm not saying that wearing those orange

lifejackets is not a good idea. It's just that inflatable ones are better for a number of reasons. For instance, they are very ergonomic, meaning that when you wear one you have a lot of freedom of movement. This is very important in keeping you safe while attending to tasks that put you in jeopardy of falling overboard while any vessel is underway, such as going up to the bow to get ground tackle ready to deploy or down to the swim platform on an aft-cabin vessel. This freedom translates to more people being open to wearing them because they don't feel so constrained.

Also, you can purchase them with varying degrees of "buoyancy," which means if you weigh 300 lbs. and get knocked out on the way overboard, these little wonders will keep you afloat with your head out

of the water, even unconscious.

Now, I'm not naïve enough to think that anything I say is going to get the entire recreational boating community in Nor Cal to instantly don lifejackets every time you go out. However, I think we can agree on some fundamentals:

First, locate all of your PFDs onboard. Put them on and label them for who would fit into each one. Also,

if you can't read the information written on the PFD, neither can the Coast Guard, and they will consider them too old to use.

Next comes the "Big Drill." This is where you declare a simulated Mayday and order all onboard to don their lifevests. Time it. You'll be amazed at how long it takes! Practice it until you are all on the same page. It could save your life.

Kevo's Tip

I have to confess that I'm the biggest offender I know when it comes to wearing my inflatable lifevest. I'm on different boats nearly every day! Although I am a good swimmer, this is no excuse. I promise to be more vigilant if you boaters out there will be more conscientious about wearing your lifevests while underway. Deal? OK then!

Be safe & happy boating!

Feedback is always appreciated. I can be reached at 925/890-8428 or Kevin@yachtsmanmagazine.com. 📧