

Choosing the Right Marine Surveyor

A marine surveyor plays an important role for anyone purchasing a used vessel. Anyone considering a purchase should consider utilizing the services of a marine surveyor to help them in the process. In this article, I will help you understand who qualifies as a quality surveyor and give tips to keep in mind when you purchase your next vessel.

What is a Marine Survey?

The word “survey” means to look at critically or inspect. There are many specialties in marine surveying, such as commercial vessels, cargo, engine, etc. The category we are interested in here is usually referred to as “yacht and small craft”.

As a boat buyer needing a pre-purchase survey, or an owner getting a survey for insurance purposes, you will need what is commonly called a C&V or Condition and Valuation survey. To use an analogy with home buying, the surveyor is like a combination of home inspector (condition) and appraiser (value).

The work product will include the physical inspection and verbal reporting to you, as well as a written survey report that contains a description of the scope of the survey, detailed description of the vessel along with any deficiencies, recommendations for remediating deficiencies, an estimated Current Market Value and Replacement Value, based on current research.

The surveyor works for you, the client, and has a responsibility to impartially and accurately represent both the condition and value of the vessel. Although there may be some temptation to find a surveyor who may overlook some faults, or inflate/deflate values, it is best to find a surveyor who will present accurate unbiased observations on which you, your insurers, and your lender can make sound decisions.

Certification and Accreditation of Marine Surveyors

At this time, there is no state or federal licensing, certification, or sanctioning of marine surveyors.

Two professional organizations, the National Association of Marine Surveyors (NAMS) and the Society of Accredited Marine Surveyors (SAMS) have rigorous testing, experience, and continuing education requirements for certified and accredited surveyors. Generally NAMS-CMS or SAMS-AMS designations are a good indicator of professional standing. To be classified as a “Professional Organization” you must have Continuing Education and Ethics Programs. SAMS and NAMS are the only two Professional Marine Surveyor organizations in North America that meet these requirements. You will find other organizations with impressive sounding acronyms, but these have no requirements for membership and are virtually meaningless.

A very few excellent and well experienced Marine Surveyors chose not to belong to NAMS or SAMS and some surveyor “apprentices” or “associates” working toward the NAMS-CMS or AMS designations may also have extensive experience in the boating industry and be good choices. In both cases, it is necessary to verify the surveyor’s experience and qualifications.

Unfortunately, Certification or Accreditation in any field does not guarantee conscientious, competent, professional performance. So, it is necessary to investigate further.

Finding a Marine Surveyor

Often recommendations from other boat owners, yard managers, and others in the boating industry can be useful. But, you have to consider the perspective of those making the recommendation. An example would be a broker who has a favorite Marine Surveyor who will accidentally overlook some defects and will write in the value that the broker wants to sell the vessel- BUYER BEWARE.

An honest broker or ethical seller probably will not recommend a specific surveyor for a deal, in which they are involved. However, any recommendation or “short list” will probably reflect their concern for a trouble-free sale, rather than the thoroughness of the survey.

A local surveyor you already know should be a good source of recommendations for a surveyor in another location.

Interviewing a Marine Surveyor

The most important step is contacting the surveyor and collecting information directly, either by phone or e-mail. First, take a good look at any web site, brochures, or articles a surveyor may have.

Perhaps the most important question is the surveyor’s experience with the type of boat. There are so many boat builders and models that even an experienced surveyor may not have surveyed a specific model. But, you should expect your surveyor to have had significant experience with the size and type of boat (i.e. sail, trawler, performance, fishing, wood, steel, fiberglass, etc.). Experience in other types of survey work particularly damage surveys will be a plus, as is experience in the previous building and/or repair of vessels. A surveyor whose income depends largely on referrals from local brokers may be subtly influenced by this dependence.

A surveyor should let you see a “sample” survey report. These days it will probably be in the form of a file sent electronically. The sample report should be well written, but you should look beyond a slick format. There is certain standard information and “fine print” that is necessary. Disclaimers are not!! But, there should also be specific descriptions of

non-standard features, deficiencies, and clear recommendations? Consider to what degree the report is padded with “boilerplate” generalities, or only a “checklist”, or inventory?

Also, does the surveyor follow Universal Practice of Professional Appraisal Practices (USPAP) guidelines when determining value. This is becoming very important to lenders and underwriters.

An important criterion is good communication skills. To get the most out of a survey you should be present for the inspection. While interviewing the surveyor you should try to assess how well they can communicate with you. How willing are they to answer your questions? Are the surveyor’s responses clear and to the point?

Price

“How much do you charge?” is often the first question we hear. But price should be far from the determining factor in the selection of a surveyor. Prices will vary depending on the type and age of boat, the location and the circumstances of the survey (i.e. will there be an underway trial, a haul out, etc.). Keep in mind that the cost of the survey will be a relatively small fraction of the purchase price or other costs of ownership. For comparison, yards and repair technicians now charge \$75 to over \$100 per hour. Most surveys will involve at least a day’s work and generally more, including market research and report preparation. A “cut-rate” surveyor will most likely also “cut corners” on the work.

In Closing

As seasoned surveyors, we have seen many preventable losses occur that could have been avoided. Choosing the wrong surveyor can be a costly proposition resulting in expensive repairs, loss of enjoyment, injury or worse to you and your loved ones. Choose the right surveyor to help ensure you, your family, your guests and the boating community are safe and fully enjoy your boat to its fullest.

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