

Yacht Painting – Where Are We?



THE WORLD OF YACHT PAINTING IS BECOMING INCREASINGLY INTERESTING and at times difficult; our market is changing along with the world in general. On the one hand, manufacturers try to reduce Volatile Organic Compounds (VOCs), which has led to many discussions about quality of finish with yacht painting companies looking for different options and trying different products. Finding the right one(s) is no easy matter. On the other hand, although there have been a number of new build projects over 90 metres recently launched with new orders of a similar size lined up, the world's markets also suffered; so did the order books, leaving a lot of applicators short of prospects. There has also been talk about whether the yacht application industry is in turmoil and disarray as apparently standards are dropping, with more open warranty issues and poor results. As usual the yacht painters blame the yards, short timeframes, poor conditions, changing products and mismanagement. The yards and experts blame the application companies for being over-stretched, under-qualified and poorly managed. No doubt crew agencies will confirm that finding enough qualified personnel has not been

easy during these boom years and the same has to be said in the application industry and elsewhere.

In reality, I believe that overall the marine coatings industry is not in a poor state at all but expectations are much higher as people become more knowledgeable and the demands made on application companies, especially during a new build, are sometimes unreasonable and often unachievable. This may in many cases be because companies are chosen not on past performance but on availability and budget and without proper due diligence. This causes a number of problems for yards and owners, while only the strongest of companies with good track records and infrastructure are managing to cope.

Where are we going?

I have listened to many seminars where the same old issues have been put on the table with little impact. Few lessons have been learned, while head scratching continues as to how things can be changed. However, there are a few areas where progress has been made.

The most prominent debate has been whether a fixed superyacht standard can be devised and enforced. This is finally and slowly being implemented and measurable acceptance standards are probably now incorporated into most contracts. Nevertheless, as long as the finish remains subjective, potentially difficult discussions at the acceptance stage can never be entirely eliminated. The finish may well meet the criteria measured by sophisticated equipment while still failing to satisfy the client – the paint job's beauty is in the eye of the beholder!

Another source of discord has been the failure to dedicate sufficient care and attention to the fairing and painting of a yacht early and at the contractual stage where often fingers are crossed while hoping for the best. Again, there is evidence that this is now improving. It is essential that the painting process (one of the most expensive parts of a new build) should be treated as seriously and carefully as the interior finish or the engine room spec.

We have also recently seen increasing numbers of independent coatings surveyors. As more owners have seen a need for such intervention so there are now several experienced professional surveyors available to act on their behalf. All in all I think that, given the huge output of new yachts in recent years, the application companies have done pretty well to deliver generally high standards sometimes in spite of the time and conditions available to them.

And if things do go wrong, well "It's always the painters' fault anyway."

Are we going green?

VOCs – Volatile Organic Compounds: what are they? Basically anything in a traditional paint can contain VOCs, that is solvents are VOCs, anything that evaporates at room temperature and helps paint flow. Are we going to replace them with water-based products? If we are, the effect will be pretty dramatic. A pure solvent will evaporate at 1 litre per hour while water takes days. The finish of a water-based paint deteriorates faster and the durability is reduced. The Solvent Emissions Directive is obliging all paint manufacturers to reduce VOCs which is very significant for a shipyard. If a yard uses 5 tons of paint a year they cannot exceed 36% of solvent. A topcoat has over 60%, so this is becoming a real issue. Paint companies are lobbying to include fillers and resins in the equation to reduce the average and make it workable and they have already significantly reduced VOCs in primers. The other problem is that it is extremely difficult to extract and filter these emissions, so all in all going green is causing some problems, but nobody thinks about that walking down the dock. Isocyanates are the next thing to be addressed, these help a paint cure and can cause respiration problems especially for people with asthma, but it will be some years before these can be eliminated as all plastics contain isocyanates.

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