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Essential reading for marina and waterfront developers, planners and operators

Marina technology in a post-pandemic world

In the midst of a global pandemic, technology promises to be the glue that holds us all together. The marina industry – historically lagging behind other industries in this area – must adapt to the 'new normal' and take advantage of the slew of products on offer. Iain Archibald, co-founder and CEO of Swell Advantage Ltd, looks at the options.

As from May, we started to see some jurisdictions around the world flirt with re-opening parts of society, but we don't really know how this will play out in the coming months and years. The good news is that access to boating and the opening of marinas, at least on a limited basis, has been considered an essential service in some regions – and for most of those where it hasn't, boating will be one of the first activities to be allowed.

Regardless of the level of restrictions in your area, we're all struggling with how to adapt personally and professionally to this new reality. Increasingly, we're relying on technology. Individuals, organisations and whole industries are getting a crash course on technologies that they had been avoiding, or were not interested in previously. It's been surprising how well and quickly we're all adapting to digital tools and new ways of doing things.

Austin Bleier, CEO of San Diego-based marina hardware manufacturer MarineSync, neatly sums up the current situation: "I think this pandemic has been a reality check for practically everyone. I think it's safe to say that all businesses will forever change how they service their client accounts and conduct day-to-day operations. It's hard to imagine taking this seriously, until it actually happened."

The marina industry has been a technology laggard compared to a lot of industries. There are a number of valid reasons for this, and a few maybe not so valid, but the real question is, how do we move forward?

Mike Melillo, co-founder and CEO of the company behind brands like Marinas.com and Dockwa, believes "technology will play an important role in empowering marina operators to simultaneously provide great customer service, limit face-to-face interaction with and among boaters, and keep both themselves and their time protected.

When marinas open back up, not only will there be new social-distancing policies to implement and become comfortable with, there will be a backlog of tasks (launching boats, work orders, etc.) to work through. The best tech will keep boaters and marina employees delightfully distant, and save marina operators time as they focus their energy on the more physical aspects of their business."

Digital tools

For organisations in any industry there are three types of digital tools replacing the physical office. Internal workflow and communication tools, document management and video conferencing. For day-to-day collaboration Slack has become the default tool replacing internal emails and in-person conversations. Google Drive with Google Docs has become a popular tool for organising, storing and collaborating on documents. Our marina software company Swell Advantage has been using Slack and Google Drive/Docs since they were founded. It's now hard to imagine not using them.

For external sales demos and internal meetings, Zoom has become popular. Other options include Google Meet and Microsoft Teams. Loom is a great way to create personalised sales videos and some salespeople are using apps like FaceTime to give virtual tours of high-ticket items like boats. These tools are generally supported by product/project management tools (generic or industry specific), customer relationship management (CRM) software and/or enterprise software systems like the marina management software many of us are used to.

Modern software tools are usually developed to do one set of tasks and connect with other systems that handle other tasks. We've seen some legacy software systems for marinas start to develop partnerships and APIs (how digital systems exchange information and coordinate tasks). Dockmaster, one of the highest rated legacy systems on the market, has partnered with drystack software Boat Cloud to handle drystack management and we've seen others connect to products like TaskRabbit. At Swell, we've partnered with Square POS. We decided not to build our own point of sale (POS), or white-label a generic POS with limited functionality. More importantly, the

partnership enables our customers to take advantage of Square's advanced security features, reporting, pay-anywhere handheld systems, online payments, retail software, hospitality software and HR features.

A problem with a lot of the systems used throughout the industry is they are older systems, which follow the ineffectual 'one solution for all tasks' paradigm. They tend to be closed systems hosted on-site, with access only available in the office and have a limited ability to exchange information with outside systems like accounting software. Some established players like Scribble are completely redeveloping their technology to provide modern functionality (Marina Go). And newer companies like ours and Molo are entering the market with cloud native solutions built around application programming interfaces (APIs).

Physical contact

Marina and boat club customer service has traditionally been high touch. Both managers and older generations of boaters are accustomed to filling out paper applications in the office, dropping off a cheque and sealing the deal with a handshake. These face-to-face interactions provided opportunities to build relationships, make boaters feel well cared for and expand the marina's brand. A well-run marina is defined by its cohesive boater community and staff who know the boater's boat and how they use it.

The problem many in the industry are now facing is how to manage facilities and boaters when "high touch" has taken on a less positive

meaning? Marina customer service can generally be put into three baskets: transactions – mostly the exchange of money and documents; services – like boat maintenance or an onsite deli; and community – which includes events, races and general day-to-day interactions.

Transactional customer service is probably top of mind for most marinas right now. Stopping into the office with a paper cheque is no longer encouraged, nor is putting a cheque in the mail. Onsite POS systems that do not have a tap option are now obsolete as they are a key vector for disease transmission and should be one of the first technologies any business replaces. Most modern marina management systems should have the ability for boaters to pay online directly in the system with a boater facing tool or through e-mailed invoices. Accounting software systems like Xero and Quickbooks often have invoicing with online payment options if you don't want to commit to a full management system. E-transfers are also an easy option available to most people.

Much of the resistance to alternative payment methods comes from older operators and boaters but we might all be surprised by how far older generations have come using online systems these past few months. Let's face it, it's a pain to learn new things and trust processes that are different from the ones we grew up with, especially when it comes to money.

Document management, including signing berthing agreements and collecting things like insurance papers, is a lot easier these days. Some systems like Swell have document management with e-signatures built into their products. Alternatively, there are a number of digital signature providers such as DocuSign, and then there's the even easier PDF. PDFs now have a signature feature that enables a person to digitally sign the document, or they can print, sign, scan and send the document back. Recently, transient boater platforms, like Snag-A-Slip and Dockwa here in North America, have emerged to handle these tasks for transient boaters with the extra benefit of having numerous marinas for boaters to choose from.

Marina services are tough because it depends on the nature of the service. Boat maintenance and refit are pretty straightforward. Invoicing and service requests probably won't change that much. Things like restaurants and retail will open when, and how, local
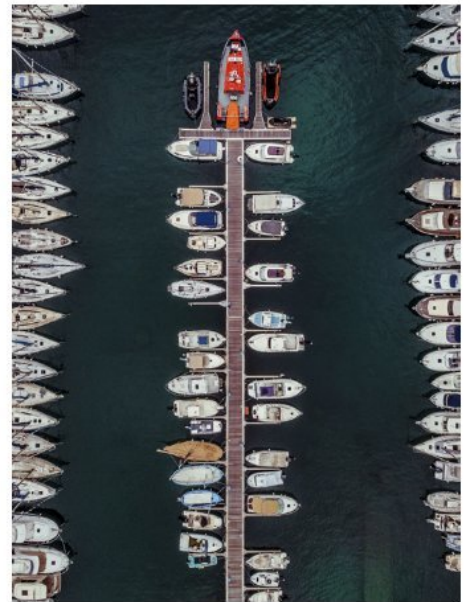
governments dictate. Drystack specific systems like Boat Cloud and Speedy Dock are focused on online scheduling tools for launch and haul-out.

Community spirit

Managing and maintaining a community is going to be a challenge for a lot of marinas and clubs. Activating and using social media has become more important, as are digital newsletters. At the very least,

keeping the organisation's website up-to-date on if, how and what services are still available and when or how boaters can access their boats along with regular email send-outs, are ways to keep everyone informed. Tools like Canva can help you create beautiful content for social media and mass communications (it's also really fun!). Hosting Zoom happy hours, creating fun competitions for boaters to do from their own boats with leaderboards posted on your website, and low touch, socially distant "adventures" for kids around the marina are all options. Creative marina managers will find ways to leverage social media and other technologies to keep their communities engaged and interacting with each other.

All of these customer service components rely on good communication. Email and phone calls are a regular part of most operations and support most activities. A CRM is a software tool designed to help manage customer relationships. The software acts as a kind of phone book recording customer details, notes and usually allows you to send emails from within the system. Some marina management software systems like Swell have a built in CRM specifically designed to serve boaters offering features like group e-mailing to specific groups of boaters, automated communications to support accounts receivable and booking slips, and even includes text messaging. CRMs generally meld operational information with customer support tools designed to streamline customer service and can assist with social distancing.

The new kid on the block for a lot of organisations will be using text (SMS) messaging to communicate with boaters. The pandemic will probably accelerate the use of texting by businesses. It's a great way to know when your food order is ready for pick-up or that the pump out has been sanitised and is ready for the next boat. For some of us who didn't grow up with texting, it can feel like an invasive and cold way to communicate. But, especially for those under 40, texting is a preferred method of communication. There are a number of industry non-specific group texting services available and we're increasingly seeing drystack systems use automated texting to

coordinate launch and haul-outs.

Marina hardware has been steadily improving with a focus on customer self-service, monitoring and wireless meter reading. A lot of these improvements can inadvertently help operators in a post-pandemic world. Companies like MarineSync have developed pedestals with various sensors and online meter reading enables services like power and water to be turned on and off remotely. These innovations can limit staff's need to directly interact with transient boaters. Self-serve fuel pumps have been gaining popularity for a few years. Given expected new regulations and insurance policy clauses, marinas will probably have to disinfect these kinds of self-serve tools on a regular basis, as well as track when the task was completed.

There have also been a lot of improvements with remote marina monitoring through video systems and sensors that allow people to remotely monitor boats. A direct video or image capture feed to the marina's website can give boaters' peace of mind and reduce unnecessary trips to the marina if desired.

Deciding on what technologies to use to help your organisation in this new post-pandemic reality is going to depend on your service offering, your staff, new local regulations, any adjustments to your insurance policy and your boaters. The good and bad news is that you have a lot of

options to find just the right fit for your organisation.

Bleier, from MarineSync, thinks the pandemic is going to lead operators towards "new ways of accessing data remotely. New ways of accepting payments. New ways of communicating with clients. New ways of interacting. The new technologies and software we're leveraging and embracing during the pandemic, will likely be adopted (in some capacity) into business architecture once this all calms down."

One thing the experts agree on is we will see waves of the coronavirus in the coming months and years. Through all of this, people and organisations are getting a crash course on using technology – from ordering groceries online, to grandparents giving parents a break by distracting the kids on Zoom. Many people, who wouldn't think of using digital services a few months ago, are coming out of the pandemic with a new comfort level when it comes to using technology. It will be interesting to see if and how the boating industry adapts to meet this new comfort level and boaters' new expectations around service delivery supported by technology. If we as an industry play it right, boating might even see a resurgence as a safe, socially distant activity.

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