

# Communicating design ideas to customers

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## Abstract

This research investigates the use of communicative methods in advanced product development environments by studying one specific design scene as a case study: The expanding yachting industry. The focus is on sailing yacht design in a contemporary perspective, by studying relevant working methods applicable to yacht design.

- What methods are being used when yacht designers and yacht producers communicate their ideas and innovations to potential users and the market?
- Are there differences in applied communication methods within opposite product (yacht) segments?

This investigation aims at answering these two questions by carrying out a comparative study of applied communication methods in two different areas; the low-cost mass production yacht segment and the more exclusive one-off / customized yacht segment.

## 1. Introduction

Customer demands appear more significant than ever. Today, there is an increasing focus and consciousness amongst consumers on product quality and user experience. As good examples of this situation, both the car industry and the boating industry have to comply with these demands.

This investigation is partly a result of my personal dedication to yacht design, including studying boat literature during the last 25 years, and partly based on updated references to recent literature describing different design projects and design methods within yacht design, as well as observation from the marine environment and yachting industry, and visits to international boat shows.

## 2. The yachting industry

The yachting industry -together with the automotive industry- is a highly specialised field. To look into the broad diversity of different boat sizes and market segments within the yachting industry without being too comprehensive, means exploring only a limited number of different design cases and the design teams behind. Because of the diversity in this market, my research has mostly a horizontal view, and it has to be told using broad, general terms. As being part of this investigation, I will focus on a few examples of current product design cases.

Product development in the boating industry is strongly developing, as the markets own expectations towards comfort, efficiency and practical, easy handling of the modern leisure boat are getting stronger. Being part of international competition, the ability to innovate, by applying new ideas and technical solutions to the product development process, is crucial for any producer with ambition to compete within defined market segments. In order to cope with the increasingly stronger international competition on the global market, there is a constant struggle to stay on the leading edge of technology. The challenge for the producer is to communicate these innovations in the right manner, so that an average customer understands what it is all about.

As the spare time in our modern society becomes more and more a luxury, the spare time activities are regarded as being more precious than ever. The boating industry tends to use this fact, by stating that boating give quality into your spare time activities, as it enhances your experiences by exploring new coast-lines and give added value by strong, natural experiences.

## 3. Studying communication tools

Communicating design ideas to customers, easily leads towards an examination of corporate information, public relations and the corporate use of different market related media, like printed media or websites, or events like the big international boat shows.

### A comparison between the yacht industry and the automotive industry

Sometimes it is useful to compare different design arenas. In this case, the comparison between the yachting industry and the automotive industry gives some interesting aspects. After having attended to numerous national and international boats shows as well as car shows, it is clear that the boating industry is more traditional than the car industry. The car shows display advanced concept cars, giving ideas on future developments in the automotive industry. This way of displaying real and physical, hands-on designs, is a tremendously strong -maybe the strongest- way of communicating design ideas to customers. You are able to experience a lot of physical features using your senses; by seeing, touching, hearing, smelling. A trend that has started evolving during the last few years in the boat shows, is the possibility for the audience to actually test and sail the yachts under guidance from sales representatives, This is the case for the Norwegian boat show “Båter i Sjøen”, which takes place at the waterfront in Asker, in September each year. This means that potential customers are able to actually get a feeling of the boats performance. I believe this must be the ultimate way of convincing a customer, by giving hands-on experience from the product on the water, in its right environment and surroundings.

## 4. A comparative approach – mass market versus luxury market

In order to explore the yachting industry as a design field, I have chosen a comparative approach as research method. I think the principle of exploring opposites within a design field

reveals quite interesting aspects, as this method from my experience often uncovers interesting contradictions or contrasts, describing the diversity within the research field.

This method involves comparing a yacht producer/yard in opposite market segments; one producer representing the low-cost mass production yacht segment and one other producer representing the opposite and more exclusive one-off / customized yacht segment. Representing the first category, I have chosen Harmony Yachts, from the French producer Group Poncin. As a representative of the second category, I have chosen the French based yard CNB.

### **Case 1. The mass-production yacht segment**

#### The yard

The French based Group Poncin yard offer three ranges of yachts to the international markets; Lower-segment Harmony, Catana catamarans, and upper-segment Diva.

The yard has a strong and consistent corporate philosophy based on innovation being the driving force through all levels of their strategic product development activities. This philosophy is easily evidenced in their corporate communication strategy, which describes to the point novelties and design solutions which have never been presented before to the market. By extensive use of printed medias like brochures, and the use of a well-planned website, detailed information on both interior and exterior innovations and ideas are clearly communicated to any potential customer. From the three ranges, I have chosen the Harmony range, consisting of five models from 34 to 52 feet.

#### Communication media

Focusing on printed media, the brochure of the Harmony range is the best I have ever seen from a sailing yacht producer. Not because of style or quality of paper, but because of the huge amount of detailed information which –in spite of having a rather technical nature- is communicated with extremely easy-to-grasp graphics and computer generated images, together with clear, multi-lingual text. The information cover all aspects, from the structure of the yard and the production facilities, structural improvements in the hull, and environmental issues and physical benefits gained from the production process called “the polyester circle”. The information is somewhat technical, which I regard as being typical for naval architects.

#### Market segment characteristics

The mass-production yacht segment is easily recognisable by its dependence on logistic principles. This is evidenced within almost all stages of planning, design, production, distribution and sales-points infrastructure.

Key-words from the promotional brochure: *Efficiency, innovator, building quality, comfort, value for money, service guarantee, after-sales service, ready-to-sail.*

### **Case 2. The one-off / customized yacht segment**

#### The yard

Created in 1987, CNB is part of the Bénéteau group, world leader in the construction of large sailing yachts and quoted on the Paris Stock Exchange's second market. More than 80% of its large sailing yacht production is exported.

#### Communication media

Through their well-planned website, information using different media is available, like brochures in PDF formats from each yacht project, videos and newsletters.

The principle of communicating design ideas to customers in this case is simply applied by extensively describing existing yachts. In this case there is no doubt, the power of exemplification is strong. This is done by providing detailed information on all aspects of a large yacht, from purely technical issues to describing styles and design plans. A large number of high-resolution images of each model is available.

Key-words taken from this yacht segment: *Lifestyle, emotions, pleasure, luxury, indulgence, entertainment, social settings, precious spare time, individualism, getting away from the crowds.*

### Market segment characteristics

The one-off / customized yacht segment is easily recognisable by scale. Everything is usually large. Everything is expensive. As a social symbol, it is almost without competition. A luxury car does not have a chance. It is much too cheap. An estate or house could compete, but is still a house, which represents a basic need –roof over your head- which all people have. But a floating home -the larger the better- is hard to beat.

This yacht segment is not dependent on logistic principles, which is almost opposite to the mass-production segment. Instead of planning a range of boats, the focus is on only one project, one yacht, and one single customer. This is evidenced within almost all stages of planning, design, production, distribution and -of course- the market communication. The only logistic principle evidenced, is the case where a customer commissions a yacht based on a sister-hull. This means that the hull because of cost saving is copied from a previously built yacht. The superstructure and interior is then completely designed as an individual yacht, based on entirely personal requirements.

In this segment, communicating design ideas seem to aim at an extremely limited upper end of the market, where you find the individual solutions and individual needs.

The large, customized yacht producers often focus on the possibility to be at home anywhere in the world - “a home away from home”.

## 5. Conclusions

It seems that the mass production yacht segment aspires towards the one-off / customized yacht segment, by offering yacht solutions that –by using communication media- pretend to be individually designed, and entirely developed for personal preferences and requirements. The customer gets the impression that the yacht is almost entirely customized to the customers needs, but this is –obviously- not the case. A mass-produced yacht is actually a large number of compromises, as it is designed to fit as many individual needs as possible. It has to comply with logistics, so it is a generalized solution, complying with the general needs from an average group of users. But it will never be a fully customized product solution.

Communication in the large yacht segment displays what it is all about – but without saying it in plain words - because it is too rude: A luxury yacht represents a social statement of success, by putting wealth on display. The lesson learned, could be that comparing an average mass-produced yacht with a state-of-the-art customized yacht, is actually comparing average conformity with the peek of modern individualism.