

Enabling your boat to talk

STORY AND PHOTOS BY JEFF MERRILL



Wi-Fi and electricity to connect.

The idea of using apps to keep in touch with your vessel is not new, and most trawler owners I know have some sort of digital game plan to take advantage of the mobile technology that is available. When you are away from your boat, it can be unsettling because you don't know what's going on. So, before you jump in and spend a lot of money to install a new system, ask yourself this, "If your boat could talk to you, what would you like it to tell you?"

A useful nuisance? Smart technology has transformed every facet of our lives and can be annoying — remember when you used to think of a cellphone as a method strictly for making mobile phone calls? Our dependence upon our smart phones is overwhelming. Adding another reason to surrender our attention and interrupt our lives is not necessarily what we want. But doesn't the convenience of knowing the status of your vessel from afar become a

Keeping tabs on a boat via vessel monitoring systems allows owners to take early action should a problem develop.

A concerned seller who could not attend the survey and sea trial of his trawler called me, his voice laden with concern: "Jeff, I keep getting text messages that the bilge pump is going off. Are you guys sinking?"

Everything was fine; the surveyor was purposely filling the bilge with fresh water to test the automatic bilge pump float switch. Each time a bilge pump went off, the installed pump notification program sent alerts to my seller's phone. We laughed when I told him what was going on, and this story not only had a happy ending

with a successful sale (and working bilge pump system), but at the same time it showed me how important it can be to keep track of your boat when you are away.

We have all seen the transformation in our lives of smartphone apps allowing us to communicate with our cars and our homes. It only makes sense to adapt some of that thinking to better look after your boat when you're no longer aboard. There have been a number of marine equipment providers offering this type of service for boats over the last few years. Once installed, all they require is



Left, a Global Ocean Security Technologies bilge pump monitor unit.

nuisance that makes sense?

Boats seem to be slower to adapt to the risks and benefits of new technology (though, admittedly, the marine sector is a smaller, less profitable niche for developers), but good ideas eventually filter down from the mainstream. I have a Ring doorbell and Nest camera installed at my house, and my initial reaction was to marvel and be amazed at the newness. Now that I'm accustomed to the technology, it is very reassuring to know that I can glance at my phone and see what is going on when I'm not home. Staying connected is very popular with houses, and it is gaining momentum with boats.

On the Internet, you can find a wide variety of systems with varying levels of sophistication to remain in touch with your boat, from super simple to deeply complex. Choosing what is best for you is an individual decision just

Above right, an iSocket shore power monitor unit plugged into a boat's AC outlet. Right, a smartphone text from the iSocket reporting on system status.

like the selection of your boat.

One of the simplest systems I have seen is a plug-in product by iSocket, which texts you a message when you lose shore power. Before



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Left, shore power connections are exposed and vulnerable, so monitoring your vessel's status while away makes sense. Below, a NEST digital camera. Getting a picture or video can help diagnose a problem.

the shared dock power tower was inadvertently switched off? How would you know if you aren't present? Worst-case scenario, you were unplugged for a couple of days and then you were reconnected. In this situation, as just described, you wouldn't necessarily know that your refrigerated goods had soured because when you open the refrigerator upon your return, it would still be cold inside. The other huge plus of knowing your shore power is working is the effect it has on battery charging. It is too easy to discharge a good battery bank and flatline them through a disconnection.

Each boat and each owner has individual and particular circumstances based on seasons, locations, distances, etc. The ability to activate and control various functions on your boat from afar is a separate but related issue. Many of us can start up our car, change the temperature and adjust the lights in our homes remotely as we approach. Telling your boat what you want it to do is a second-level discussion after you first get started by creating a one-way conversation enabling your boat to talk to you.

The following suggestions represent a starting outline of key attributes, indicators and information that you might want to be made aware of when you are away from your boat:

SecurityMotion sensors that detect movement aboard, and cameras that allow you to see from a surveillance perspective what is going on. See who is aboard and

you spend a lot of money installing a system with flashing lights and ringing bells, it's important to first determine what it is that you really want to know about your boat when you're not there.

Ice cubes and a coin

While teaching my TrawlerFest course, "Dialing-In-Your-Trawler," I often emphasize that your boat is always talking to you; the skill you need to hone is learning how to listen. Naturally, it is much easier to stay on top of things when you are aboard, but knowing your vessel's status becomes virtually impossible when you aren't there. The first time I presented this course, I asked for any other suggestions at the end of the session. One gentleman told the class how he would put a few ice cubes in a small plastic tub and put a coin on top of the cubes, then place this setup in his freezer when he left his boat. Of course, we all wanted to learn what the purpose of this was. He told us that if he came back and the coin was still on top, he knew he had not had an



interruption in electricity. But, if the ice cubes melted and the coin dropped to the bottom of the tub, he knew that his refrigerated food was spoiled. This is a simple example of a very basic alert system that all boaters can try.

So, knowing that you can fairly easily set up a remote monitoring system on your boat, what do you want to have your boat tell you? This is personal and depends upon a lot of factors, but I think the most vital intelligence is to confirm your shore power is connected. How many times have you returned to your boat to find out that your input breaker on

check if your lines and fenders are secure. Some systems offer live-feed video streaming. Stay aware of your boat's location through GPS.

Shore power connections and loss of shore power. In addition to refrigerated foods, it can be very expensive if the charge levels of your battery bank's health is endangered.

Bilge pumps Increased water in your bilge and active use of your bilge pumps.

Alarms: Every alarm that you have installed — smoke, carbon monoxide, bilge level, entry, fire, etc.

Status: Interior temperature and humidity. Outside local weather conditions at the dock or anchor age. There are sensors, probes and alerts that can provide you information on just about every detail you want, including refrigeration temperature.

The ability to keep an eye on these functions and have a warning if they are failing or doing something out of the norm is available. The reassurance that all is well will give you peace of mind,

but may also interrupt your bliss away from the water if your boat asks for help. Most of the remote vessel monitoring systems are app-based and send status updates to your smartphone or tablet.

Having had this discussion with many of my clients, I have realized that there are an overwhelming variety of choices, so again, the solution is to determine what you want your boat to tell you and then find the system that best does that. A big driver for most systems is making sure your boat has reliable Wi-Fi.

Take some time talking to other boat owners, attend boat shows to learn what is new and search online to see what is available. Most products are easy to plug in and install; then you can simply download the app, select a subscription plan and create your account.

Getting an early warning indicator of something not functioning correctly and learning about this in real time — not after you return to your boat and it is too late — is one more responsibility

that you must consider as a boat owner. Of course the tried-and-true, old-fashioned method of letting the marina office and your dock mates know what your plans are should be included in your strategy; if you are at the theater or up in the sky with your phone in airplane mode, you won't be able to hear from your boat — and that is, after all, what this is all about.

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