

# Lakeshore marinas navigate rough economy



Written by

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MANITOWOC — Jack Culley's office overlooks Lake Michigan and the Manitowoc Marina, where there are more empty boat slips than he would prefer.

"We're running about 60 to 65 percent (occupied) ... down from about 85 percent," said Culley, the general manager of the \$7 million, 250-slip marina built in 1985. Up the coast about six miles, Kent Anderson owns and operates Seagull Marina in Two Rivers with his brother, Scott.

Anderson said 2008 and 2009 were especially tough for the marine market, but his 50 slips have stayed pretty much full.

Both marina operators said they benefit from a key attribute — a reputation for excellent service, creating good word-of-mouth advertising and customer loyalty.

Just last week, Fred Warner, mechanical supervisor, came into Culley's office to tell

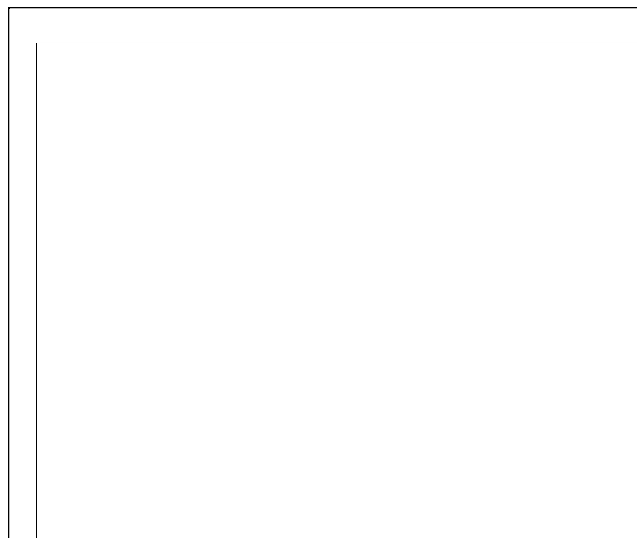
him a previous winter storage customer from Chicago was in Alabama with a 42-foot power catamaran dead in the water as he headed home to Illinois after a Caribbean excursion.

The customer trusted Manitowoc Marina's service expertise, and by week's end, parts were ordered and discussion was under way whether Warner should head to Alabama to make repairs.

Once the boat was seaworthy, it would power its way to Manitowoc for possible further work over this winter, generating revenue for the marina, Culley said.

Manitowoc Marina has established a reputation as a marina that can handle complex mechanical, repair and refinishing, rigging and sailing systems, navigation and electrical work, Culley said, noting several high-profile projects.

Well-known in the sailing world, Terry Kohler's "Evolution" and "Cynosure" have been "high-profile floating billboards for



our paintwork," Culley said.

The city of Manitowoc gets 5 percent of Manitowoc Marina's gross service revenues. The city underwrote the cost of the marina's new heated indoor storage facility, built in 2000.

"It has worked out well for both parties ... we have had a lot of service business we normally wouldn't have gotten," Culley said, noting Manitowoc Marina is paying off a 20-year mortgage on the facility.

Culley is proud and pleased Manitowoc Marina became the eighth to earn "Wisconsin Clean Marina" status.

Staff and boat owners have adopted a variety of environmentally friendly practices linked to aquatic invasive species, boat cleaning, engine and hull maintenance, fuel oil control, solid waste, and wastewater containment and disposal.

### **Wi-Fi, 100 campsites**

Seagull Marina specializes in outboard engines and stern drives, said Anderson, who took over the business with his brother about 15 years ago from their parents, who started the business in the 1970s.

He is a certified Evinrude mechanic along with his service manager-marine technician, Leon Plansky. Anderson said Seagull Marina is the only Evinrude dealer in Manitowoc, Sheboygan, Door and Kewaunee counties.

He said their service is always busy with customers who may be the children or grandchildren of boaters his parents first helped.

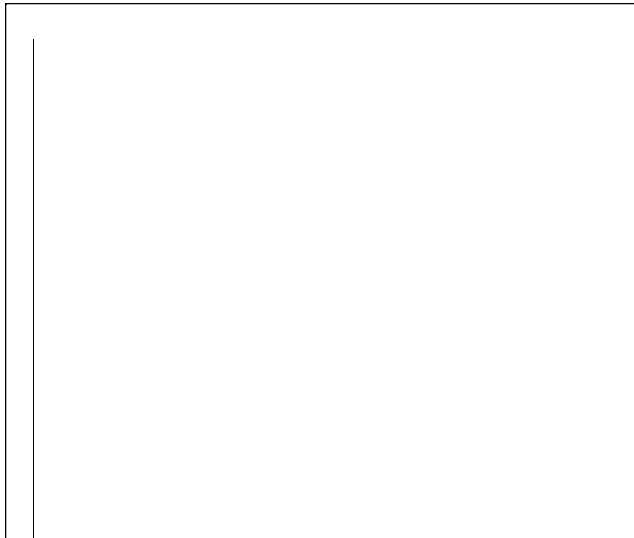
He knows the keys to continued success and maintaining a good reputation with boaters in Manitowoc County and beyond who patronize Seagull Marina.

Anderson said, in addition to having competitive service charges, "get the repair right the first time and get them out of here for the weekend."

A stone's throw from the McDonald's restaurant in the "Cool City," the Anderson brothers have doubled the number of their campsites, to 100.

Wi-Fi is available throughout their nine-acre marina, which features water on three sides.

An expanded showroom features new boats selling from about \$10,000 to \$30,000, including Mirrocraft aluminum-



hulled boats and pontoon boats from Weeres.

The Andersons own the inventory, so "you have to figure out what boats people are going to want ... what size, what color," he said.

## **Out of their control**

Marina owners-operators have to roll with the punches that may come with Great Lakes weather.

On Tuesday, in one of Manitowoc Marina's parking lots, Linda Hackney was applying black paint to the bow stripe of her 25-foot sailboat. "Grace" won't be going into the water this season, the Belgium, Wis., resident said.

She gave high marks to Culley's service department. But she has been having trouble find crew mates and said she respects the lake — and rough conditions that can arise — too much to sail alone.

A cool spring that seemed to hang on forever meant Hackney and many other owners didn't work on their boats in April and May. Culley said his marina was launching boats in July that normally would be in the water by Memorial Day.

Higher water temperatures also can cause a decline in marina activity.

"If the fish decide they're not going to bite, they won't," said Roger Meyers, captain of the charter fishing boat "Toybox," moored

at Seagull Marina for the past four years along with several other charter vessels.

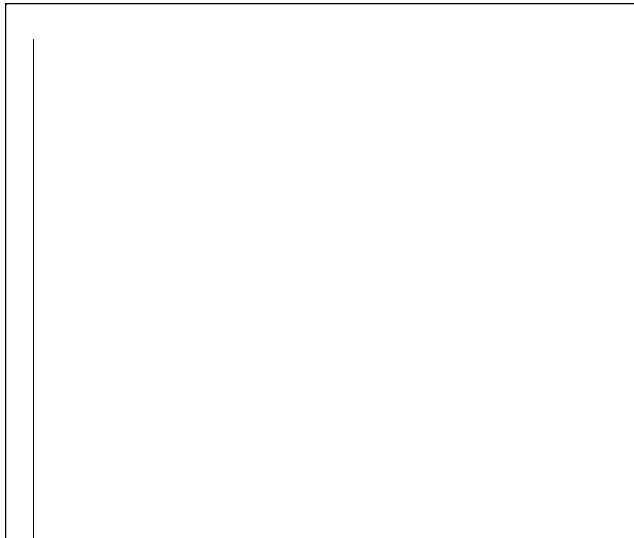
Meyers said salmon and trout prefer the water to be mid-40s to mid-50s, and warmer lake water isn't conducive to the best fishing conditions.

Keith Heberleim, charter captain for 19 years, said business had slowed for his "Willie Bee" but is bouncing back. On Tuesday, he was getting ready to take out a party of six eager to fish from about 1:30 p.m. until sunset.

Getting them out to a good fishing spot would cost more in fuel costs this season than the past several years.

Culley said high fuel costs may be limiting owners' use of their boats. "For a guy with a 30-foot powerboat, two V-8s, going for an afternoon buzz up to Rawley Point and back, he might burn through \$50 to \$74 in gas," he said.

But, despite weather and economic



uncertainties, Anderson and Culley both said they enjoy operating their marinas for the same reason — having customers turn into friends that have the same passion for boating that they do.