

Ten Commandments for Successful One-Design Management

By Gay Lynn

Make no mistake. One-Design classes – you're in an increasingly competitive business. Your "customer" has more and more options, and more class choices. A few casual class volunteers who meet once a year will lose business and watch their membership decline. A few energetic, well-organized volunteers who have a plan and communicate frequently will preside over a healthy, growing one-design class.

Of course it's not quite that simple, but the basics of managing a successful one-design class aren't that complicated, either. There are certain basic "commandments" that can, if followed, put your class on track. These "commandments" have formed the base agenda for US SAILING's One-Design Class Council (ODCC) over quite a few years, and experts from many independent fields have suggested ways of implementing them. The following is combined with some of my own experience running one-design classes and listening to many others, both volunteers and professionals, who are doing the same.

Each class faces a different set of circumstances, but in all of them, the basic commandments still apply.

1. Communicate

To many class members, the newsletter is the Class. Other than the racing experience itself, the newsletter is the only tangible link to the group. It is the glue that bonds the people in the class together, offering feelings of belonging, sharing, and being involved. Include not only regatta results but how-to articles, cruising reports (in a Penguin? Sure, somebody has) and other non-racing activities. Scots _n Water Editor Pat Barry aims to have each class member open up the current issue and say "There's something in it for me." Include friendly encouragement from class officers, fleet profiles and success stories, and people, people, people. Follow the advice of Bagpipe Editor Dave Keran, —I haven't featured Thistles as much as Thistle sailors. I truly believe it is the people in the boats and not the boats themselves that make the Class.¶ Your newsletter editor is probably the most important person in your organization. Help him or her and make them feel appreciated. Go for advertising. It's easy to get (from sail makers, boat builders, accessory makers, etc.), looks great and helps finance a professional-looking product. Publish advertising rates in the masthead. There are as many types of newsletters as there are classes, from the slick and professional Bagpipe to the homemade North American Yngling News. With personal computers, publishing software and the internet, no class has any excuse for not having a regular, readable, and interesting newsletter.

2. Use local fleets as building blocks and their leaders as your conduit to the sailors

You can never do too much to make the local fleet captain feel an essential part of your organization. Give each fleet the tools it needs to expand its membership – to sell the class locally. Personal contact between class officers and fleet leaders is important. Phone calls, email, and visits all help. At a championship, be sure to chat with at least one representative of each fleet. Encourage each fleet to publish its own informal newsletter.

3. Balance continuity and new blood

There is no reason why your enthusiastic and popular chairman, who is just getting a handle on the job, has to step down after a year or two. Get rid of bylaws that are creating turnover unnecessarily at the fleet, national, or international level. A class officer who is having a problem with his responsibilities will be glad to step aside for someone new. Aim for turnover of about 20% a year.

Under the heading of continuity comes the phone number and email address. Most successful classes have someone who is there, year in and year out. If a person calls or emails with a question or an inquiry about the class, this person (whether paid or unpaid) can tell a inquirer where to get his question answered, where to buy a new or used boat, etc. An ideal place to find such a person is among the retired members of your class. They bring a lifelong knowledge of, and love for, the class, and they have the time. For new ideas, add new faces each year. The Etchells Class has not only elected governors but also “co-opted” help. Co-opt someone in the ad business, a lawyer, an intercollegiate sailor, a sail maker - anyone whose advice or viewpoint you could use – and lead them into class management. They’re one source for the 20% or so of new faces and ideas each year.

4. Create enforceable class rules – and enforce them

Who has the responsibility for maintaining the one-design characteristics of a class? The officers? The fleets? The individual owners? The answer, according to US SAILING One-Design Measurer Bob Shiels, is all of the above. The individual owner is responsible for making only legal modifications – and has a stake in keeping all boats one-design to preserve his investment. “Class officers,” says Shiels, “should (a) provide clear, precise, universally understandable rules and plans, (b) distribute promptly the latest class rules and plans to all builders, measurers, class officers, and boat owners, (c) train, qualify, approve, and appoint class measurers at all levels required and (d) take the necessary steps to correct violations of class rules at all levels through spot-check measurements at major regattas and at builders’ yards. The class officers also have the responsibility of reporting any problem and recommending solutions to the offending party.”

5. Treat your builder as a partner

It’s possible that part of the success of manufacturers’ classes stems from the builder’s total involvement with class business. If you make your rules too complicated, too vague, or you don’t enforce them, you won’t have a builder’s support. They’re in business. We’re all lucky that many of the one-design boat builders remaining are deeply committed to the classes they build– and often sail in the class. Be specific and totally literal in class measurement rules. As Olaf Harken (former builder of Vanguard sailboats) suggested (Sailor, March 1985), “tell builders, in numbers instead of verbiage, these are the rules and this is how far you can go... in actual tolerances and numbers.” Include the builder directly in class business. Make sure your builder is on your technical committee, is consulted about rule changes and is part of your promotional efforts.

6. Raise money

Money is essential. Collect it. Raise it. If class members are happy with the class, money is not as sensitive a subject as many think. Class dues and builders’ fees are the basis for most class budgets. Even if class dues are collected at the national level, rely on local fleets for help. Use the carrot (a potluck dinner at which dues are paid) or the stick (you cannot race unless you’ve paid your dues). Give a new owner a couple of newsletter issues free, then insist that he pay up to continue his subscription. Consider other sources of revenue. Sail royalties have given the J/24 class the wherewithal for extensive promotion. Star class merchandise makes money for the class – and has the added benefit of making each member a walking Star class advertisement. A \$12 tote bag or T-shirt might return \$2 per item to the class. If your class has tax-exempt 501(c)(3) status, encourage members to donate used boats, then sell them to enthusiastic newcomers.

7. Let the world know you exist

Public relations is essential and requires planning and follow-up. Appoint or elect a specific person in charge of PR and promotion. In her article, “What’s Ahead for One-Design Sailing”, US SAILING

Inshore Director Lee Parks mentioned some promotion success stories. Organization is the key. Promotion can cost anything from placing a rigged boat and a few fleet members in the local mall (usually free) to manning a corner of the builder's boat show space (free) to magazine ads (expensive but worth it) or online advertising. Budget for a brochure or booklet that presents your class appealingly, and have it available in both online and print format. If you can afford a "showcase" ad in a national magazine's catalog issue, it can generate lots of inquiries. At a One-Design Class Council meeting, advertising executive Mary Prescott of Hill and Knowlton and John Burnham, editor of Sailing World, gave some excellent advice on preparation of publicity:

- a. Keep an up-to-date media list to which publicity and press releases will be sent.
- b. Start off a press release with who, what, where, when, and why.
- c. Prepare a press kit including class background, a brochure, a newsletter and yearbook, a good photo or photos, local contact and phone number/email address.
- d. Send out human-interest stories, as well as class news.

8. Make your championships outstanding events so that people go home from well-run championships inspired – and hooked! Give members as many mementos and trophies as you can possibly hand out. Members are entitled, having spent precious vacation time and money, to well-managed races with good sailing instructions, top-notch judges (preferably certified) and great social events. How do you afford all that? Sponsorship – of everything from the program to sailing instructions to a fried chicken dinner to the trophies and gifts. All it takes is legwork. If you can't find a major sponsor, start small. Hobie has found that small sponsors get involved and become major sponsors.

9. Get everyone involved

Families, tail-enders, newcomers...the event is successful if every element is considered. Hold regattas where there's something for everyone to do. Ask interested wives/husbands/parents to serve on the race committee. Plan social events around something other than talk about the day's race. At one championship, the Hobie 16's ran armadillo races! In the northeast, you can race lobsters, and then eat them (but you can't eat armadillos). Another valuable suggestion from Hobie is A, B, and C levels at championships – no pressure, and you race at the level where you feel most comfortable. Sailors from A and B divisions can also pay off in "big brother/sister style" for tips and encouragement. Former US SAILING Executive Director Tom Ehman recommends running short races in light air. The flukier it is, the wider the variety of winners you'll have. If you begin to feel like you're running a sideshow instead of a one-design class, you're doing something right... which leads to:

10. Make one-design sailing fun!

Former J/Boats president Bob Johnstone has concluded from observing 100 J/24 fleets that the key to success is in the planning and organization of social events that promote good fellowship. "Sailboat racing," he says, "is included as one of the activities." Thistle sailors get together in the off-season for racquetball tournaments. The Marblehead Etchells fleet has a great ski weekend at Mad River Glen, with representatives from eastern fleets trying to win the downhill race. Each class at Atlanta Yacht Club gets together once a month – all year round. Encourage clinics and as much give and take among class members as possible. Try a "winner's roast" at a potluck supper after racing. Take the attitude, as marine journalist and former one-design champion Tom Linskey says, that the customer (class member) has to be "wooded, taught, entertained, informed and practically guaranteed of a fulfilling leisure-time activity."

Most classes are following some or even many of the “ten commandments,” but there isn’t a class around that can’t benefit from a planning session on how to implement all ten. The classes Bill and I sail –Etchells, Snipe and Mistral – are success stories, but we all have a lot to learn. The effort involved in putting all the pieces together will be rewarded many, many times over by the satisfaction of getting your class moving and the innate pleasure of sharing good times with special friends. Work on the “commandments”... and watch the results.

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