

TURNING A TEEN JOB INTO A BUSINESS

Entrepreneur who started out washing and waxing boats has built a full-service marine operation

By Rich Armstrong / Managing Editor

Scott Sundholm knew at an early age that he wanted a career in the marine industry.

Now 33, Sundholm is founder and president of S&S Marine, a growing service company in Old Saybrook, Conn.

The Connecticut native grew up spending summers aboard his parents' Trojan F32, and as a teenager he found work washing and waxing neighboring boats at Saybrook Point Marina. "I grew up around boats," he says. "That was the weekend routine. I always knew this is what I wanted to do and planned to make it work as a livelihood."

"You have to grow within your means steadily, but you can't bite off more than you can chew."

— S&S Marine founder Scott Sundholm

While in high school, Sundholm earned money detailing boats with his brother Drew which was the start of S&S in 1998. He put himself through Fairfield University while working full time, earning a business degree in 2006, and continued to build S&S. About 75 percent of his business as a subcontractor was bottom painting, shrink-wrapping, fiberglass/gelcoat repair and detailing. "I was just trying to do something I love for work," he says. "I had a vision of creating a business focused on the attention to detail and quality that customers appreciate."

Sundholm's first physical address was an office space and work shed that he rented at a local marina. Four years ago, he bought an old service station that had been closed for more than a decade. "I remem-



Scott Sundholm launched the service company S&S Marine and is focused on growing his business.

ber driving by the place and thinking this would be a great location if I could ever make it work," he says of the Old Saybrook shop. It is directly off Interstate 95, less than a half-mile from the western shore of the lower Connecticut River, and about three miles north of Long Island Sound.

Sundholm opened his roadside-frontage brick-and-mortar shop, focusing on detailing, mechanical services, repowers, electrical work, fiberglass repair, gelcoat and paint, winterizing, shrink-wrapping, and parts and supplies. "If I see a need, I'm not afraid of being hungry for it," he says. "I seek out work. I try to be proactive."

He expanded his business, and customers returned season after season. He built up a fleet of five service vehicles, all emblazoned with the

bright red S&S Marine logo, which are dispatched from the shop for remote service jobs.

Young blood

Sundholm's staff now includes five full-time employees and another 10 to 15 seasonal part-time workers. "It's hard to find people that are young who want to do this work and have the energy and passion for it," he says. "I'm looking for people who want to go on this journey with me."

Sundholm says he sees the value of hiring quality young staff. "When investing in training for certification, to me it makes a lot more sense to do that with someone who's interested in making this a career," he says. That said, he has some employees who have years of experience, such as a part-time, semiretired marine mechanic/engineer who serves as a mentor to younger staffers.

Sundholm recently joined the start-up Connecticut Young Marine Professionals group, comprising the next generation in small family businesses (see story on facing page). In March, Sundholm and his staff hosted the CYMP's second meeting. "If you care about the industry — and I do — we need new people to train and apprentice if we want to



The headquarters is inside a renovated former roadside automotive shop.

have an industry going forward,” he says. “I have a lot of passion for this, and I’m not planning on going anywhere any time soon.” Sundholm believes that the most important thing to come out of the new organization is a unity that will strengthen the marine industry going forward.

Work ethic

“Attention to detail is something I’m big on. The little details are our signature,” he says. For example, the boats he stores over the winter have the S&S logo stenciled on the shrink wrap, as does the wood he uses for boat blocking. “I take pride in my equipment and facilities and try to brand S&S on everything.”

Sundholm also has an eye for innovative advertising, such as a QR code on a customer satisfaction brochure distributed at the winter boat shows. Scanning the code with a mobile device launched video messages that S&S sent to a customer as updates about the boat’s progress. “In today’s culture it’s generally accepted that as a customer you have to chase people doing work for you, and I find that unacceptable,” he says. “The days of an endless pool of customers in this industry are long gone.”

“Customer satisfaction is our No. 1 priority,” he says, with “great communication every step of the way” — from proposal to intake to work to delivery. “I like to under-promise and over-deliver,” he says.

Room to grow

Still, his business was missing one element: a waterfront location. An opportunity arose just a half-mile from Sundholm’s shop in the former Seth Persson Boat Builders yard on the Connecticut River, which was abandoned in 1980. “There was something there, and I could see the potential,” Sundholm says.

He bought the property, broke ground in the summer of 2012, and has since been developing a waterfront service facility. The former boatbuilding shop features a 120-foot floating service dock and a concrete ramp for hauling and launching boats.

In the fall, boats can be hauled directly into the building, where in quick succession they pass through an environmentally compliant wash, fol-



Before and after: The long-vacant Seth Persson Boat Builders yard on the Connecticut River has been turned into a modern service station for the 2014 season.



The launch: Over the winter, the concrete boat launch was poured and is now ready for the season.

lowed by winterizing and shrink-wrapping, before they are moved behind the building for outside storage. The process works in reverse in the spring. Sundholm designed the assembly-line model for efficiency. During the season, he says, his new valet service center will haul a boat for repair or service on a Monday and have it ready and dockside for the owner come Friday, in most instances. Eventually he plans to have slips for about 20 boats along his dock, about a half-dozen of those as seasonal slips.

Sundholm keeps an open business model and has built a partnership with Wilde Yacht Sales, a regional

Nordic Tugs dealer in neighboring Essex, with the companies mutually promoting one another. While growing his services, Sundholm says he won’t stray from his core business and will operate out of the old site as well as the waterfront location.

In the future, he is considering supplementing his brokerage business with new boats. “You have to grow within your means steadily, but you can’t bite off more than you can chew,” he says. “I want customers that can grow with me. It’s a people business, and I get a lot of satisfaction from the relationships and the services S&S provides.” ■

‘Young bloods’ organize

Sam Crocker is the assistant manager at Crocker’s Boatyard in New London, Conn., and he was born and raised in the marine industry. At 24, he is a fifth-generation Crocker — along with brother Greg — and is working his way up the ranks of the family business.

In many ways he is a typical 20-something member of generation Y. He has a degree in business management from Southern Connecticut State University, but teaches snowboarding during the winter months. He plans to eventually take over the yard — established in 1881 by his great-great grandfather, Henry A. Crocker — and its 230 slips at the mouth of the Thames River from his Uncle Skip and his father, Dave. For now, Crocker is learning the ropes, moving boats and working in the service, parts and customer service departments.

He is also a member of the Young Professionals of Eastern Connecticut, a networking group. During the winter, he came up with the idea for a marine industry-focused group (inspired in part by the “40 or younger and flush with ideas” article in the December 2013 issue of Soundings Trade Only). Connecticut Young Marine Professionals was launched in January as a subgroup of the Connecticut Marine Trades Association.

CMTA president Grant Westerson became an immedi-



The founding members of Connecticut Young Marine Professionals (from left): Sam Crocker of Crocker’s Boatyard, Heather Petzold of Petzold’s Marine Center and Scott Sundholm of S&S Marine.

ate advocate. “It’s a graying industry, so young people are vital, and these kids know a lot more about the industry just from watching their parents and uncles work in it all these years,” he says. “I tell them: ‘Don’t hesitate to ask questions of the older people in the industry. I’ve been in the industry for 50 years, and I don’t want you to stumble where I stumbled. I want every step you make to be a productive one.’”

After publicizing the new group in a CMTA newsletter, Crocker scheduled the first meeting at the Hartford Boat

Show in late January. “My goal was to get 18 people; 24 showed up, and we ran out of chairs,” he says. The participants were a mix of general managers, yard workers and small-business owners. Scott Sundholm, founder/president of S&S Marine in Old Saybrook, Conn., was the elder statesman at 33.

The group brainstormed about what it might accomplish and came up with a mission statement: “To provide an energetic platform for our members to grow and promote themselves personally and professionally, as well as introducing teaching and encouraging younger individuals and the general community toward the marine industry.”

They agreed to meet monthly at businesses around the state. “It’s good to see the younger people come forward, and this group is going to work as a transition to the CMTA because they’re already going to know people in the industry,” Crocker says.

He says the benefits of networking and cross-learning from other members of the group already have proved valuable. As a first act, the group is taking over the scholarship fund for continuing education for young people entering the industry. The major component to fundraising is the annual CMTA golf tournament in July.

“An infusion of younger blood is going to revitalize the scholarship fund,” Crocker says. “Our first initiative is big enough to make a difference, and we’re really excited about it.”

— Rich Armstrong

(CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT) NONE; PAUL TORTORA (3); RICH ARMSTRONG (BOTTOM)