

SENATOR BOATS

A PROVEN BRAND



Established by Wayne McKinley, Senator Boats has cemented itself as one of the prominent aluminum boat manufacturers in New Zealand. Based in Napier, Senator prides itself on providing boats with many features incorporated in the 'standard' boat. Freddy Foote talks with the company's owner, Wayne McKinley.

When did you start Senator Boats? We started the company 1996. I had been building boats for family and a few friends but then a local boat yard wanted one, then another and it just grew from there. Our first boat was a 5.5m pontoon.

How many boats have you built? In the 18-years, we've built in the vicinity of around 2000 boats. They're marketing themselves out there pretty well. We continually get enquiries from people who have talked to someone who owns one, and then they come to us to find out more.

How is the market for you right now? We're flat out. We hear that our boats are so well priced in the market; as long as we are building them efficiently we'll be able to maintain our current pricing structure. We now have eight dealers throughout New Zealand and we do sell a few boats overseas through online enquiries.

Why should I buy a Senator? We've been around for a long time, and are a proven brand. Everyone likes the ride they give. They have quite a deep vee compared to other pontoon-designed boats, and they are one of the better-looking pontoon boats on the market. We're very proud of our deep vee hull shape, and the shape of our pontoons. We developed the hull in the waters here off the Hawkes Bay coast, which can be very rough; there is no shelter or protection

here, so the boat has to perform in the roughest of conditions. We have an 18-deg deadrise at the transom and then forward at the shoulders we increase that to 26 deg. It has always worked, so we haven't changed it.

We have many boats in survey, company/ charter/rescue etc. We only use reputable marine grade aluminum plate. There are increasing numbers of manufacturers using cheaper aluminum plate from China which I don't believe has the quality of what we've been using for years. It worries me how long that cheaper product will last once used to build a boat.

What is the most popular model? Our most popular model is the RH620 of which we have built almost 400. After that our 580 model is probably the next most popular.

How has the market changed since you built your first boat? Aluminium boats are more accepted in the marketplace now and fiberglass boats have taken a big hit. More people are choosing an alloy boat as it allows a large degree of customisation during the build process. Plus, I believe that long term an alloy boat doesn't require as much maintenance over the course of its life. You can leave an alloy boat outside in the weather and nothing will happen to it.



1. The company use the latest router and plate press. 2. Bigger hardtop pontoon boats are proving extremely popular. 3. Depending on future demand the company may look at expanding the factory. 4. Senator Boats are building around 130 boats per year.



Are there advantages or disadvantages of being a provincial manufacturer? I don't think there are really any disadvantages. Properties in the provinces are usually cheaper than in the bigger cities, so our overheads are lower. It is hard to find the staff at times, but we have been lucky in sourcing the right people. We get younger guys coming in looking for a career in boat building and we try our best to get them started and to put them through the apprenticeship training programme with NZ Marine.

Are buyers more discerning and demanding on what they want? Buyers all have their own ideas. People have often been thinking for years about what they would have in their 'dreamboat'. We have lots of ideas come from the public, and we certainly look to undertake those ideas for them if it's feasible and can make it work.

Is there a trend to bigger boats? At the moment there is. From around 6m upwards we have a lot of orders for hardtop models. We also have a non-pontoon Senator range called Typhoon, which start at 6m though to 8.5m, of which we sell a handful during the year, but the bulk of our orders are for the pontoon models.

Have you changed your building techniques or materials since you started? Gone are the days of patterns and a skill saw that's for sure! We moved to a router cutter some years ago and also

upgraded to a 6 metre press brake as well. It just saves a lot of time and is more accurate.

What is your capacity annually and how big can you build? At the moment we are building around 130 boats per year which see's us at maximum capacity. We can build boats up to 17m in length, but we find the smaller models keep us busy. We've recently taken on a couple of new staff members, which takes the total to 14.

How do you see the future? I think there will be a shift towards pontoon boats being put into survey as they meet the buoyancy requirements. Plate boats will struggle to meet the new buoyancy rules, which will require them to have higher levels of buoyancy in the gunwales. For us here at Senator, we may look at expanding the factory. If it stays busy like it is and the dealers want more boats, we will have to look at expanding our production capabilities.

Any new models on the horizon? It's always a hard one to consider. Why fix something if it isn't broke? Particularly when that model is going so well. We make little tweaks here and there, but we're not looking to make wholesale changes to the model line-up.