

Setting Up Your Boat for Direct Marketing

Greg Fisk

SeaFisk Consulting and Alaska Sea Grant Marine Advisory Program

12

Using your boat for direct marketing can be pretty simple. Retailing your catch at the dock may not require much change at all to your basic fishing operation.

Direct marketing from your boat can also be complex. For example, setting up to process salmon or prawns on board a “direct-market vessel” can entail considerable investment, and you’ll have to jump through a lot of regulatory hoops.

The one thing all good direct-market set-ups have in common is plenty of forethought. Legal requirements governing direct marketing and onboard process activities vary from place to place. Your first task is to contact the relevant state and local agencies where you plan to operate.

Dockside Sales

The most basic form of direct marketing is retailing your catch to the public directly from your fishing boat. Technically, you may not need to alter your boat at all. You can haul a fish out of the hold and hand it directly to your customer. But, practically speaking, there are things you should do to improve your set-up. Help make your customers’ trip to the dock to buy seafood an enjoyable experience and they will be more likely to seek you out again.

Try to moor in an easily accessible place. Long walks to the end of a float can discourage customers — particularly if they have to lug a heavy load of fish back to their car. Work with your harbormaster to establish a service-oriented experience for seafood consumers at your harbor.

Keep your boat shipshape and clean. Extra care is warranted when retailing to the public. A processor may be perfectly understanding of a lot of gear on deck, and fish coming out of bloody slush ice, but many retail customers will be put off. Fish ready for sale should look as good as those at a seafood counter.

No pets. It’s unsanitary having dogs and cats running around where you are selling food. It’s also unwise to allow rambunctious kids to play around on deck. If the kids aren’t taking part in selling product, you should confine them to the wheelhouse or the dock.

Maintain a covered area. In some places, it’s required. A cover protects product from what regulations refer to as “avian fecal contamination.” If you can set up a cover that also offers your customers standing on the dock a little shelter from the rain, that’s a big plus, too.

Keep enough change on hand. If you are hoping to sell somebody a couple of nice fat salmon for \$25 apiece — or more — be prepared to break a \$100 bill. A lot of dockside fish sales are made on weekends, when banks are closed, so think about this in advance. Having a cash box makes things easier. If you have policies like “Local Checks Only – ID Required,” it’s a good idea to post them where they can be easily seen.

Use nice signage. A scrap of cardboard with a hastily scribbled note in marker pen doesn’t speak well of your business. Make some decent signs. If you can’t print neatly or spell properly find a friend, relative or fellow fisherman who can. Include a price list. A chalkboard can look very nice and allow you to make changes as needed. For directional signs and other signage off the boat, be accurate and clear. Don’t forget to check with the harbormaster and other authorities about posting signs in public areas.

Bags or boxes. Customers need a way to get their purchases back to their car in some sort of packaging that won’t leak fish juices all over everything. Whatever you use, make sure you have enough on hand. Waxed boxes are great and people are often willing to pay for them, rather than have the carpets of their new BMW slimed.

Carry the fish to the customer’s car. This is a nice touch if you can break away to do it. Two or three big cohos in a 33-gallon plastic garbage bag can be a real load. Obviously, you have to weigh this against being away from the boat. This is the sort of service that’ll get you remembered and referred to other potential customers.

Be a good Scout – In your personal compartment and

Help make your customers’ trip to the dock to buy seafood an enjoyable experience and they will be more likely to seek you out again.

the way you do business, it helps to be “Trustworthy, Helpful, Friendly, Courteous, Clean,” as per the Boy Scout Oath. Treat customers honestly. Be prepared to answer questions. Do your best not to be surly — “sirs” and “ma’ams” don’t hurt — and don’t look or act like a slob. You’re going to get some customers who are stupid, unpleasant or even downright hostile. Be prepared to tough them out with a smile. Finally, be business-like.

So, You Want to Process and Direct-Market Your Catch?

Welcome to the club. This has been a dream of lots of fishermen who want to improve the return they get from their catch. Some sell their catch to regular processors on shore – many freezer trollers for example. But, for many, the motivation is direct marketing. For all such operations, a few basic concepts apply.

Space - Get as much room as you can afford. If you are starting from scratch, buy the biggest platform you can afford. If you are constrained by your existing boat, be realistic in your expectations and do all you can to free-up space.

Think out your process from start to finish. How is the catch landed and moved around the boat or facility? What will happen to the catch, and where? How will it be stored?

The specific regulations you will have to follow vary from one jurisdiction to another. The suggestions made here are only general. There is no substitute for reading and understanding the regulations yourself. Talk with the responsible authorities before setting up your vessel or small shore operation for direct market processing. Regulatory authorities want to help you succeed and often can supply a lot of good advice but, remember, their first responsibility is to ensure public food safety.

Surfaces - The surfaces that come into direct contact with your product must be of **food-grade materials** — that is, materials that are easy to clean and sanitize, do not impart tastes or odors and do not promote bacterial growth and contamination. Regulations in your area may allow properly treated wood surfaces, but non-porous metal and food grade plastics are your best bets, and, when it comes to metals, go stainless if you can. A lot of operations use aluminum tables, but aluminum corrodes and pits easily. Good-quality stainless steel is durable, easy to clean and resistant to chemicals and corrosion. It’s expensive but bargains may be found by shopping at restaurant supply houses. Often standard restaurant shelving, cutting tables and sink set-ups can be used directly or customized to work on your boat.

Non-food contact surfaces in your processing area must also be addressed. First, processing functions need protection from the elements and from outside sources of contamination.

Many boats use converted bait sheds for processing purposes. Aluminum bait sheds can work just fine, but pay attention to:

- **The interior framing**, to make sure surfaces drain well, don’t readily accumulate dirt and contaminants and are easy to reach with cleaners and sanitizers. These principles apply to processing shelters made of other materials as well. In an ideal situation, on-board processing areas should be lined with impervious, easy-to-clean, non-porous paneling, just like that used in on-shore processing operations.
- **Possible sources of contamination**, such as fuel or hydraulic lines, which should be re-routed and/or shielded to prevent drips or leaks contaminating product or product contact surfaces. This may include running such lines through protective conduit or routing lines below or outside processing areas. For hydraulics, consider switching to food-grade fluid if re-routing is difficult or costly. You may have to do this anyway if you are using hydraulic power in your processing line, for instance, to power a conveyor or similar machinery.
- **The floor of your processing area**, which should be designed to drain well and be easily flushed, cleaned and sanitized. False decks that are common on many fishing boats can readily accumulate gurry and contaminants. Grating should be easy to lift and clean.

Lighting - Your processing area should be bright. This is important for properly working product and for effective cleanup and sanitation. Regulations may prescribe required illumination levels. Lighting in processing areas should be with safety-type fixtures suitable for marine environments and designed to prevent breakage and contamination of product and surfaces.

Water supply - Regulations in your area are likely to be quite specific about process water supply. Clean seawater may or may not be acceptable for primary rinsing, product transport and initial product processing operations. Check regulations. In any case, you should always:

- Avoid any highly turbid or nearshore waters;
- Never use water taken from inside a harbor;
- Stay away from other vessels while processing;
- Do not flush your head or pump out sanitary holding tanks while drawing processing water. (Your water and sanitary systems should have valves that physically prevent this possibility, even if that is not a requirement of regulations in your area.)

Regulatory authorities want to help you succeed and often can supply a lot of good advice but, remember, their first responsibility is to ensure public food safety.

- Make sure that your processing water system is segregated from any other pumping system. Cross-connections with bilge pumps and other non-sanitary systems are not permissible.

Systems are available to provide continuous treatment of processing water with chlorine or other agents, including acidified chlorine dioxide and ozone. Such systems work well and may be required in your area. Batch chlorination of final rinsewater may be an acceptable alternative, if allowed by regulation. If using batch chlorination, give products a thorough final rinse in the chlorinated solution, keep careful tabs on residual chlorination levels (such checks are likely specified in regulation) and change the solution frequently.

Effective cleaning and sanitizing starts with good organization. Your processing area should be simple and uncluttered.

Cleaning and Sanitizing - “Cleanliness is next to godliness” and nowhere is that more important than in seafood processing. You simply must keep your processing area clean. Effective cleaning and sanitizing starts with good organization. Your processing area should be simple and uncluttered. Eliminate hard-to-clean nooks and crannies and keep processing surfaces accessible. Bleeding tanks, cutting tables and other processing areas should be flushed regularly and kept free of excessive build-up of blood and gurry while processing.

Cleaning and sanitizing should begin immediately after you have finished processing. Start with a good washdown with plenty of clean water. Follow with a good scrubbing of all surfaces with a detergent that is approved for food processing areas. Do not use phenolic cleaners such as Lysol® or PineSol®. Keep a good set of scrub brushes on hand, specifically for these cleaning purposes. Brushes and plenty of elbow grease can do a fine job. Remember to give a little extra effort to those hard-to-reach places that can harbor bacteria. Thoroughly rinse off all detergent. Next, apply sanitizing solution throughout the processing area. An effective sanitizing solution can be prepared with simple household bleach and clean water.

Pressure washers are excellent for cleaning and sanitizing and can significantly reduce your workload. Pressure washer units designed for marine use are available at reasonable prices. They can be mounted in your engine room, with outlets conveniently located on deck, where they are needed.