



## Technology is changing the face of today's boatcovers and suntops

BY JEROME A. KONCEL

Advances in technology have allowed the simple cut and sew industry known as marine boatcovers and suntops to become quite sophisticated, according to Russ West, vice president of marine sales for Dowco in Lebanon, Mo. The result is better covers and suntops from the viewpoint of being better quality and more consistent.

"How customers select a boat cover and what are their options has changed over the years," West noted, "but what it comes down to for the customer is an easy-to-use, high-quality product."

### Partly the same

Teaching customers what to look for in selecting a boat cover has not changed much over the years, West noted. There are three places a consumer can purchase a boat cover/suntop from, and there are three basic types of covers they can order.

Consumers can order a boat cover from the manufacturer as part of their orders, West said, or the dealer/manufacturer can add it to the final setup to close the deal. Once they get their boats, consumers can then go out and purchase a boat cover. Finally after several years, boaters can purchase a cover for their vessels.

In ordering boatcovers, there are three basic types available and they come with trade-offs in price differences, as well as performance specifications.

The most basic boatcover type is the universal one. "The universal cover fits a range of boats based on the length and

beam width," West said. Thus, for example, there are universal covers to fit 17-19 foot boats with deep-V hulls. These are traditionally the lowest price boatcovers and customers can usually pick these up at their local mass merchandisers.

The second type of cover is known as the semi-custom boatcover. As the name indicates, these covers are semi-customized, meaning they are designed to fit specific models coming from boat manufacturers. "Manufacturers' boats come off the production lines, and cover manufacturers are able to model covers/patterns based on the finished product," West said.

The semi-custom covers offer pretty good protection from the weather and the elements. They are typically used either for trailering or storage, but not usually for both, although some manufacturers are now producing boatcovers that work well for both functions.

The third type of boatcover is the "custom cover," which is made to fit snugly over a specific boat. Typically, these covers are made for boats whose interior or exterior are changed after they come off the production line.

"In the past, people motoring around on boats that were 5-10 years old only had one option in selecting boatcovers. They had to purchase a customized boat cover," West said. "Today, however, Dowco and other manufacturers are able to use the models for these boats and supply the semi-custom covers." West notes that Dowco can go back as far as the 1980s to supply semi-customized boatcovers to boaters.

### Partly different

Dealers can help boaters select the proper covers for their boats by asking some simple questions. What type of protection does the boater want from the boatcover? Is the boater using the cover to protect the boat during trailering? Is the boater using the cover to protect the boat during storage? How much money is the boater willing to spend?

Answers to these questions will tell the dealer that the owner is looking for protection of their prized possessions during transportation. This cover should be a snug fit over the boat and protect it from the elements, whether that be different temperatures, wind, rain, or even snow.

However, if the person is simply looking to have a cover that will protect the boat during storage, with the major goal of keeping dust off the interior, then a universal cover might be a good fit. If the boat is going into a dry storage facility, the boater should ask if this a climate-controlled facility and where the boat will be stacked.

"An important part of making boatcovers is the materials the suppliers are using to making their boatcovers. "It used to be that most covers were made from a canvas or a cotton woven material to which various coatings were applied," West said. Today, suppliers such as Dowco with Clima-plus line of covers and others are using polyester-dyed materials designed specifically for marine applications.

"It's not unusual today to find suppliers that can be used both for saltwater and fresh water applications," West noted. "Material technology has come a long way in the last decade."

At the same time, dealers should ask their customers if the materials are breathable or not. "The good thing with breathable materials is that there is not a mildew or mold problem," West noted. On the other hand, such materials repel water, but are not water resistant, meaning they don't necessarily keep water from reaching the interior of the boat.

As might be expected, the better the fit, the better the protection offered by the boatcovers. "That's why many boaters should not just be concerned with materials, but should also see how snug the fit is on their boats," West said. ⚓