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IBEX: Three newbies, one goal

By IBI Magazine

On opening day of IBEX, the number of visitors in the exhibit hall appeared relatively light compared to last year. But while veteran exhibitors were worrying about whether this would last during the entire three-day run of the show, a handful of first-time exhibitors had high expectations. Three startup companies, in particular, were ready to take on the US boatbuilder market with products that relied on technical innovations to distinguish themselves from what is currently on the market.

John Kujawa, president of Lumitec, a Florida-based manufacturer of LED lights, said by noon of opening day that he had already received orders from two boatbuilders and a "strong expression of interest" from a national distributor. "We wanted to use the show as a way to get our name out there and demonstrate our technical expertise," said Kujawa. "We also wanted to educate purchasing managers about what makes a good LED and more about thermal management."

With LED lighting being the big buzzword among marine manufacturers, Kujawa sees it as his mission to inform them about misconceptions with the technology. LED lights, said Kujawa, differ greatly in expected service life, efficiency and overall usability. They also can generate more heat than comparably powered incandescent fixtures. "We have specialized software applications to understand the thermal dynamics of a lighting system," said Kujawa. "We've also set up a full machine shop on site, have local suppliers who do our printed circuit boards, and do salt spray tests and full-metal fabrications."

This in-house control of the development and production process allows the company to develop prototypes in three weeks. "I saw a big opportunity in the marine industry in accelerating the speed of development around new LED technologies," said Kujawa. "The pace of product development in the marine industry felt very slow to me, but LED technology is developing very rapidly. By the time most manufacturers bring a new product to market in a year or two, it's already obsolete. We're able to increase that production pace exponentially and turn that into a positive for our clients." Kujawa has developed dozens of lighting styles that were on display at the Lumitec booth.

Scott Sutherland, president of Burnewiin, was also upbeat about his line of high-end universal mounts and accessories. "We saw there was a huge hole in these types of systems," said Sutherland. "But what the other guys were doing were working around price. We didn't look at price points but focused on quality. We see the line as a type of functional but expensive jewelry to dress up the boat."

The list of accessories for the mounts includes rod-holders, barbecue stands, and even a fishing knife that is housed in a sheath that fits into the universal mount. The equipment looks well-designed and constructed. "We are professional product designers and have designed everything from unmanned aircraft to baby carriers for bikes," said Sutherland. "We have a full machine shop on site. We just saw the opportunity in the marine industry for this type of system — one that will dress up a boat rather than degrade it."

Sutherland has turned over distribution to Ocean Equipment, which distributes over a dozen other brands in the US. "We found that we were turning down work as product designers to focus on marketing this line," said Sutherland. "It just made more sense to let Ocean Equipment handle that end of it, while we focused on product design."

Perhaps the most ambitious startup at IBEX, and certainly one of the most notable booths, was Caudwell Marine. The South African company is hoping to make inroads into the US boatbuilder market with a new line of innovative engine/drive systems that are a hybrid between outboards and sterndrives.

Caudwell Marine's Axis Drive gas engines, which are currently in 250hp, 300hp and 350hp configurations, were the result of a five-year R&D process. "We did the R&D and opened the business 18 months ago," said Lloyd Williams, international marketing manager. "We are aiming at the high end of the market, and dollar for dollar, we are up there with the higher-end products. But we feel that we offer some technological advantages."

Williams said that the Axis engines feature a number of design breakthroughs in performance and technology. Their 45-degree angle of the block also provides boatbuilders with easier installation and more cockpit space. The all-stainless exterior will also prevent corrosion. The engines are based on Nissan Infinity engine blocks. "We've been working with boatbuilders like Pursuit and Chaparral to test the product," says Williams. "We got quite a few Pursuits in South Africa, have done the sea trials there, and are ready to sell to the US market. We realize it's a tough time here, but it might also be a good time for builders to see what is new on the market."

Williams said the company will also be making a similar big splash at METS, with hopes of breaking into that market. "We currently only have gas engines, but we're working on a diesel," said Williams. "We think that will appeal to both the US and European markets."

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