

# 6 Ways to Modernize Your Marina to Meet Boater Expectations



Learn how modernizing your marina operations with technology can help you meet boater expectations and be more efficient – without losing meaningful customer interactions.





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## TRADITIONAL MARINA OPERATIONS DON'T MEET BOATER EXPECTATIONS

Marinas, resorts, retail stores, and other types of businesses are experiencing a wave – and it's not the kind our industry usually handles. This wave is digital: technology has swept into every part of the buying process, even in some of the oldest, most traditional industries. Technology has changed boater expectations from booking a slip to paying for monthly storage to grabbing ice and snacks. They expect up-to-date technology at each point in the marina purchasing process.

And while some marina owners may hold on to outdated, highly manual processes for operating their business, one critical factor should convince you to adopt more tech-savvy methods: boater expectations. The [fastest growing segment of boat owners](#) is younger, more diverse, and highly educated. Many are busy professionals who are used to incorporating technology in nearly every other part of their lives, particularly when shopping. They don't want to wait around on your dock to fill paper forms out by hand or walk back and forth to and from a single office location to make a payment.

This guide will help you understand how to become more efficient at meeting modern boater expectations without sacrificing the human touch you like to maintain. It shows how technology has impacted each step of a typical marina transaction – from booking to arrival to post-purchase follow-up. It also includes examples of cutting-edge companies in similar industries like Airbnb and Toast have navigated shifting buyer expectations and the business impacts of adopting technology.

Let's start by diving into the first step of any marina transaction: research and booking.





## **OFFER ONLINE BOOKINGS AND INQUIRIES**

In other areas of their lives, boaters are used to convenience and flexibility through technology. They book stays at hotels online when traveling, reserve dining, or order food and groceries through an app on their phone. In other cases, they might use a messenger app to ask a question about an item, or make a last-minute change to their order.

Given the trends in bookings and reservations in many other industries, not offering some type of online option is leaving revenue on the table. Many of your marina customers – particularly the younger generation of boaters – will discover your services online. They may want to book a slip as part of a broader itinerary they are booking on several different websites. Alternatively, some might need to secure space at the marina while they are out on the water, already heading in your direction. Both of these buying scenarios require a strong digital presence.

If you aren't offering your prospects and customers a way to find your slip online, you run the risk of losing out on business. It's irresponsible for modern marinas to ignore the prevalence of online booking technology in the boating sector.



## *Industry Example: OpenTable*

OpenTable is a San Francisco-based startup that allows diners to make reservations at local restaurants. According to company founder Chuck Templeton, he was inspired to form the company after seeing his wife spend hours trying to book a table at a restaurant on the phone. Its business model focuses on providing value to both consumers and restaurants.

Diners worldwide get access to a huge array of different restaurants in their area, plus suggestions on new and popular options based on what other users are saying. They can book a table at a specific time and change or cancel a reservation using either a computer or phone – all completely free of charge.

From the restaurant's perspective, one of OpenTable's main benefits is creating a single system to handle all steps of the reservation process, from when a customer first books the table on to follow-up surveys and marketing offers. It offers restaurants flexible plans that start at less than \$50 per month to fit into the budget of any mom-and-pop cafe or fine dining establishment.

OpenTable has become a **massive success** by streamlining all the different elements of the restaurant reservation process into one single system:

- As of Q4 2019, OpenTable was seating over 130 million diners a month and over 1.5 billion per year
- OpenTable's restaurant network includes nearly 60,000 restaurants in over 80 countries
- In 2014, the company was acquired and taken private for \$2.6 billion



## HOW TO GET STARTED WITH ONLINE BOOKINGS AND INQUIRIES

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To start, you don't need a highly sophisticated online reservation system with many different modes and interface options. You can begin by setting up your site with a form to get all the information and documents needed, allowing you to confirm availability and the reservation quickly. Ensure all form data is stored in a central location so assigning slips and other spaces happen more smoothly.

Eventually, you should make it a goal to transition to a more powerful digital tool that allows prospects to book a slip or mooring directly from their phone or computer. Investing in a system that allows you to manage reservations, communicate with customers and centralize information is a smart decision. Still, it's a point that may take you some time to reach.

As you work towards this shift, you can help online prospects by giving them information and answering common questions. Be sure also to have an easy way for people to contact you directly if they can't find what they want, such as an email or phone number. Finally, don't forget [some good photos](#) to help them visualize their experience at your dock.

## HOW TO KEEP IT HUMAN

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We see several marina owners who are hesitant to adopt online booking because it causes them to lose the human element. The important thing to remember is that allowing digital booking doesn't have to come at the cost of customer service or relationship building. As a marina owner, you've already communicated with boaters for years. Digital tools will not interrupt that – if anything, they only enhance it because more of your company personality can shine through earlier in the process. Think about the difference between working with a live chat agent to get questions answered and reading a picture and a few bullet points on a website.

Adding some fun with a lighter message, joke, or even a clever pun is okay. Above all, do your best to keep every portion of your online booking, brochure, or reservations site authentic to your real voice as a marina.



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## USE DIGITAL CONTRACTS AND DOCUMENTATION

Once a boater has completed the booking process, the next step is to collect contracts and signatures. Traditional methods involve a contract being printed, filled out by hand, and then mailed or faxed to a customer's location so they can send it back. Even if you draw up a contract on-site, not every boater will want to stop by your office immediately to sign paperwork and provide their license and insurance. None of this makes you any less responsible for collecting all this information, though, or any less liable if an issue comes up with a customer that doesn't have a signed contract.

Technology has simplified the collection of documents and signing of contracts for both sides of the transaction. Not only are e-signature and digital documents convenient for customers, but they also allow your operations team to complete a critical step in the purchasing process with almost zero manual effort. With e-signature tools, there's no need to wait for customers to stop by your marina office or expect them to sign documents and then put them in the mail. Not to mention the COVID-era preferences of many customers to minimize contact with other strangers.





## *Industry Example: McCloskey Motors*

The use of e-signatures and digital contracts is especially effective in industries that require a lot of paperwork. One of those industries is the car business. If you've ever bought or sold a vehicle, you know that even after you determine terms and make a final decision, you must still spend a significant chunk of time reading and signing various contracts.

McCloskey Motors is a family-owned car dealership based in Colorado Springs, Colorado. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, the state of Colorado (like many others) ordered nonessential businesses closed. Dealers could no longer make in-person sales, but they were allowed to sell online and arrange for delivery at service centers.

This order forced McCloskey to devise a solution quickly, or risk even more significant disruption to their business. After switching to work with DocuSign – one of the leading e-signature providers for companies in every industry – and adjusting their normal workflow, McCloskey Motors was able to take its entire purchasing process digital.

After incorporating [DocuSign](#) into their car buying process, McCloskey shaved a full hour off each car sale. The time savings combined to roughly 350 hours of staff time annually. It has also made compliance with required state and legal ID checks much easier, thanks to its improved security measures.

McCloskey also found that using digital signatures and verification methods made interactions with customers and prospects more personalized, not less. Company leadership pointed out that since customers could begin introducing themselves and their needs remotely, it removed that element of tension when someone walks onto a car dealership's sales floor and gets approached by an unfamiliar salesperson.



## **HOW TO GET STARTED WITH DIGITAL CONTRACTS AND E-SIGNATURES**

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It's never been easier to scan and digitize documents now that so many people have access to a powerful camera in their pocket. You can easily find apps that let you scan paper documents and turn them into image files or editable PDFs. Simply turning your current forms into digital ones is low-hanging fruit to start the process. From there, setting up a software tool like DocuSign is relatively simple and easy to integrate into your current workflow.

Once you feel more comfortable using digital contracts, start researching to find an all-in-one system that helps you manage reservations, contract signatures, payment processing, etc.

## **WHY DIGITAL CONTRACTS CAN HELP STRENGTHEN CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS**

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Some old-school customers may wonder why you switched to digital contracts or e-signatures. You can easily paint a picture of the many benefits going digital provides everyone, from the convenience factors mentioned earlier to the environmental savings from cutting down on paper and envelopes.

In your business communications and customer service messages, you should also explain that your ultimate goal is to make life easier for prospects and customers while also making your business run more efficiently, a win-win scenario. Failing to adopt new technology that makes contract signature and verification easier could damage your bottom line in the long run.





## **ACCEPT ON-SITE PAYMENTS USING A POINT OF SALE (POS)**

Once you've generated a contract and received the necessary documents, it's time to collect payment. People today are used to paying with apps and wallets or using a credit card online. Almost every other industry has this setup in place already – when was the last time you went to a store that didn't accept credit cards?

Digital payments are another method rapidly growing in popularity across many industries. From coffee shops to movie theaters to clothing stores, businesses accept methods like Apple Pay and Google Pay to allow contactless payments from a customer's smartphone. [Data from Ohio University](#) shows that 70% of American retail stores now accept Apple Pay, which uses NFC technology to allow customers to pay with a stored credit or debit card. Since they don't share the customer's card number with the merchant, these digital payment methods are more secure than using a traditional card or check.

Credit cards are similarly popular: [one study](#) showed that, in 2021, credit card purchases accounted for 28% of all payments. Households with an income above six figures use credit cards at an even higher rate, more than one out of every three purchases. Allowing customers to use credit cards and modern POS systems is important for your business and customer convenience.



## *Industry Example: Toast & the Restaurant Industry*

**Toast** markets itself as an “all-in-one digital technology platform for restaurants.” The company was founded in 2012 by three friends in Boston who spent a lot of time in bars, restaurants, and cafes. They observed that the wait time between a patron requesting a check and receiving it was often a point of friction in the dining experience.

While Toast started as a way to pay for a tab, it evolved into a more comprehensive solution for all types of restaurant transactions and processes. With a \$4 billion valuation shortly before the COVID-19 pandemic, widespread shutdowns in 2020 forced them to expand their offerings and help clients do more with their system.

Today Toast offers everything from inventory management to digital ordering tools to payroll and schedule management to help busy restaurants avoid using too many software tools in their operation. According to company statistics, Toast is used in approximately 68,000 locations and processed over \$23 billion in payments in Q2 2022.

It's not just restaurants in the U.S., either – many companies in different countries are experiencing increased mobile payments.

In the United Kingdom, **almost two in three transactions** made are with a digital wallet or contactless payment system. In South Africa, digital payment provider Yoco reported that the number of **businesses not accepting cash payments quadrupled** in the first four months of the pandemic, from March 2020 through July 2020.

Many modern boaters are likely to prefer traveling without cash. If your marina also includes a retail store with popular boating supplies like snacks, ice, or fishing gear, you can see how accepting more modern payments can lead to a similar increase in sales.



## HOW TO GET STARTED WITH DIGITAL POS PAYMENTS

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At a minimum, you should be able to take credit cards from new and existing customers. Almost any business can start taking cards by signing up for a free or low-cost merchant account at a payment provider like Stripe or Square. However, you may find it's often more convenient to have this function handled by an all-in-one software that you can also use for marketing and operations management.

If you're already comfortable with credit card workflows, consider going even further to accept digital payments. Doing so can be done with free or inexpensive tools offered in modern point-of-sale (POS) systems for merchants.

## HOW DIGITAL POS PAYMENTS WILL STRENGTHEN CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIPS

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As mentioned, boater expectations have changed quite a bit over the last few decades. The surge in digital POS payments in industries like hospitality and dining means people have come to expect to be able to use their phone or touchless card to send payments. Besides that, many boaters don't want to carry cash with them, particularly if they've got a busy itinerary with several locations.

Boaters will appreciate that they can quickly pick up last-minute items like ice, snacks, fishing supplies, or drinks without having to deal with cash or walk back to your marina's office to pay with a credit card. It will make them appreciate your efforts to give them a seamless, enjoyable marina experience.





## **HANDLE RECURRING BILLING EASILY**

Marina owners understand that while one-off slip customers are important and help support cash flow, the bread and butter of their business is recurring monthly customers who are purchasing long-term rentals. These clients typically sign a contract to pay the same amount each month to store their boat, sometimes during the off-season or when they are on extended travel.

It's a great arrangement for everyone: your customer gets the peace of mind of knowing their boat is safe when they aren't around it, while you get predictable revenue you can depend on each month. There's only one problem for marinas still using outdated technology: collecting payment. Getting their monthly balance every month isn't always easy if a customer isn't there in person.

Many marinas still rely on traditional methods to collect payment from customers in different locations: sending out an invoice or monthly statement in the mail, then waiting on the customer to mail back a check. Besides the unpredictability of sending important financial documents via snail mail, it can be difficult to get customers to mail a check to you every month, especially if they travel to new locations frequently.

### **HOW TO GET STARTED WITH RECURRING PAYMENT COLLECTION**

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If you haven't already looked into online payment systems, there are plenty of simple options for digitally processing payments from a bank. Several businesses and consumers use popular apps like Venmo and CashApp for digital payments, and the Zelle payment protocol is supported natively by many of the largest bank franchises.

Start small by only accepting one or two forms of payment with these new protocols, and then make tweaks and updates to the process as time goes on. If it works well, you can adapt it to more transaction types within your business to speed up cash flow and reduce reliance on paper checks and mailed invoices.

There's no reason to be hesitant about customer acceptance or moving away from traditional methods. Most of your marina's customers will appreciate not having to fuss with mailing payments or writing out checks for your service every month.





## USE CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT TOOLS

Many of today's consumers – even in older demographics – are digitally savvy with communications. Millennials, one of the largest purchasing populations in the world right now, have a well-known aversion to phone calls. Though older generations that likely comprise your ideal customer base are more comfortable with getting on the phone, one thing they all have in common is a fondness for modern communication tools like text messaging and email.

It's important to stay engaged with past and prospective customers by using email marketing and other technology to communicate with a modern audience. It's always easier to get repeat business than to win over a new prospect. Investing in the email tactic to improve customer relationships is one of the most inexpensive yet profitable ways to market your business.

Studies show email has [an average ROI](#) of \$36 for every \$1 invested. Another benefit of email is its universal reach. By 2026, we can expect 4.6 billion email users worldwide, with nearly \$18 billion of revenue from email marketing by 2027.

One of the nice things about marketing a marina via email is the association with popular recreational topics. Travel, hospitality, and leisure emails have an industry-wide average open rate of 20.5%. With some effort put into personalizing and segmenting an email list, you may be able to do even better.

Marina customers are no different. Whether it's a transient boater looking to get a question answered about mooring or a longtime customer that has an issue with a recent account statement, everyone wants to get their issues resolved as quickly as possible. Using modern messaging systems is a great way to make people feel like you are working on their inquiry, even if a real person on your team can't immediately be available to answer.



## *Industry Example: Washington House Inn*

The Washington House Inn opened in Cedarburg, WI in 1846. Just 20 minutes north of Milwaukee and two hours from Chicago, the inn has become one of the most popular destinations for midwest visitors looking for small-town charm in a historic setting.

And though The Washington House was successful, innkeeper Wendy Porterfield was having trouble overseeing the upkeep of the historic building, managing a staff of 26, and handling the inn's marketing. Porterfield connected with a boutique marketing agency that helped them redesign their website and start using Mailchimp, a popular email marketing platform for small businesses.

According to their agency, since starting their campaign with [Mailchimp](#) The Washington House Inn has experienced some significant success with email marketing:

- In 7 years, their list has grown by 18,000 people
- Email marketing makes them over \$30,000 annually in direct revenue
- Their average email open rate is 22.3%





## HOW TO GET STARTED WITH CUSTOMER RELATIONSHIP MANAGEMENT TOOLS

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If you aren't already offering it, email customer service is one of the least difficult ways to develop into more modern communication methods. You might think about setting up a shared company inbox that you and a few trusted team members can access, helping to cut down on the response time to emailed inquiries.

From there, you can dive into email marketing – you might even decide to start a small-scale campaign sending out emails manually. However, you'll likely want to switch to an email automation platform eventually. Email marketing is a huge topic, but many [great guides](#) can help you get started.

Of course, email isn't your only option. [Social media](#) is also an excellent channel for building brand familiarity while reminding customers of your marina and their next boating adventure. Use visuals liberally – it's easy to include a smartphone picture of the water or a particularly nice pontoon parked on the dock. You can also reach out directly to previous or prospective marina customers via social media messaging. Don't overdo it: a simple post-purchase follow-up within a week or two followed by a casual check-in every few months is more than enough.

## WHY MODERN CUSTOMER RETENTION MATTERS FOR YOUR MARINA

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Some marina owners are hesitant to adopt email or social media marketing methods because they fear it will impact their brand reputation or feel "annoying." This type of thinking is misguided. According to [consumer surveys](#), nearly half of all customers want to hear from their favorite brands via email. A savvy digital communication program can actually improve your brand by helping you stand out and position your business as a forward-thinking business.

Finally, remember that once you build enough of a following, you can forge additional partnerships with vendors and businesses in your area by allowing them to market to your customer base. Doing this must be done respectfully and in a specific manner, but if well-executed, it can delight your existing customers and help you earn referrals from other companies in your area.





## HOW DOCKWA CAN HELP MODERNIZE YOUR MARINA

You've seen examples of how technology can positively affect every part of a marina transaction, from the earliest research and booking phases to the post-purchase time period when your goal is to remarket to past customers and stay top-of-mind when it comes time for them to plan their next marina visit.

We know that some of these steps may seem confusing or overwhelming. One of the nice things about technology these days is scalability – you can pick and choose the elements that work for you and slowly incorporate them into your operations. However, the most important advantage of using technology may be the two-pronged benefits to your internal operations and customer service. Like the organizations we profiled, your team will save valuable time and effort that once went to manually completing processes with pen and paper. Customers will appreciate the use of technology that makes booking, paying for, and verifying their marina reservations much easier. This will also give you a leg up on competitors if prospective customers comparison shop, especially among the younger generation of boaters who tend to be more tech-friendly.

That's exactly what happened at the [Newport Harbor Hotel and Marina in Newport, RI](#). After incorporating Dockwa's convenient digital reservation system – which also includes a listing on a marina directory accessed by over 350,000 boaters across the country – the Newport Marina experienced a 40% year-over-year increase in bookings.

They far exceeded record monthly revenue during the most recent peak season, thanks, in part, to the power and efficiency of digital reservations providing a more precise evaluation of vacancy. Previously, Newport Marina used a manual system for reservations involving paper slips on a whiteboard.



The image displays the Dockwa web application interface, which is used for managing boat reservations. The interface is divided into several sections: a dark sidebar on the left with navigation links, a main content area with a receipt and reservation details, and a bottom section with a map and reservation summary. The sidebar contains links for Dashboard, Reservations, Contracts, Sales, Inquiries (11), Waitlist, Customers, Messages (101), Assignments, and Reports. The main content area shows a receipt for a reservation #RVFYXPGQ, dated October 11, 2022, for \$9,600.00. Below the receipt, there is a reservation summary for a boat named 'test' with a length of 50' 0" and a beam of 4' 0". The reservation is confirmed and has a revenue category of 'Transient dockage'. The bottom section features a map of the dock area and a reservation summary table with columns for Type, Due, Processed, Method, and Amount. The summary table shows a charge of \$3,477.50 for the reservation, with a total amount paid of \$3,477.50.



Whether you decide to work with Dockwa or not, just remember one important truth: failing to modernize your business could put its very existence in danger one day. It's important to maintain a personal connection with customers and prospects, and it's true that a face-to-face interaction is one of the best ways to connect. But technology isn't a replacement for human connection today: it's a necessary supplement. People want to hear from you via email, social media, and other modern messaging platforms. They want technology to make the actual process of paying for a bag of ice or booking a slip to be easier so they can get back to focusing on all the best parts of boating.

If you're looking to start down the path to modernizing your marina, [request a demo](#) today. One of our team members can customize the demonstration to display specific features you may appreciate. We'll also use knowledge gleaned from working to modernize marinas across the country to help you implement technology in a way that prioritizes the most important part of boating: human connection.

[dockwa.com/demo](https://dockwa.com/demo)

