



# Brokerage – it’s a relationships business

*Creative visualisation doesn’t come naturally to every broker, but the best practitioners can have a real positive impact for their clients during the design process of a new-build project. Here, we find out how ...*

BY FELIX SOWERBUTTS

Good brokers are available as advisors at every stage of the customer journey – whether a client is moving from chartering small boats to chartering big boats, to brokerage boat ownership and then on to new-build ownership, they are a constant for every eventuality. They have many roles – some of them challenging, unforgiving and out of the realm of their natural skill set. Some brokers are very invested in the process and others not so but, irrespective of their level of involvement, keeping a project on track and ensuring the client is being steered in the right direction and meeting the right people are a must. Brokerage is a relationships business and clients are buying not only into the experience and knowledge of that individual broker, but also the people they can meet through their representation.

With this particular issue of *The Superyacht Report* being the design issue, this seemed an ideal time to reach out to the brokerage community to discuss their role in the design process of a new build. How can they bestow confidence in their clients and help to create a design concept that is everything they ever dreamed of? Because, ultimately, clients – as savvy as they may be – need guidance, and brokers are there to futureproof their decisions for resale, design shrewdly for charter, ensure they meet a designer who understands their visualisation and suggest a shipyard capable of delivering the project both on budget and on time.

“How to design a good boat really comes down to relationships,” says Chris Cecil-Wright, founder of the eponymous brokerage company Cecil Wright & Partners. “If you have a good relationship with your client and you know about his or her family, what they like doing and what their style is then you can be very involved in the design. If the boss has a clear idea of what they want, your job is to transfer those ideas – and that visualisation – on to paper.”

Cecil-Wright says his clients are, invariably, new to building and have come from either charter or brokerage boat ownership. He emphasises the importance of having benchmark boats – boats that clients like the colour, design or shape of. “What is it about certain boats they like and why, and who designed those boats?” he asks. “Often, I look at

where they live and where they come from and try to pair them with designers who I think would suit them, not just logistically but also with their characters. Then I sit in all the design meetings and mostly keep quiet, but make suggestions here and there.” Cecil-Wright has delivered some of the most iconic yachts on the water for his clients – *Tango*, *Hampshire II*, *Trident* and *Utopia* to name but a few. But it was his involvement in *Madame Gu*, the 99m Feadship, that piqued my interest because I had heard that his influence in the design was significant.

“Andrew Winch and I worked extremely closely with the owner’s right-hand man, who is a good friend of mine,” says Cecil-Wright. “Frankly, the owner’s comments were always, ‘Make it look faster, make it look faster’ every time we went to him with a design – that’s why we included features like the cycling helmet for the radar domes for aerodynamics. My role was to ensure that his demands were put into action and we went back with something according to his new brief. Almost always, you start a design and it ends up being bigger.”

Cecil-Wright tells me that *Madame Gu* went from 88m in her initial design to 99m and from 22 knots to 24 knots. Steve Burn, the captain of *Madame Gu*, recalls a defining moment on board the owner’s previous yacht that led to the design alteration. “We were in a superyacht race that summer to get to an anchorage against the boss’s friends. It was actually the only time I’d ever seen him on the bridge. He came up and said ‘Steve, we must go faster!’ I called down to the engineer in the engine room to see if we could produce any more power, but we were maxed out. We lost. The boss turned to me and said, ‘Oh Steve, we lost’, grinned a bit and walked out. He was designing *Madame Gu* at the time and about a week later he said we had to go bigger and faster.”

For Joe Foggia, sales broker and new construction specialist at Northrop & Johnson, the number one priority for any broker should be futureproofing for resale. “If you leave it to the yard and build without a broker, they will just build what the client wants, which is no bad thing but issues might arise down the line when it comes to sell.” Foggia says that yards aren’t typically thinking long term and



*Joe Foggia.*

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are focused on that specific project. “Sometimes clients say that because this boat will be their last hurrah, they don’t mind what it sells for down the road and end up selling, eventually, for a 30 to 40 per cent price cut, which could have been avoided.”

Foggia doesn’t name the boats that have struggled on the brokerage market because of poor early decision-making, although he does list some mistakes he’s observed during his time in new construction. His advice is that every yacht should be designed with charter in mind and should be a “default consideration”. Foggia has shipyard experience – he formerly worked for Christensen – and has regularly seen brokers get themselves into trouble during the design process, and it tends to be those who lack the visualisation to

understand what’s going on. “Brokers can actually be very destructive during this process. If they lack the visualisation [for full-custom projects], which many do, they are better off sticking with the production/series side of new construction because it’s more of a known quantity.”

Occasionally, pride gets in the way of brokers making the right decision, which is to take a back seat, and this adversely affects the value the client is getting. There is a clear drive from all the brokerage houses to advertise that clients have access to their full range of in-house expertise, not just a single one-trick-pony broker. Design is a good example of an element of the service offering where, if it’s not the forté of the broker, their involvement can be more destructive than constructive.



*Mark Cavendish.*

**“Designing a boat is complex because it’s a matter of feeling between the owner and the designer.”**

“It might destroy the relationship between the shipyard and the broker, and potentially the client if things go sour. I’ve seen that happen several times,” adds Foggia. “Some brokers get a bad reputation from builders because they can’t conceptualise or they aren’t familiar with the specs.” Brokers need to be able to visualise how things will work from an operational standpoint and convey this to the client, but also relay the client’s visualisation to the shipyard and designer. Foggia says he is surprised by just how often brokers don’t understand construction drawings, elevation plans, blueprints and general arrangements. “Reading a blueprint is a basic that you need to know. So is how to scale and understand elevations and plans because you have to do that before you

get visual renderings; even though technology has got a lot better, you still need the basics.”

Mark Cavendish, director of sales and marketing at Heesen and a former broker, tells me it’s rare for a client to go into the design of a boat without any experience. “The broker needs to discover what they’ve got in mind, what their budget is and what size boat they are looking for. But, also, what their operational requirements are – speed, range, volume and capacity. Designing a boat is complex because it’s a matter of feeling between the owner and the designer. All the broker can effectively do is make introductions and explain what the strengths and weaknesses are of each, their styles and where they sit on the pricing scale.”

The value the broker brings, according to

Chris Cecil-Wright.



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Cavendish, is looking over the shoulder of the client and explaining the practical consequences of certain decisions and how it will affect the operation and residual value. “Most of our clients at Heesen have a terrific amount of hands-on interest in the design of their own boat. Where they are less involved is with spec boats because we’ve done the design for them. It’s a bit like buying an apartment in a big building where you can change the interior decor and furniture but, of course, you don’t touch the exterior design because that is done, for the most part.”

On the full-custom side, Cavendish says the design almost always changes as projects progress; clients might design a stateroom one way and then change their minds after having thought about it, but that’s part of the process of creating any custom product. “You start with a profile and 3D renderings but the interior can, at that point, be relatively basically specified,” adds Cavendish. “Yes, there’s probably an interior designer and a layout plan on the contract but when you look at the spaces in greater detail, things will begin to change. You don’t have it 100 per cent designed at the point the contract is signed by any means.”

Cavendish believes brokers have to be hands on with owners who are building full-custom boats for the first time. As Foggia explains earlier, series/production builds are more of a known quantity where you know what you are getting, but full-custom requires more guidance to produce – literally – a watertight concept. Justin Olesinski, managing director of Olesinski, says brokers are often closer to the market in terms of their understanding, what works, the competition and trends. “Without a broker, there would be more guesswork involved in design, where we effectively predict what people want rather than knowing.”

Olesinski agrees that the contribution of customer preferences is an important part of the process, but also points out that every broker interprets the wishes of clients differently. “Often, we receive conflicting requirements for the same model of yacht. In production, we have to satisfy more than one customer per design.” Olesinski says there are varying levels of involvement from brokers during the design process – some are proactive while others rely more on the designer to choose the direction and come up with proposals.

I ask Olesinski if brokers show interest in his designs even if they don’t have interested clients, so they know the lie of the land when they do. His response is that for production series boats (Olesinski is well known for its collaborations with Princess Yachts), brokers always want to show clients what is on the way in terms of new models to excite them; clients want to be sure they are not buying a model that will be replaced or upgraded before it is delivered.

There is much brokers can do to add value to design processes, but it’s clear they need to be mindful that their input is adding value and is not just an interference. While brokers can certainly help to steer the project in the right direction, the contact between the designer and the client is fundamental to delivering a yacht that fits the exact brief of the client. Therefore, a less-is-more approach might well be the best course of action. **FS**

## HEADING

- Modifying the general arrangement to eliminate one cabin. For instance, making a 50–60m boat, which typically has five or six staterooms, a four-stateroom boat.
- Encroaching on crew service areas to make more room for owner and guest areas, or eliminating access for crew altogether. Such examples include removing lower-deck access from crew quarters to guest accommodations and, instead, making crew walk up to the main deck and down the main stairway to access guest areas for cleaning.
- Allowing captains to design their spaces without oversight. I have seen captain’s cabins and engine and control rooms that are way too big and compromise owner and guest spaces.
- Creating permanent enclosures on exterior gathering spaces that do not allow both sun and shade.
- Extreme colours in marble, granite and other hard surfaces. When potential buyers see this, they think of the amount of work, time and money it may take to replace.