

Top Ten Tips to Improve your Experience when using a Marine VHF radio

Whichever way you enjoy the water, a marine VHF radio is an important safety tool



which will ensure that you stay safe and can contact other Boaters, Marinas, Fuel docks, Port authorities or safety organisations. Whether you are new to boating or an experienced sea hand, together with Dorset Marine Training have provided several tips to improve your experience, optimise the use of your radio purchase and hopefully keep yourself safe.

1. Familiarise yourself with operating your radio and avoid 'skill fade'

You have been on an RYA VHF/SRC training course and have passed with flying colours. You have your licence and have now made your radio purchase. One of the worst things you can do is to leave your radio in the box covered up on your console. Your radio is an important safety tool, as with any emergency facilities, we only use them well if we are familiar with them so pick your radio up and get accustomed to using all the functions. An important thing here is confidence, and it is important that the first time that you use your radio that you will be confident in using it. The longer you leave it, the more likely there will be a barrier to you using it. If you aren't sure get a friend at your club to help you and make a few test calls

If it's a little while since you took your course many RYA training schools are doing refresher courses or evenings at yacht clubs.

2. Make sure that your radio is working properly

It is important before you go out to sea that your radio is fully working.

Firstly, make sure it turns on and all the channels and functions work properly. If it is a hand portable radio make sure that the radio is fully charged. Some people also like to have a separate battery bank purely as an extra safety consideration.

Secondly, check to see if there is any salt corrosion. Maritime electronic equipment gets exposed to salt spray so certain parts can corrode. They may get a little salt build up, so you want to make sure when you're finished for the day you wash your radio off so next time it will be free of corrosion.

Thirdly if you have a fixed radio you should check your antenna. You want to make sure that the antenna is still attached to your boat, elevated and free of any obstruction. Before the start of the season, make sure that it is in good condition as antennas can be affected by UV sunlight and salt corrosion. – having a periodic inspection of the wiring around the radio means we will notice any obvious green or white corrosion before it causes a problem with the radio.

3. Do a radio check before you go out.

It is good practice to make sure that your radio set is working. In the past, HM Coastguard was able to carry out these checks. However, their time is precious and focussed on other more important issues, including particularly Search and Rescue. We recommend that radio checks should be carried out primarily with marinas and other shore stations or with other vessels. National Coast watch Institute (NCI) shore stations are usually well placed for such calls which should be made on Channel 65.

4. Be brief, disciplined and clear in all your transmissions

If you live near a busy shipping or channel area, you will encounter a lot of commercial marine traffic. You will need to be brief, clear and disciplined when you operate your radio. There are very few channels for everyone, and they will get clogged up if there is unnecessary waffle on the air. Be precise in all your transmissions. Check the Port's website and their 'Local notices to mariners' to see if there are any additional restrictions or recommendations on VHF channel use.

5. Radio etiquette is important.

Listen on the calling channel (Channel 16 or 09) for at least 30 seconds to be sure you will not interfere with a conversation already in progress. Make sure that the squelch control on your radio is set just at the point where it cancels out static but not so far up that it prevents your hearing other radio traffic.

If the channel is clear, push down the talk button on your microphone and follow the protocol you have learnt on your radio course. Remember to always identify yourself, not only is it a condition of your license but also avoids confusion between those listening.

6. Practice your microphone technique

It is important to have a good microphone technique to convey your message clearly. If the channel is clear, push down the talk button on your microphone. Hold the microphone one inch from your mouth, and slowly call the name of the other boat in a normal tone of voice so that you avoid any distortion.

7. Use Low power

VHF radios have two settings—low and high power. Use low power as your default setting. Its shorter range means that other boats a few miles away can use the same channel.

8. Keep chatter away from safety channel 16

This is very important. Channel 16 is our 'Distress and Calling' channel, everyone can use this channel to make contact with others but remember that all 'Mayday' and 'Pan-Pan' calls are dealt with here so it must be kept free and available for such emergencies. It's a great idea to produce a small laminated card listing the relevant channels for you, especially if you're a novice user. Make a list of your 'intership channels', Marina Channel, Port control (and other frequented harbours) so that you can easily change between them at the controls of your boat.

9. Educate your children about your radio.

Teach your child that the radio is an important safety tool and it should be used responsibly and is not to be played with. This approach will stop false alerts or inadvertent chatter on the air. Empowering your children to use the radio 'under supervision' can be a fantastic way to not only engage them with roles on board but also equip them with a mature understanding of the equipment, in case of

emergency; this also helps lay the foundations for when they too can take the VHF SRC radio course at the age of 16.

10. Watch your language.

Don't forget that a VHF radio is not a private phone call and everyone in range can hear you. Foul language will not only be offensive to other users but is also not allowed under the rules in your license. We hope that you find these tips useful. In our experience it is about being fully prepared knowing that your equipment is working correctly and that you have the confidence and experience to use your radio in an emergency. The best way is to start today and familiarise yourself with these points.