



Cell phones

Q. I like to use my boat frequently, even when I need to keep in touch with my office. Since I am relatively close to shore, I rely heavily on my cellular phone. But I am having trouble getting a clear reception, especially near large cities. What can I do to help the reception while I am onboard my boat?

A. As a dedicated gadget person, this question was of personal interest. I too am always looking at ways to increase my cell phone and Blackberry range. For those of us that rely on cell phones and e-mail, connectivity is a necessity.

Cellular phone range is based on the power of signals from the phone and cellular towers. The best estimate I was able to get was that the average cellular tower will give you (about) eight miles of range. Of course, many factors can inhibit the range such as buildings, hills, and weather. Cellular towers are installed in all sorts of locations...but few are located off shore.

Remember the “bag phone?” Bag phones were actually better because they were/are around a three-watt output that offered great range and signal clarity. Nevertheless, who wants to carry a bag phone around? Today’s society has transitioned to small pocket sized phones that have reduced signal power to about .6 watts. Sure, we have more cel-

lular towers than we did before, but if you are traveling off shore, your reception will be spotty at best.

A couple of things that will increase the signal of a cellular phone are the use of an amplifier and an externally mounted antenna. One or the other can help, but in the marine world, it is best to use both. I am not talking about those little “stick on” signal boosters that mount under the battery. I am talking about a two to four foot externally mounted cellular antenna connected to a pocket cellular phone with the appropriate couplers, cables and a powered amplifier.

There are a number of places to get amplifiers and antennas. In a quick internet search I located www.TalkFarther.com and www.shakespeare-marine.com. Shakespeare is a well-known leader in the marine industry. Shakespeare manufactures and sells antennas and amplifiers (along with several other items).

Motorola manufactures Shakespeare’s amplifiers under an exclusive license. By using an externally mounted antenna and then amplifying the signal, you should eliminate the number of dropped calls, dramatically extend your range, and enhance the clarity of the signal and the overall performance of your cellular phone.

Oh, and another tip I learned, for the best service look for amplifiers that are “bi-directional”. That means they will amplify the incoming signal (receiving) and amplify the outgoing signal (transmit). It does not really do the cellular phone user much good if all they can do is hear better but cannot reply.

Send your questions to: sky@skysmith.com

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