

A Sailmaker Offers Tips on How to Buy Sails

If this is the year for you to buy sails, you can go a long way toward not only getting the best deal for yourself, but getting the type of sails you need, if you'll take the time to do your shopping properly. Over the last 12 years, I've sold a lot of sails to a lot of people, all of whom had something in common with you: they wanted to buy sails. I've learned a lot from selling-and not selling-sails to them.

Perhaps the first thing to realize in setting out to buy a sail is that sailmakers are businessmen, some good, some bad, but all interested in making a sale to a **bona fide** customer.

None of us gets really excited about the prospects of selling our product to the customer who sends a Xeroxed copy of a "sailbuying" form torn out of a magazine, with only the most cursory information scratched in, and franked on the office postage machine. You'd probably agree that the chances of making a big sale to someone with such cursory interest are pretty remote. If you want your sailmaker to put some effort into getting you a price, you put some effort into asking for it. Putting together a price and support material is a time-consuming job; one likes to feel that there is at least a chance to make the sale in return for the effort. There are plenty of sailmakers who will file an obvious quicky inquiry in the round file immediately.

Be Prepared With Information

When making your inquiry, whether by mail or phone, it is always appreciated if you have on hand at least the most fundamental information about the boat and sails in question. Don't call up and ask "How much for sails for my 32-footer?" and expect to get a very coherent answer. Your sailmaker will have to know at least how big the sails are that you want, and the barest details about how big and heavy the boat is, and where and how you sail her. You should have this information at hand when you first make the call, particularly if you have something other than a production boat. Even for well known boats there are a lot of holes in the available fund of information, and no sailmaker will know all about every conceivable boat. There have been thousands of models produced over the years, and the best known are often produced with a variety of rigs, not to mention "owner modifications".

Ideally, you will have a copy of your sailplan, showing the "I" (height of the mast from the deck at the sheerline to the top of the highest sheave), "J" (distance from the front face of the mast at the deck to the base of the foremost forestay), "P" (from the top of the gooseneck to the top of the mainsail when hoisted to the desired height), and "E" (aft face of the mast to the clew of the mainsail when stretched to the desired outhaul position). The "I" and "E" are frequently fixed at "black bands," particularly

on racing craft but also frequently on boats that are not currently raced.

Though these designations are adopted from measurements prescribed by the IOR (International Off-shore Rule), having them does not mean you have to take off on the next Whitbread Race. It's just that they have been pretty well accepted and are well understood in the sailmaking community, and thus are the most convenient means of communicating a lot of info about your rig with the minimum confusion. Your sailplan will usually have these dimensions printed on it in the appropriate place, so you will not normally need a scale rule. If you do not have a sailplan you may have an old measurement certificate, a brochure listing the information or boasting a "scale" drawing, or other material the sailmaker can look at to get this fundamental information. If you can supply none of these then perhaps you can tell him the designer or builder, from whom he may be able to get a plan. As a worst case you may have to go to the boat to measure it yourself, though if he gets the sailmaking job he may insist on taking his own measurements.

Having passed on to your sailmaker the mystical runes, IJPE, you will probably be asked what sails you are looking for. The sailmaker will not want you to say, "white ones". If a main, will you want reefs, battens, Cunningham, shelf, etc? If you don't know what you want, say so, and the sailmaker will probably be happy to help you with these decisions. As for headsails, it helps to know what you've had in the past, and what you think you'd like that might be different. Where and how you sail will help to make the decisions about how big and heavy the sails will need to be, and probably every sailmaker will have his own idea about this, so don't be afraid to discuss the choices he suggests to you. Additional information such as the size and weight of your boat may also prove helpful in making the right selection. Your sailmaker will need to have most of this information to allow him to calculate prices on the sails you will end up buying. So the answer to your first question (How much will it cost?) doesn't come first in the conversation.

Selecting Sailmakers

If you are serious about buying something more than just one or two small sails it will be helpful to put as much information as you can about you, your boat, and the sails she needs into a letter. If you know what you want, be fairly specific. If not, ask for recommendations. This kind of detailed inquiry is a lot more likely to get a serious response than the above-mentioned quicky form. It is fair to assume that you will want prices from more than one or two sailmakers, anyway. But beware, there is a trap awaiting if you send out a zillion letters! Plenty of sailmakers will want to make direct phone contact with

you, and sending out lots of letters will get you lots of persistent phone mates in a hurry. You're best off selecting up to a half dozen candidates whom you identify as making the kind of sails you want and sticking with them.

In identifying them you'll want to consider a number of variables. If you're a heavy duty, serious racing fanatic, you may do well with one of the national franchise groups, particularly if you are good at it and likely to add to their victory list. If you're not all that fanatical you may do better with a smaller, local company that has a good reputation for bringing in the silver in local events. They'll be more likely to offer you good service, since any individual customer is obviously more valuable to a small outfit than a large one. Don't necessarily expect the price to be a lot lower at the local loft, though. Chances are that the little guy's kids eat just as many Big Macs as the nationally known face's kids,

If you are not involved in racing you probably have a wider choice of sailmakers who will do a genuinely good job for you. You may still want to try a franchise, particularly one that has a loft close to you, though you should remember that the large companies for the most part got that way through their involvement with racing. If you are a cruiser or casual sailor you may get promised the world but not delivered much beyond the "white triangle."

For most people it is worth considering some of your local lofts, for simple convenience. All other things being equal, it pays dividends to buy locally. The few bucks you might save by going "out of town" can get quickly eaten up in freight and travel, should you have a problem. And remember, even a phone call to Hong Kong is not likely to result in that sailmaker's arriving on board next Saturday to check out your sails. If you are really serious about your boat, and want to get her all the best things for your Great Cruise, then you'll probably spend a little more time on selecting the sailmaker who will be compatible with your style of sailing and your type of involvement with boats. Observing other boats and asking their skippers how they like sails that you think look good will help lead you to the right sailmaker. Sometimes even the advertising can be believed!

Once you've narrowed the selection down to a manageable number, ask for an appointment to see the loft, and the opportunity to discuss how they make sails and why they recommend their methods. What's good in a racing sail is not what you want for a cruise to Bora Bora.

Interpreting Price Quotations

Sooner or later you'll get together the quotes on the sails you need. Unless you've been very specific about the exact sails you want you may be overwhelmed by the apparent choices offered. You may also be amazed by the variation in prices for sails of a given designation, and it is easy to arrive at misleading conclusions about the cost of sails as a result. Any price quote you get should include at least the size and weight of the sail, as well as the price. Many people assume that "a number 2 genoa is a number 2 genoa is a . . ." but it ain't necessarily so. In studying prices from a number of sailmakers over the last five years, we've found that there is little consensus even as to how big a 150% genoa is on a very ordinary boat, and in some cases we've seen quotations for sails that were nominally the same, but which were quoted on a variable of more than 10% of the assumed area! So, be as careful in evaluating the prices you get as you expect your sailmaker

to be in designing your sails. The quickest means of comparing values is to compare price per square foot for sails of given weight and construction. Beware of any quotation that gives sail areas grossly different from the bulk of replies you receive, and before accepting such a quotation be sure the sailmaker is working with the right numbers. Even the best are not immune from mistakes of this sort.

Depending on the size of your order and/or the time of year you will need the sails, you may well avail yourself of special discounts. Most sailmakers will offer some incentive to place your order during their slack season on the premise that it is better to work for a small profit than not to work at all. In the Northeast the discount season is generally October through December, the particular dates varying from one loft to another. At least one loft we know offers a sliding discount, largest in October, tapering down to smallest at year's end. In most cases a deposit of about 1/2 will be required to write the order, with the balance due when the sails are completed. It is increasingly common to make the discount contingent on prompt payment of the balance, as well.

You may also be able to swing a discount on volume if your order is big enough. How big your order has to be to negotiate such a discount varies from one loft to another, and not all lofts are approachable, but if you have over \$5000 to spend it is probably worth asking. You will also occasionally see ads for seasonal specials, generally on light air sails in the summer. You're most likely to see this during summers of slow economic growth in general, as in ordinary times sailmakers will be busy from early spring through late fall, with only the slightest pause for a week or so in August. Warning! It can be extremely hazardous to your health to ask a sailmaker for a discount during the summer season.

Adding it Up

No discussion on buying sails would be complete without mention of quality. Of course, every sailmaker sells only the finest quality, so it is up to the buyer to determine for himself which "finest quality" sails are right for him. In fact, not all sails are made the same. To some extent price is a guide to quality, at least to the extent that you are unlikely to buy the best sails at the lowest price. Of course, not everyone needs or wants the very best, and the budget priced discount sailmakers certainly have a place in the "best" market if the best thing you want to say about your sails is that they didn't cost much. If "best" means "fastest" to you, be prepared to pay fancy prices to look at fancy cuts that may go out of fashion fast. For most people, "best" is modestly priced and expected to drive the family sloop on the family cruise for 10 or more seasons, without having to drive cross country for service. For a few, "best" is simply the best; well made, durable, reliable offshore in bad weather, repairable on board in far away places, quick, of obviously fine manufacture and cut, and not cheap.

In the end, you play as great a part in getting good sails as the sailmaker himself, because ultimately you make the crucial decisions. Providing the correct and adequate information, deciding which of the many options you want, and selecting a sailmaker you feel confident will do his best to serve you with products appropriate to your usage all are matters for you to resolve. It's your money.

-Tom Clark

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