Scott Molloy

To boldly go ...
Scott Molloy, founder and managing director of Superyacht Electronics Academy, says that while true innovation can actually present initial challenges, it is worth persevering.

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When asked for my thoughts on superyacht innovation, I began with wondering what I considered that to be. And how much the industry actually innovates versus perception.

We regularly hear from companies offering things that claim to be different or new. Are they always innovating or is much of it hype? Most technology on yachts is not sector-driven, but follows existing lifestyle trends – for example, electronics consumerism and connectivity thirst.

Innovation is not sourcing the 'latest and greatest', or obtaining rare or expensive materials. In the luxury sector, the lines between innovation and 'wow factor' are blurred. Innovation has to be about solving a problem for the first time. Or improving on an existing solution in a way that brings additional benefits. Obviously, diverging from tried and tested solutions takes longer, costs more and brings more risk. Worse still, additional teething problems may negatively impact the on-board experience. So, to innovate can go completely against our primary objective.

One owner I worked for was a serial yacht builder who totally respected the processes of commissioning and 'running in' a new vessel. On his first trip, the crew had technical issues deploying a tender crane that stowed under the aft deck basketball court. As his guests stood observing, and unphased by the delay, he asked them to leave the crew to it. As he ushered them back inside, tales of how such issues were normal on a new boat ensued. This is the breed of yacht owner that makes it much easier to innovate. The breed of bold and adventurous yacht owner we need to commission more builds in the industry!

Recently, Crestron ran a live online panel discussion on the feasibility of a hydrogen-powered superyacht. While there were obvious and difficult hurdles, it would also require an adventurous owner to commission such a build. Or perhaps an owner with a desire to commission such a project based on environmental principles. Just because something is difficult, doesn't mean we shouldn't try.

Recent guest/owner surveys by The Superyacht Group indicated a strong dissatisfaction with their user interfaces for on-board systems. However, I believe that we are about to move away from the traditional user interface altogether. The current standard is a wireless touchpanel or iPad. Yet, believe it or not, universal push-button remote controls are still popular. Even in the luxury sector. Because aesthetics and the stigma of 'old-fashioned tech' aside, push-button control is more practical.

Once the user knows the button locations, unlike a touchpanel, they can operate it without taking their eyes off the task in hand. Consider the same problem when driving a new car. Our attention is diverted from driving, by trying to understand the touchpanel controls. This was much less of an issue before touchpanels appeared in cars. Don't worry, I'm not saying the future of user interfaces is button remotes! I am just highlighting how the touchpanel UI is far from ideal. I predict within five years, UI panels will exist only as a back-up to emerging control methods. Why? Convenience.

Common voice control solutions now give the ultimate convenience – not having to stop what you are doing. In comparison, consider the inconvenience in having to find your phone and navigate to an app setting for the same result. Convenience is a powerful weapon for the tech giants. They know we strive for it in our busy lives and are willing to pay for it. So, we can expect consumer trends to continue to move quickly towards more 'hands off' methods.

But, convenience comes at a cost. With voice control solutions from Google and Amazon, for example, the cost is further loss of your privacy. Voice control for yachts needs to be innovative in that it solves a couple of problems. One is that it guarantees complete privacy and security. The other, that it is served by the on-board yacht systems and is not cloud based. Although voice control might not work well every time, the user will typically patiently repeat a command. The user has not been inconvenienced. Oppositely, you can understand a faulty or confusing UI being frustrating. It has the user's complete focus.

As well as voice control, we will probably see advances in gesture control. Additionally, I imagine we will soon see a new class of discreet wearable tech allowing new methods of systems control. Even further ahead, what might be seen is the evolution of user interfaces. Might we be controlling our tech simply using the power of thought in the future? I think so. Although that sounds like science fiction, things generally are until they are made science fact. To quote Arthur C. Clarke: "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic."

In a rapidly changing world, I'm sure we'll see the superyacht sector come under intensifying scrutiny regarding ethical issues such as the environment and wealth distribution. Will there be an increasing pressure on owners to do the right thing, even if not naturally inclined to do so? And the same can be said for all parties in the sector from designers to shipyards, yacht management, and crew. This pressure is a good thing, and will help drive a new period of innovation. SM