

The Importance of Digital Radios

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If you have recently purchased a VHF radio for your power- or sailboat, this week's column is directed squarely at you.

Technological advances in the maritime industry continue to make recreational boating safer.

Regardless of the type of boating you do, river, off-shore, or otherwise, advances in the last two years have made boating safer and more enjoyable. One item that some boaters might not realize is the incorporation of Digital Selective Calling, or DSC, into their VHF radio.

What is DSC? Simply put, it is an easy-to-engage system that has the capability to send an automated "Mayday!" The digital transmission provides a wealth of data including vessel information, your present location (assuming that connections have been made with the onboard GPS system) and details on the owner/operator. You get all this information with the simple push of a button. It is almost like an automated 911 system for boaters. Not bad, huh?

But, and this is a big but, you need to register your radio as soon as possible. Register a radio you ask? But wasn't the requirement to have a ship's station license no longer required by the Federal Communication Commission (FCC)? The answer to the question is yes - for a standard VHF radio. DSC is different!

At this point you might say, "Oh great, more bureaucratic paperwork to fill out." True, there is one additional step with a DSC radio, but the potential help during an emergency situation is worth the effort. Let me explain.

In order for DSC equipped radios to be as helpful as possible, they need to be registered. Once registered, a special nine-digit number will be assigned. This number is called a "Maritime Mobile Service Identity" or MMSI. Once you obtain an MMSI from the FCC, information is then entered into my service's National Distress Database.

Why is registering so important? For starters, all the reasons mentioned in the first paragraph. Much like an ELT, a DSC puts out specific information. You get a position, vessel information and contact information. In addition you can use DSC-equipped radios, with properly registered MMSIs to call directly to another vessel (also with MMSI) and have a private conversation. Ever tried to have a conversation on other VHF channels? Good luck!

According to Boatsafe.com, "commercial ships over 300 gross tons are now required to monitor the DSC radio reserved Channel 70 for distress calls...the U.S. Coast Guard is still monitoring Channel 16. As the Coast Guard updates and upgrades their equipment, they should be monitoring DSC Channel 70 in many areas by 2002-3 and be fully functional by 2005-6."

Now, back to registering. Believe it or not it can all be done online.

In an agreement between the FCC, USCG and BoatUS, boaters can get a free ID number for marine radio with DSC.

Simply go to <http://www.boatus.com/mmsi/> and follow the easy steps.

NOTE TO INSTRUCTORS: While this article is an excellent lay-explanation of DSC and the GMDSS, it is important for you to know and it should be pointed out to students that the date by which the US Coast Guard will be technologically capable of making full use of this system for recreational boaters is still not certain.