



D Kent

Communications breakdown

This year we didn't ask ARC skippers to rate communications equipment models. Past experience tells us that the basic equipment, be it HF radios or Iridium phones, goes wrong extremely rarely. In the case of HF radio, it's usually only installation or poor reception that causes problems; with satellite equipment the set-up and configuration are the biggest headaches. So this year, we asked skippers to tell us more about this.

We had first-hand experience of the difficulties of getting Iridium to work at the ARC three years ago. Sadly, this hasn't changed. The majority of ARC boats had Iridium phones and many had problems getting them to work for sending and receiving data, such as e-mail, weather forecasts and fleet positions.

Quite a few others used them only for phone calls and on the basis of this year's evidence, we wonder if that's because they gave up on the alternative. It's high time the phone manufacturers got their software sorted out. Take this comment, which was typical – and not just of the named supplier: 'Awful to set up. Phone was supplied by Marconi. I spent a day at their Chelmsford offices while their senior engineer tried to get my laptop to link to the phone. He failed! The problem turned out to be the firewall in Norton Internet Security. Nightmare.'

Numerous other skippers said they couldn't get supplied software to work. 'Problems with data. Supplied kit just didn't work. Used Marine Computing'; 'Five guys tried and failed. Now doing via Sailmail and HF radio.' In fairness, most skippers did in the end get their Iridium phones to work for e-mail, but this is a prime example of gear you must not expect to work straight from the box. And as customers, perhaps we should put pressure on suppliers when we buy products to provide support for a unit that is fully functional, as advertised.

The other side of the communications equation is the provider you use for data services. These vary in quality, speed and user-friendliness. ARC skippers were using a variety of providers, including Stratos, UUPlus, Fastmail, Zapmail, Smartcom, Mailasail and Winlink. UUPlus had some mixed reviews, but the others were praised.

Stand-out companies based on users' comments are Zapmail and Winlink, but top marks must go to Mailasail, which earned what we can only describe as rave reviews. Typical comments were: 'Fab'; 'Excellent'; 'Top, top marks'; 'First class'; 'Extremely helpful'; 'Very quick download for weather and positions'.

HF radio can also be used for data, although that is becoming rarer compared with Iridium.

Something else that came out of our survey results was a general unhappiness with the data allowance of SailMail, which restricts its 'members' to an average of 90 minutes per week. 'Repeatedly cut off after 10 minutes, so couldn't get weather or positions. Inbox clogged up, which made matters worse,' was a typical comment. »

'Numerous skippers said they couldn't get software to work – Iridium for e-mail is a prime example of gear you must not expect to work straight from the box'

Our conclusions

Sometimes equipment is dead out of the box. Sometimes it dies shortly afterwards. We've seen examples of both in this survey, in everything from autopilots to chart-plotting gear.

But these problems are relatively rare. Installation problems continue to be the main source of failures, sometimes occurring or recurring many months later. The good news is there seem to be less of these in the ARC with each passing year – perhaps more skippers are aware of this pitfall.

If your biggest priority is reliability, the message remains the same: fit equipment such as watermakers, communications equipment and self-steering gear early and thoroughly test it before you leave home. That also gives you a proper chance to get 100 per cent familiar with its workings. Marine equipment gets a bad name, sometimes well-deserved, but user errors are a factor, too.

If you can do without and keep it simple, so much the better; that's one less thing to fix and service. Because make no mistake about it, every extra bit of kit you buy will fail sooner or later.