Ever wonder about those claims of meeting or exceeding USCG Standards?
Do they really exist, and where can I find them?

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You pick up a new PFD from your local marine store and the first thing you check is the label. You're looking for two lines, the first: "US Coast Guard Approval Number 123XXX". And the second, "Inspected and tested in accordance with US Coast Guard regulations."

You now feel confident that the PFD you're about to purchase or for that matter any other piece of equipment for your boat or even your boat meets or exceeds Coast Guard standards. But what are these standards and does the Coast Guard test every one of them.

The Office of Boating Safety (www.uscgboating.org) is charged with all things related to recreational boating standards by the Secretary of Transportation.

United States Code
Title 46: Shipping
Chapter 43: Recreational Vessels
Section 4302: Regulations

(a) The Secretary [of Transportation] may prescribe regulations—

(1) establishing minimum safety standards for recreational vessels and associated equipment, and establishing procedures and tests required to measure conformance with those standards, with each standard—

(A) meeting the need for recreational vessel safety; and
(B) being stated, insofar as practicable, in terms of performance;

(2) requiring the installation, carrying, or use of associated equipment (including fuel systems, ventilation systems, electrical systems, sound-producing devices, firefighting equipment, lifesaving devices, signaling devices, ground tackle, life- and grab-rails, and navigational equipment) on recreational …

To best serve both the law and the public, the Coast Guard is required to test all equipment that is covered by the United States Code (Code). Obviously the Coast Guard could not possibly test each and every piece of equipment itself. It neither has the manpower or the budget, but Congress understood that when they wrote the law. They specifically stated that the Coast Guard could sub-contract the work to commercial firms

who in the Coast Guard's opinion had the expertise to determine whether the systems that require testing meet and/or exceed the standards.

While the Coast Guard does do some site visits of boat manufacturers and testing of boats, many of the items tested go though companies such as UL (Underwriters Laboratories Inc. – www.ul.com). UL is a non-profit, public service company that tests millions of different items for safety and adherence to Federal, State, Local and Voluntary building and/or manufacture guidelines.

You'll know when something is tested and approved by UL, by seeing their name and Mark (symbol) [see symbol no. 1] on the product "tag". According to UL, items with a UL Mark on "…can show consumers, retailers, surveyors, insurers, government agencies, regulatory authorities and others that your product meets federal regulations and ABYC, NFPA and UL Safety Standards."

What exactly needs testing you ask? There is a whole list of items, but we'll highlight just a few:

- Navigation lights
- Marine Sanitation Devices (MSD)
- Boats
- Boat Identification
- Safe Loading & Powering of the Boat
- Capacity Plate Placement and Content
- Flotation Systems on Boats
- Electrical Systems
- Ventilation Systems
- Main and Auxiliary Systems
- Safety Equipment

Why do you want to buy and install only USCG Approved material in your boat? Let's use one example – parts for your engine. If you took a Coast Guard Auxiliary Safe Boating Course you would have learned that you should never use automotive parts in your marine engine.

Yes, marine parts are more expensive. And yes, they do look exactly alike to the untrained eye. But why should you pay more for the same product (or at least what you think is the same product)?

According to the USCG Boating Safety Circular 64 (Dec 86) one of the reasons you don't use automotive parts is this example: "Alternators. A standard automotive alternator has exposed electrical contacts that can create sparks and ignite fuel vapors in the engine room. On marine alternators, which must meet the ignition protection requirements in §183.410(a), the contacts are sealed inside."

Similar issues are involved with Distributor Caps, Fuel Systems, Starting Solenoids, Generators, Auxiliary motors for hydraulic pumps, tilt motors, etc., carburetors, and batteries. Each of these items can either cause a spark or release flammable vapors into your enclosed engine compartment.

Cars don't have enclosed engine compartments. There is no "bottom" to the engine compartment in your car, as there is with the trunk. Vapors, oil, grease and other flammable items fall to the ground in your car, wherein your boat, these items release their vapors in an enclosed space. One spark can ignite the vapor with a resultant fire and/or explosion ensuing.

Similar reasoning is used in all of the safety standards used in your boat. The marine environment is completely different than the normal environment on land. Boats, their equipment and the techniques to manufacture said equipment must work in, and survive this harsh environment while keep the occupants of the vessels (that's you folks) safe.

One quick mention – don't over-power your boat. One of the items mentioned above was the "safe powering of your boat". The Coast Guard requires boat manufactures to list the largest engine that the boat you are buying can safely handle. Don't exceed this value. It can jeopardize the safety and stability of the vessel, and in turn endanger the most important items in the boat - you!

If you want to learn more about the USCG Boating Standards, visit the Office of Boating Safety, and take a look at the Regulation pages at http://www.uscgboating.org/regulations/regulations.htm.

While your there, click on Safety and then click on Vessel Safety Check and request this free service of the United States Coast Guard Auxiliary – it could save your life.

Then click on Boating Safety Courses and sign up for one, and take the entire family – it's a great learning experience and helps build the concept that the family unit is a team responsible for the safe operation of your boat.

Remember - ***"You're in Command. Boat Responsibly!"***

Symbol No. 1