

The lead card that almost got thrown away

After 37 years of selling boats, John Weller, subject of PYB's broker spotlight profile, has seen and heard just about everything. One thing's for sure, people who look like they're ready to buy a boat don't always do so, and some guys who look like they don't have two nickels to rub together wind up spending millions on luxury yachts.

by Lisa Overing

After a young broker in John Weller's office quit in 1978, his desk was cleaned out and all of his 3 x 5 index cards with prospects were distributed to the remaining salesmen. Weller got about six lead cards and they sat on his desk collecting dust for several months. Just as he was about to trash them, his assistant, Claudia, suggested that he at least go to the trouble of sending the prospects a simple form letter saying, "Do you want to buy a boat?"

So Claudia typed the letters, Weller signed them, and after investing in six postage stamps, the letters were mailed to each prospect.

About two weeks later, Weller got a phone call from one of the form letters.

"It was this guy with an Alabama accent and he sounded like he'd just fallen off the turnip truck," says Weller. "He said, 'I wanna buy a boat, a big boat, like 100 feet.'"

At the time, John Weller knew next to nothing about 100 foot boats. The biggest boat he'd ever sold was a 46 Bertram Sportfish.

So Weller packed his briefcase with specs of the one boat that the prospect was interested in and waited to meet the guy from the turnip truck at 4 o'clock in his office on A1A in Fort Lauderdale. With an office just off the beach, a cross-section of humanity from millionaires to beach-bum drifters was prone to staring at his brokerage listings on the wall. You never knew who would wander inside.

Then Claudia announced, "Mr. Johnson is here to see you."

"I walk out and see a bum leaning on the wall, shirt hanging outside his pants and scuffed-up boots," Weller remembers. "Next to the bum was a beautiful woman and a guy with a blue blazer. So I looked at the guy with the blazer and said, 'Hello, Mr. Johnson.'"

"Then the drifter-bum guy extends his hand and says, 'No, I'm Mr. Johnson.' So the guy who looks like a derelict is the one who wants to buy a 100-foot boat."

So Weller showed Mr. Johnson a 108-foot Benetti in the marina. Then they decided to look at a Bender boat up in Palm Beach. After Weller said it was about a 45 minute ride, Mr. Johnson suggested they take his plane and fly up.

"I thought this guy must be some kind of flake," says Weller. "He can't own an airplane. But he had a Gulfstream I, the same size as the ones built today. So we went to Palm Beach and got rooms at the Breakers. Then Mr. Johnson asked about a boat called *Avante*. When I told him we couldn't see it because it was in St. Thomas, he said he would tell his captain to fly us to there, to the Caribbean, tomorrow."

So the next day, as Weller was flying over Turks and Caicos in Mr. Johnson's private Gulfstream, he notices the pilots opening bottles of beer. It turns out that the guy with the blue blazer was Mr. Johnson's pilot. Just a little concerned, Weller calmly

asked Gloria, the beautiful woman who was Mr. Johnson's wife, where her husband had disappeared to inside the small aircraft.

"Oh, he's flying the plane," she says, instructing an incredulous John Weller to go sit in the co-pilot's seat, next to her husband.

Weller had never been in a private plane before, but decided he was enjoying himself and would go with the flow.

He remembers Mr. Johnson saying to him, "See that glowing light over there? That's Puerto Rico. Feel like a good steak? We'll go mañana."

"What an adventure," Weller recalls. "First, the guy's leaning on the wall with dirty boots, and now, he's actually flying the plane. I couldn't believe one thing after another."

When they got to St. Thomas, Mr. Johnson decided that he liked *Avante*, a 108-foot Feadship. Shortly thereafter, Mr. Johnson bought *Avante* from John Weller. Mr. Johnson also decided that he really liked Feadships, a lot, so much in fact that he proceeded to buy six more from Weller over the years.

So what's the moral of this story? Is it to not judge a book by its cover? Is it to willingly jump into airplanes with strangers who have no sense of fashion as their pilots swig on beer in the passenger seats?

The point, Weller says, is: "Don't ever throw a lead in the trash!"

Got an anecdote on selling a boat that almost sounds too fishy to be true? Contact PYB at Jim@ProfessionalYachtBroker.com and share your tale. And by all means, feel free to change your well-known, millionaire customer's name to something more anonymous like, Mr. Johnson, if you have a fish tale worth telling.