



Alter Ego

June 24, 2010

For Immediate Release

Outerlimits president Mike Fiore can get down to serious business when the situation calls for it.

By Eric Colby.

Boat shows provide manufacturers with more information than just boat sales. They also see trends that are developing throughout the industry. At the 2008 Miami International Boat Show, Outerlimits Powerboats president Mike Fiore saw something coming that few others in the recreational boatbuilding world recognized that far in advance.

"We walked out of the boat show and a week later, we laid off people," he recalled recently. "Everyone was trying to look cool and be cool," Fiore added, but he saw the downturn coming and knew that trying to maintain appearances was not the approach to take.

He explained, "You switch into survival mode, which fortunately or unfortunately, is one of my strong suits. If there's an emergency, I'm running in with the fire hose and then figuring out later what happened."

When most performance-boat enthusiasts think of Fiore, they see the guy who shows up at a poker run with the bright-red factory Freightliner and knows how to make a statement, both visually and verbally. They don't necessarily envision a shrewd businessman who makes tough decisions when they're called for. They need to look a little closer.

Later in 2008, Fiore continued to make cuts, laying off 1/3 of his staff in November. "It was terrible," he said. "You're laying people off and you know they're going to be on unemployment and their lives are going to change."

Fast forward to today and through the tough times, Outerlimits has kept its doors open and remained solvent despite Fiore's admission that 2009 was a tougher year than even his first 365 days in business nearly 17 years ago. Today the headquarters in Bristol, R.I., is busy building new boats and there's even a new Outerlimits custom engine shop. "We've hired back some more people, but we will always have a much leaner organization than we had before," said Fiore.

Boats currently under construction include the new SL 44. Number seven of that model is in the mold. The boat is first of a new series that feature a unique monocoque construction with a molded bilge liner in the engine compartment and another single-piece mold in the cabin. This simplifies the construction process and creates a much cleaner looking boat. "We had to build a new product with fewer people and we had to find a smarter way to do it," explained Fiore. "That's going to prove to be the most important development in the history of Outerlimits, it's that significant."

In addition to the 44-footer, Outerlimits has three versions of its 52' V-bottom under construction. The first is a Super Vee 52 that will be powered by four diesel engines for endurance competition in Europe. There are two more SL 52s being built in pleasure versions for customers.

Ever candid, Fiore admitted that from 2007 to 2009, Outerlimits business dropped by more than 50 percent, but they company always had enough orders to stay in business.

"We have never not had any orders, I was able to sell some stuff and keep my core group of guys at work," he said. "Not at one time did during the recession did I have a mold with nothing in it." Today, Fiore estimates that the company has recovered to about 60 percent of pre-recession output.

Another reason for the company's survival is the loyalty of Outerlimits customers. Many are repeat buyers. It's their continued support that has helped the manufacturer through these tough times.

One change in his management style came from the man who will soon become Fiore's father-in-law, Art Whipple, founder of Whipple Superchargers, the company that has basically taken over the aftermarket supercharger business in the automotive and performance-boat worlds. Fiore and Shonda Whipple became engaged at this year's Miami Boat Show.

Whipple is a self-made man who takes a decidedly hands-on approach to business. He's directly involved with every aspect of Whipple Superchargers and now Fiore, like his future father-in-law, is more directly involved at Outerlimits.

"If there's less margin and you're building fewer boats, there's less middle management, you take on that role yourself," said Fiore. "A lot hands-on guys didn't skip a beat during the recession because they're used to hard work."

He admitted that he got spoiled with middle management, letting someone else be in charge of everything. Now Fiore knows what's going on with every aspect of Outerlimits, right down to what's being done to clean up the break room.

Today, Fiore can look back at what were considered drastic moves in 2008 and realize that he made the right call. "Because we pulled the plug quickly enough, it allowed us to make the smart move and keep the company solid," he said.

Fiore said that he would forego a lot of things to own a boat instead and he thinks that many of his customers feel the same way. They've been loyal and he returns that loyalty by continuing to develop new models to keep them interested.

"I build my boats for people who want a boat like I would want a boat, fast, strong and unique" he said. "You want people to look at Outerlimits and be proud to own one." Not only can they be proud of the manner in which their boats are built, but also how the company is run.