



By Amy Kilpin Playing it safe

As rates plunge to all time lows and companies sink into the depths of administration and bankruptcy despair, ship owners and managers are being hit hard by the economic crisis, and such stringent financial times have a major knock-on effect. Cut backs.

Safety is a key issue – if cost-cutting is the prevailing objective, then it will hit the subsidiary elements of ship operation, including safety equipment. And by metaphorical domino-effect, the supply industry will suffer.

Concern for a drop in safety and quality standards is writhing across the shipping industry at present, reinforced by a recent shocking discovery of fake safety gear found on vessels undergoing routine inspection.

Swedish equipment manufacturer CM Hammar discovered three useless replications of its Hammer H20 hydrostatic-release units for life rafts in operation, fully non-functional and consequentially posing a severe threat to the lives of seafarers onboard the vessels.

Comprehensive testing by the genuine manufacturers revealed that none of the pirated safety equipment released life rafts as the original equipment intended, and in addition, failed to activate the emergency-position radio beacon (Epirbs) – a disturbing discovery, to say the very least.

Jan Calvert, Sales Director at CM Hammar, said: “We tested all the equipment and found that it did not function as intended. There may be a number of ships at sea that are sailing with fake units and if any were to sink, there would definitely be no liferafts or Epirbs to help rescue seafarers in danger.”

Under new International Maritime Organisation (IMO) guideline MSC 1206, lifeboat-release systems are required to be serviced at stations operated by the manufacturer, however with internet provid-

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ing easy access to obtain illegal equipment, the market is open to risk of plagiarism with cases reported of ship chandlers passing on cheaply-sourced equipment without an authenticity guarantee.

Unable to locate the source of its replicated equipment, CM Hammar has urged owners to verify equipment serial numbers and to source safety equipment through authorised service stations. The IMO safety campaign warns against the importance of correctly-functioning safety equipment, and a long-running campaign by the Japan Marine Equipment Association against pirated parts allegedly produced in China and South Korea has also been addressing this alarming issue.

Equipment supply companies will inevitably be impacted upon as a result of both the procurement of substandard products and cut-backs in the purchase of what is regarded as superfluous equipment, despite the potential perilous consequences of such thriftiness.

Paul Luen, Managing Director of Martek Marine, supplier of life-saving equipment and safety and environmental monitoring systems,

"Many anticipate that owners and operators will take short cuts to save on costs, but this is something that they are very much aware of and vigilant to, and they actually increase focus on the right investments into new safety equipment"

said that the company has witnessed "a freeze on 'non-essential' project spending among some clients, and among some who had previously budgeted for environmental innovation projects in 2009."

In addition, as a result of major cost-cutting exercises and acute pressure on financing, the supply markets are being affected by the widespread newbuild order cancellation epidemic sweeping across the industry. If newbuild orders are cancelled, there is an ensuing reduction in the need for safety systems and equipment.

"Like all of our peers in the industry we have been affected by the cancellation of orders and we expect that trend to continue in the first two quarters of 2009," Mr Luen revealed.

While Mr Luen regarded the industry as "highly regulated, with most safety equipment mandatory under current and pending SOLAS regulations," he raised concern over "inconsistent or weak enforcement by Port State Control and other certifying authorities," which inevitably weakens the maintenance of such standards.

Jefferson Soh, Managing Director of Singapore-based safety equipment supplier Durasafe, has indicated that the economic situation is likely to have a disturbing impact on the levels of safety adopted by ship owners and managers. The company has discerned an estimated 10% decline in business, and Mr Soh has raised con-

cern that "smaller sized ship owners may compromise on cheaper safety products to cut costs."

He added: "There is not a specific focus on the shipping industry from safety equipment manufacturers, but as the world fleet continues to expand, there will be substantial demand for better value and improved safety equipment. Safety standards should be raised and made mandatory by shipping bodies such as the IMO to minimise and prevent crew injuries and protect ships."

Contrary to widespread opinion, however, Norwegian lifeboat company Noreq has emphasised a rising focus on safety as a direct result of the economic collapse, as companies recognise a step-up in legislative standards as even more significant in such a harsh industry climate.

"When the financial crisis shakes the world, the attention on safety



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