Why is the shipping industry not successful in creating a better image among the general public? Is the present shortage of qualified seafarers worldwide in any way related to this poor impression of the industry? Dr Jaime Veiga, of the Seafarers International Research Centre in Wales, highlights some issues relating to the image of seafaring and the effect this might have on recruitment.

The image of the shipping industry has always been the most important factor in recruitment. Seafarers who join the industry for the first time will have a perception of the industry that will influence their decision to remain or leave. If the industry is not visible it is hard to recruit new entrants. In May 2000, an International Shipping Federation (IS/Baltic and International Maritime Council (Bimco) study mentioned a shortage of 16,000 officers (4 per cent of the total workforce) and predicted a 12 per cent shortfall of 46,000 officers by the year 2010. A previous study by the Federation of Transport Workers’ Unions in the European Union and the European Commu- nity Seafarers’ Association, which concentrated on the European Union, estimated a shortage of 13,000 officers in 2001 and of 36,000 officers in 2006.

Although the first study pre- dicted a shortage of 16,000 officers in 2010 (30 per cent of the total work force), a recent SIRC study pointed out that very different systems of education and training to fill shore-based posts that had previously been occupied by former seafarers. The shipping industry is falling in the recruitment of seafarers and at the same time is failing to demonstrate the impor- tance it is playing in world commerce.

What is to be done? Most of the responsibility is in the hands of shipowners. However, the other players in the shipping industry, such as maritime administrations, trade unions, seafarers and international organisations, also have their role to play.

There would be advantages to shipowners in changing their marketing strategy and opening the industry and their vessels to the general public. Guided visits to vessels, promotion of TV programmes with positive infor- mation about the industry and a better understanding of how the industry works would all be positive steps. As a crew member said recently, “When I was a child I used to visit the big passenger vessels of the 1960s. They were there in the port. Today that does not happen anymore.”

However, marketing alone is not enough. The change of the systems of education and training will only work if the appropriate steps are taken to improve the living and working conditions of seafarers. If the problem is not identified, it will be difficult and retention rates may even more and the image of the shipping industry that needs to show a good image has to invest in proper education and training. Until the adoption of the interna- tional convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW) 78, the system of systems of education and training were only a good idea in principle. With the adoption of STCW 78, an international standard entered into force but soon it was realised that it was not being properly implemented. Different countries had different systems. The amended STCW 95 is an important tool to improve education and training. It is still at an early stage and it will take some time to establish how successful it can be.

To conclude: improvements in the image of the shipping indus- try are in the interests of all, including most obviously the seafarers. For shipowners there are also several advantages in promoting improvements. In fact, the different parties would gain enormously. Marketing strategies applied commonly for other purposes can be used to benefit the shipping industry and would allow the general public to see its positive aspects and links to the rest of the industry to world commerce.

The fact that shipowners have not invested in education and training level does not help in improving the living and working conditions of seafarers. Despite positive policies in a few countries, the promote the same does not work. If nothing is done, then the situation may worsen even more. However, if nothing is done, the situation may worsen even more. The image of the shipping industry will be beyond im- provement and the image of the young people will be even more difficult and retention rates may be expected to drop even further.

The vital question of shipbuilding image

Ignorance about the industry has further consequences. Recent SIRC studies suggest that the majority of those working at sea chose the career mostly because of family influence and not because they were chanced on that career. There does not appear to be proper marketing on the part of ship- owners and other interested parties in the shipping industry. The following is a quotation of a seafarer that reflects a typical situation:

“Many seafarers tend to look for other career alternatives after a very short time at sea.” (Photo: SIRC photographic archive)