The touchscreen buttons on the Garmin 5208 are highlighted in blue. The jury's still out on how durable touchscreens are, and Garmin's one-year warranty isn't enough to allay our concerns over longevity.

Touchscreen Technology Comes of Age

Proponents of touchscreen technology point to two big advantages: a more intuitive interface that requires less button-pushing, and a more robust display with fewer potential failure points. In reality, some functions are more easily accomplished with dials or dedicated buttons (a prominent, dedicated MOB key, for example), and the track record of the newest touchscreen plotters, in our view, is too short to ballyhoo their robustness. The IPX7 designation (capable of withstanding accidental immersion in one meter of water for up to 30 minutes) on Garmin's touchscreen units is encouraging, but a longer warranty on the touchscreens would better allay concerns.

The maturing of touchscreen technology since its invention in the early 1970s has led to a variety of techniques for managing inputs. Garmin chose to use capacitive touchscreen technology for its robustness. This system will work when the screen is wet, fingers are wet, and will even function properly in a driving rain.

On the downside, this type of touchscreen will not work when the user wears gloves, so cold-weather operation will be hindered. Garmin offers these units with or without touchscreen control.

Another advantage of this touchscreen is the large, full alphanumeric keyboard displayed onscreen for data entry. On the Garmin 5212, the letter keyboard fills the screen with individual letters offering a ¾-inch-square area for contact, which is roughly four times the size of most pushbuttons we've seen.

The downside is the loss of the tactile feel of actually pushing a button. Some sailors feel that while underway in heavy seas, it is easier to reach and execute a key stoke with a pushbutton than it is to tap an onscreen field.

Another issue often raised is that a touchscreen will get dirty with oily or dirty fingers. We've had a unit installed outside on a center-console test powerboat for 10 months. We just spray the screens off with a jet of water after each use. So far we've seen no degradation in the quality of the picture.

PS will be taking a closer look at touchscreen technology, its track record in the marine environment, and where it is headed, in a future issue.