

# Put Your Passengers to Work

For a better flight experience

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This story isn't about how to get your passengers to wipe the bug guts off the wings, mop the grease off the belly, pull the mud out of the wheelpants, or any other dirty airplane job. This is about how a passenger can feel more comfortable, have a better flight experience, and enhance the safety of the flight when you include him or her as part of the crew. I'll share some thoughts about how to include your passenger into your crew resource management (CRM).

It's a simple fact: most people are uncomfortable if thrown into a situation where they have no control and little knowledge of what's going on. This is true in any situation, but it is amplified when you add in the altitude factor and then toss in a pre-programmed fear of flying. Let's face it; through the media, the nonflying public gets a good dose of how flying can go wrong.

Providing your passenger with information and keeping him or her occupied can go a long way to making the flight more enjoyable for both of you. However, how much do you tell him or her and how do you include your passenger as a crew member? The answer to this question must be tailored to the passenger. To some extent, the pilot must take a short walk in the passenger's shoes to understand the best way to create a good flight experience. To keep this discussion focused, I'm going to use examples of a single passenger in a two-place aircraft. I'll classify my passenger types as new and seasoned.



A thorough pre-flight briefing is essential to your passenger's enjoyment.

## The New Passenger

This could be someone who has little or no flying experience or it could be someone who has some passenger experience with another pilot. Even if my passenger is a regular airline traveler, I consider him or her as a new passenger if this person is new to light aircraft.

The first thing I do for new passengers is to make them an official back-seat driver. That is, I explain to them that they are part of the crew when they fly with me, and they are welcome to make comments about what is going on or ask me questions about what I am doing. Most important, I urge my passengers to let me know if any part of the flight feels uncomfortable for them, either from physical discomfort or from not knowing what is happening. Of course, I mention that sometimes we can't hold conversations because I'll be a bit busy, and I'll tell them when those times occur.

Now that they are an official part of my CRM, I include them in the preflight inspection, or at least let them know one has been completed. Here is where you need to be diplomatic. Don't overload your new passenger with details such as the ramifications of loose prop bolts allowing the prop to fly off. I simply tell them the preflight inspection is similar to getting your car ready for a long trip, only with an airplane, we do it for every trip.

Once seated in the cockpit, I go over their part of the cockpit duties. This includes learning how to manage the seat belt and shoulder harness and how to latch and open the door or canopy (if you have one). Don't just buckle them in and latch the hatch; let them understand how these essential functions work. How would you like to be strapped down and locked in a machine and not have a clue about what is happening? As passengers accept these simple

responsibilities, they gain control; that's an emotional plus.

The next thing my passengers learn is to become an extra pair of eyes, and this starts before we move. I jokingly remind my "right seater" that my plane is about 30-feet wide and does not have mirrors to check for things that are moving or stationary. Before I make a turn I ask my passenger if it looks okay to move in that direction. It doesn't take long before the passenger starts looking before I ask.

While in the run-up area, I brief passengers on what they will hear on the radio. If we are using a common traffic advisory frequency, I explain that many aircraft will be on the same frequency, and they will hear other airport names. My passenger's job is to back me up if he or she hears the name of our airport announced. I also explain the call sign I use so my passenger can tell if I'm talking to someone or if someone is talking to me. If we are at an airport with tower-controlled traffic, the radio briefing takes on an additional safety role. I ask my passenger to follow the clearances, and I often ask my passenger if they heard what I heard. The extra set of ears improves safety. I have yet to carry a passenger who did not think the radio part of the trip was fun.

Next, my passenger gets the traffic-watch briefing. I tell him or her to let me know what they see when they see it. I also point out traffic to my passenger, and ask him or her to look into my blind spots before I turn.

The first-time passenger might be excited and ready to go, or timid and fearful. If he or she falls into the timid and fearful category, it's even more important to welcome your passenger as a crew member and put him or her to work, but don't overload your passenger with too much detail.

## The Seasoned Passenger

The seasoned passenger is someone who flies somewhat regularly with you in your light aircraft. Perhaps it's your spouse or a flying buddy. If my passenger has flown a lot with other

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pilots, but not with me, I start off by treating him or her like a new passenger until I determine how far to get this person involved in my CRM.

There are no rules governing how much a passenger can participate as a safety resource. I'll use my wife, Mimi, as an example of a seasoned passenger and important crew member. Not all passengers will be helpful in the same tasks; the task must suit the passenger.

I taught Mimi to fly in my Aeronca Champ, and then in her Ercoupe; she soloed both planes. However, she later encountered inner ear problems that led to occasional vertigo, so her days of being a pilot-in-command

ended. While she does have a fair amount of training, she is now a "professional" passenger. Remember, anyone can take a couple of hours of flight training and learn the basics of level flight, climbs, descents, and turns. A passenger who can help with the controls can be mighty handy.

In Mimi's case, the vertigo issue (a propensity to get airsick) means she performs CRM tasks that address her problem and help me. I avoid asking her to read the chart, look up frequencies, or program the GPS; she needs to be looking outside the cockpit. So, I'll have her fly the plane and watch for traffic while I do the "head down" stuff. Mimi is great on the

radio, so she backs up my calls and clearances and frequently does the radio work for me. She has hawk-eye vision and often sees traffic before I do. Since reading the chart while flying is a problem for her, if I describe what I am looking for on the ground, she commonly finds the checkpoint quickly. I'll use the GPS for navigation while she observes the ground for landmarks. Mimi usually sees the airport we're heading for before I do.

Last year I participated as a flight instructor in a Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) FAA Safety Team program that involved me flying with a program participant in his own plane. I climbed into the right seat of his Beechcraft Sierra, and we headed out to perform some maneuvers. During the pretakeoff briefing, he showed me a briefing card he created for his passengers. Much like an airline briefing card, it depicted the proper use of seat belt and safety equipment. I was impressed. Then he pointed out that a normal and emergency checklist were located adjacent to the front seat passenger. He said that he and his wife use the plane for frequent cross-country trips, and these checklists are for her use. His wife reads the normal procedures checklist while he performs the tasks, and they frequently practice reading the emergency procedures checklist; she reads and he simulates the actions. He also said his wife is not a certificated pilot but did receive a few hours of training to be able to assist in flying the plane.

The point is, a nonpilot passenger can improve safety, have more fun, and make it easier on you, the pilot, if you include him or her as a crew member. Just because you are the pilot-in-command does not mean you have to do everything. Whether your passenger is new to flying or a seasoned rider, putting the passenger to work can be good for both of you. If you can get your passenger to debug your plane, you are a master in the use of CRM. If your passengers can help inside the cockpit, that's even better. 



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