

“This Is Your Captain...”



How to personalize the passenger briefing

BY JEREMY LUTES

As I walk through the flight school where I work, the dispatcher stops me to ask if we can take an observer, a prospective student, on our next flight. After a quick review of the weight and balance, I agree and walk out to the aircraft to find my student just beginning the pre-flight and the observer preparing to get into the back seat.

My student is a commercial applicant. Before starting his checklists, he begins the passenger briefing. At first I'm impressed that he remembered this step, but my impression changes when words begin to spew from his mouth at an incomprehensible rate.

When my student completes his Mt. Vesuvius-style information eruption, I look back at our passenger, who is wide-eyed and looking more than slightly nervous. Obviously the briefing hasn't accomplished its mission of communicating essential information, nor has it made the passenger feel safe and comfortable in our aircraft.

Passenger briefs aren't often emphasized as much as other elements of the practical test standards (PTS)—a pilot's skill is rarely attributed to his passenger-briefing ability. While it isn't the most glamorous part of training, the PTS specifically states that an applicant for a private or commercial certificate must “brief the occupants on the use of seat belts, shoulder harnesses, doors, and emergency procedures.”

We can teach them to do better.

The SAFEST Way

It's unfortunate that many student pilots only get cursory instruction in this area of operation. That may be because it seems a little ridiculous for a student to brief his instructor on the operation of the seat belt and other basics. Whatever the reason, students don't get much practice briefing passengers. And while it's true that an instructor doesn't need to be constantly briefed, the fact remains that a student will, at some point, take another individual flying with him.

This means, at a minimum, a student should be able to give a briefing that covers things the passenger needs to know in the event of an off-airport landing or if it becomes necessary to quickly evacuate the aircraft. While there are various acronyms to help remember these items, one that I find particularly helpful is SAFEST:

- S** - Seat belt operation and required usage;
- A** - Air vents and heater operation;
- F** - Fire extinguisher location and operation;
- E** - Exit(s) location and operation;
- S** - Sterile cockpit during takeoff and landing; and
- T** - Traffic spotting to point out any potential conflicts.

A student who can complete this brief should have no issues passing the checkride at the end of his training. While this brief will pass the checkride, in many ways it's incomplete. It doesn't account for the numerous variables that should be addressed.

In fact, this brief is similar to the brief that you'd receive on a commercial airliner. The flight attendants brief the passengers on the required items, but they never take the extra step and address specific passengers' concerns.

This is where general aviation (GA) has a chance to shine by comparison. Not only do passengers get to sit in the front, but they also get a personalized experience that can leave them with a lasting impression of the utility and safety that GA offers.

This is what we should teach our students to do.

Tailoring the Talk

So, how should we personalize the passenger briefing? We should always start by identifying the type of passenger we are flying with—whether a GA newbie, an experienced pilot, or someone in between.

For the GA newbie, a small plane is often perceived as a death trap about to spring. This person has undoubtedly heard about a “small” plane that crashed with multiple fatalities. To help dispel these fears, teach your student to start by letting the passenger observe the preflight as he points out the numerous safety features that an aircraft has, as well as the extensive maintenance that's required on the aircraft.

After the passenger enters the aircraft, your student should give a thorough run-through of the “SAFEST” acronym to make sure the passenger is familiar with the “required” items. And rather than stop there, he should go on to show the redundant ignition, radios, and other equipment that make the aircraft even more resilient.

Finally, before start, your student should teach his passenger how to use the headsets. The passenger should know



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that if she has any concerns or feels uncomfortable in any way, she should let the pilot know immediately.

The briefing shouldn't end there, either.

Prior to takeoff the pilot should make sure the passenger is ready and give her a quick rundown of what will occur during the takeoff roll. If there is the possibility of turbulence, he should place special emphasis on that potential, and stress that it will not hurt the aircraft or cause it to "fall out of the sky." I like to compare turbulence to an old dirt road; there may be a few potholes and an occasional stretch of washboard bumps along the way.

During the flight, the pilot should take extra care to prepare his passenger for what's going to occur. If he's going to bank to the left, he should let her know. If he's going to reduce the throttle, he should tell her this, too. The goal is to make the passenger feel comfortable and explain the various doors that GA opens. As the pilot gets more insight into his passenger's personality, and what makes her feel at ease, he can change his methods accordingly.

On the opposite side of the spectrum is the passenger who is an experienced pilot. Obviously, it isn't necessary to brief such a passenger on what is going to occur during takeoff or how the aircraft can fly safely through turbulent skies. However, there are important areas that should be covered that you wouldn't with the GA newbie. Again the key is to personalize.

With such a passenger, there's always the possibility for confusion over who is pilot in command (PIC). This

creates a potentially dangerous situation, where both pilots are "fighting" for the controls during a critical phase of flight. It's extremely important that your student briefs who is PIC and responsible for the ultimate safety of the flight. Is the pilot who is flying the PIC, or is it a specific pilot regardless of who is handling the controls? Will your student handle the radios while flying, or will the other pilot? Is there anything the pilot-passenger should do to assist? These are all questions that should be answered before takeoff.

Briefing the passenger who is somewhere in between a GA newbie and an experienced pilot is somewhat more challenging. While the pilot should still use the "SAFE-EST" briefing method, he should also analyze what additional information would be beneficial to that passenger.

Next Steps

Beyond personalizing the passenger briefing to fit the type of passenger the pilot is carrying, he should also personalize the brief to cover various systems that are unique to his aircraft. A great example is the emergency parachute in the Cirrus. A passenger will want to know about such a system in the event that the pilot is incapacitated, but what if she tries to assist him in a perceived emergency by pulling it when it isn't truly necessary? It's important to brief her on which situations would require her to pull the parachute.

I once took a ride in a Pitts S2B with an aerobatic instructor who briefed me on the use of the parachute, how to release the canopy, and how to bail out. He then took the brief to the next level by informing me that if the canopy released I should first look back to see if he was bailing out before I did anything. He explained that the canopy can occasionally release by itself if it isn't locked properly, and he didn't want me to bail out and try my hand at sky diving just because of an accidental release. That seemed like common sense to me, but I can see how a passenger who is unfamiliar with aerobatics might perceive the canopy flying off while the aircraft is spinning out of control as reason to bail out.

So, how do we get our students to take the passenger briefing to the next level? The answer is through scenarios. Next time you get into the aircraft, don't be the instructor for the first few minutes. Instead, tell your student that you are a specific type of passenger, and ask her to brief you accordingly.

The bottom line is, we should teach our students not only how to pass the checkride, but also how to be the PIC of the aircraft. When our students take up passengers they become the face of GA. What they do or don't do will be perceived as the norm.

Teaching students to personalize passenger briefings can help give them the tools they need to present a good face. ■