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# AOPA

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## Straight talk

A good passenger briefing helps to manage expectations

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If you have spent any time flying on the airlines, you know that the flight will always start with a safety video or presentation by the flight attendants about how to evacuate the aircraft in an accident. The drill always covers the use of the seat belts, oxygen masks, and emergency exits. Many passengers who have flown commercially for awhile just ignore the talk and wait for it to end so that they can read a book or fall asleep.

As a general aviation pilot, you too have an obligation to brief your passengers. Although Federal Aviation Regulation 91.519 is directed toward large and multiengine turbine aircraft, it provides an outline for the conscientious general aviation pilot. You may not have the fancy videos, and your airplane may not be equipped with drop-down oxygen masks or floor-level emergency lighting, but you probably do have a fire extinguisher on board and maybe a flashlight or two.

Not all people are as comfortable squeezing into a four-seat Cessna or Piper as you are, and you need to realize that one of the reasons for this is a perceived lack of safety that such airplanes symbolize to much of the public. That can make your safety briefing a bit touchy, since you are not trying to scare them -- a legitimate concern if they're already apprehensive. So, what do you need to cover in your briefing?

Start with the simplest things. Explain how the seat belts work, especially if there is a shoulder strap that hooks to the lap belt. The buckles are usually pretty similar to what you see on airliners, or perhaps in your automobile, which are good frames of reference to use. Demonstrate how to tighten and loosen the shoulder strap. It's not always intuitive, and you don't want your passengers thinking that if something as simple as the shoulder strap doesn't work, the airplane itself must be unsafe.

Explain operation of the doors. Airplane doors do not need to be slammed in the way that many treat their car doors. In fact, too often this kind of treatment causes damage to the latching mechanism. If the door has more than one handle, explain the differences and show all passengers -- even those who will be in the rear seat -- how to use them. Have each passenger close, lock, and then open the door. Since so many airplanes offer access to the baggage compartment from the cabin, demonstrate how the baggage doors work as you do your walk-around. Most people will want to see it anyway.

The most delicate subject to broach with tact is the possibility of a forced landing. As unlikely as it is, most people prefer not to think about it, but it's one of their biggest fears. Explain that if the engine quits, the aircraft will simply behave like a glider and continue to fly



under the pilot's control while slowly descending.

Don't gloss over an engine failure. Address it immediately. "It's a very remote possibility, but in the event of a power failure, the airplane will continue to fly, similar to a glider. Should that happen, I've been trained in dealing with it, and I will follow the procedures to get us on the ground safely. Hopefully it will be on an airport, but if it isn't, I'm going to need your help to find a suitable landing spot."

#### FAR 91.519-Passenger briefing

(a) Before each takeoff the pilot in command of an airplane carrying passengers shall ensure that all passengers have been orally briefed on --

(1) Smoking. Each passenger shall be briefed on when, where, and under what conditions smoking is prohibited. This briefing shall include a statement, as appropriate, that the federal aviation regulations require passenger compliance with lighted passenger information signs and no smoking placards, prohibit smoking in lavatories, and require compliance with crewmember instructions with regard to these items;

(2) Use of safety belts and shoulder harnesses. Each passenger shall be briefed on when, where, and under what conditions it is necessary to have his or her safety belt and, if installed, his or her shoulder harness fastened about him or her. This briefing shall include a statement, as appropriate, that federal aviation regulations require passenger compliance with the lighted passenger sign and/or crewmember instructions with regard to these items;

(3) Location and means for opening the passenger entry door and emergency exits;

(4) Location of survival equipment;

(5) Ditching procedures and the use of flotation equipment required under FAR 91.509 for a flight over water; and

(6) The normal and emergency use of oxygen equipment installed on the airplane.

(b) The oral briefing required by paragraph (a) of this section shall be given by the pilot in command or a member of the crew, but need not be given when the pilot in command determines that the passengers are familiar with the contents of the briefing. It may be supplemented by printed cards for the use of each passenger containing --

(1) A diagram of, and methods of operating, the emergency exits; and

(2) Other instructions necessary for use of emergency equipment.

(c) Each card used under paragraph (b) must be carried in convenient locations on the airplane for the use of each passenger and must contain information that is pertinent only to the type and model airplane on which it is used.

more clearly you can answer any questions without stammering over the information, the more confident your passengers will be putting themselves in your trust. Likewise, tell your passengers what you will and will not be doing in flight. You'll be making standard-rate turns (which you will explain without pilot jargon as simply gentle, shallow-banked turns), but you won't be doing any aerobatics.

Telling passengers that you want their help often makes them feel better and reinforces the idea that they cannot panic because they have a task to perform. Ask your passenger to open the door just before landing to keep it from becoming jammed shut. Explain how the airplane will be evacuated, and where you want people to go. If you are flying over water and you are providing life vests, explain their operation. If you are not providing vests, explain why.

If you are going to use headsets, show your passengers how to put them on and use them properly. A surprising number of people do not put the band on top of their head, but on the back, and the headset falls off. Show them where the volume control is. Explain that the best location for the boom microphone is close to their lips.

One thing you should avoid is giving your briefing while you are doing your preflight. You should ask for some time to do the walk-around undisturbed to ensure that you don't miss anything while trying to answer questions. Tell your passengers that you will be more than happy to answer their questions after the inspection is complete, but not before. Once the airplane is ready, answer any questions and do your demonstrations. Common questions will center on why you are draining the fuel, the purpose of the pitot tube, what the flight instruments do, and how the flight controls work. Don't make any inappropriate comments or jokes, as they will only add to the doubt some people will have about small airplanes. If they have any concerns about safety, address the questions bluntly and confidently.

If the weather is going to have a significant impact on your flight, cover that early on. If you know it will be bumpy at low altitudes, say so, and explain why. The

Tell your passengers what you expect from them. It might be something as simple as looking for landmarks on a cross-country flight or reading the checklist out to you. Explain the traffic pattern, and ask your guests to be on the lookout for other aircraft in the vicinity of the airport. There will come a time when you need to politely ask them to cut off their idle conversations so that you can concentrate on your approach and landing -- what the airlines call the *sterile cockpit*, when only conversation pertinent to the safety of flight is allowed. If you enforce such actions of safety, you will gain a new level of respect.

Passenger briefings are required before flight on any airplane, and if you want, you can create a checklist that is specific to the airplane you fly and the items you want to cover. Many of the questions, concerns, and trepidations that nonpilots have, we also had at some time -- but now that we're trained pilots, we may forget.

And, most important, we want our friends to return for another flight, and perhaps even a first lesson.

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