

COMMUNICATE POSITIVELY WITH YOUR PASSENGERS

Original idea from David Carlisle

Using good communication skills with your passengers can vastly improve satisfaction, and may even put anxious fliers at ease.

" Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. On behalf of your flight crew I would like to welcome you aboard. Our flight time to Paris tonight is . . ." Contemplate this thought: You fly people, not airplanes. You accomplish the task with aircraft. You can take a bad flight with a crew who can communicate well with the passengers and they get off the aircraft thanking them for a delightful flight. You also can take a nice flight with a crew who does not communicate with the PAX and at the very best they get off the aircraft saying it was OK. Communication and how you relate to your passengers (who are your customers, remember it) is of the utmost importance.

Regardless of a pilot's personal feeling about delivering announcements, they are a very important part of your job. Your PAX are the reason you are in business and their satisfaction is of the utmost importance. As a high profile public affairs person for your company, you must take the time to look through their eyes. Keeping your passengers in the loop is a key element of delivering good service - and it also pays the important dividend of putting at ease those of your passengers who may have some anxiety about flying.

There is a genuine frightened flyer problem in our society. A large percentage of passengers have flying fears and a desire to overcome them. It is very important that you develop high-quality announcement skills that impart timely information with cues that the aircraft is being flown by safe, by competent pilots. This adds value to the airline's image," says Carol Stauffer, cofounder of Fly With Confidence, FWC. (www.flywithconfidence.com). Pilots tend to think and communicate pilot to pilot and as such do not realize how important their words are to the security and comfort of their passengers. They need reassurance from you that your operation is safe and that you know your job. They rely on you for comfort and security and hold you in high esteem.

Your passengers cannot observe you in the simulator or when you train. They do not know how safe you are so they watch you closely. They look for cues and make value judgments based on observations. If you deliver a professional announcement with a reassuring voice, people who are a little bit uncomfortable while flying will get the sense that the aircraft is in the control of a very capable individual.

1. THE BASICS

Provide an initial welcome aboard announcement while you taxi for takeoff. Identify flight crewmembers and flight attendants by name, as many corporate customers will not have flown with you previously. Include your destination and time en route.

"Good evening, ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. I would like to welcome you aboard this B737 to Richmond tonight with continuing service to Washington. We should be airborne shortly. Our flying time tonight is one hour and 10 minutes. We will give you an update once we are at cruise altitude."

If you anticipate a departure delay or have been issued a ramp hold, make an announcement with the reason. Sound positive and optimistic, as delays are generally bad news to your passengers. Try to deliver some good news such as that you anticipate a tailwind that will make up for part of the delay or that the en route weather is smooth and clear. If the delay is indefinite, update the passengers every 15 minutes and consider deplaning for comfort.



"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. ATC has informed us that all eastbound flights will be held on the ground for a short delay. The eastern coast experienced heavy fog this morning and Richmond has not improved enough for arrivals to land. ATC would rather hold us on the ground for a while than hold us en route for an indefinite period. We will keep you abreast of changes and appreciate your patience."

2. EXTRAORDINARY EVENTS

Good communication is especially important when unusual events occur. Consider a rejected takeoff. This event can create a great deal of anxiety with your customers. You should make an announcement as soon as possible to alleviate their fear.

Communicate in a relaxed tone and do not use the word abort. Perhaps you will be able to clear up the problem and continue, so avoid the use of the phrase "system failure." Even if you are the first officer (because the captain is busy & not visible from the cabin), identify yourself as the Captain.

"Ladies and gentlemen, this is your captain speaking. There was an inconsistency between two of our instruments during the takeoff roll, so we elected to stop on the ground and check their status. We will make a timely determination on whether we can continue and get back with you."

If you check your MEL and determine that the flight can continue make an announcement.

"Ladies & gentlemen, we have completed a thorough check of our systems. Everything is normal and we are now ready for departure. Thanks once again for your patience."

If you experience a maintenance problem while taxiing to the active runway that cannot be deferred, tell your passengers.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we have an indicator in the cockpit giving us trouble and we are going to return to the ramp and have a maintenance person check it out. We appreciate your patience."

When people deplane the aircraft at the gate, try to be physically there. Tell them that you will get back as soon as possible with an update. Ask the lead passenger what his time constraint is so you can work on his alternate travel plans if need be.

When encountering an unknown delay, let your passengers know you are trying to resolve the situation.

It is a good technique to wait until you complete your 10 000-ft check to deliver an after-takeoff announcement. In this way you can deliver maximum attention to checklists and traffic.

"Good evening again Ladies & gentlemen. This is your captain. Here is some information about the flight progress. Our B737 is presently climbing through 21,000 feet en route to our cruising altitude of 33,000 feet. We are expecting a smooth ride and our flight plan shows an en route time of two hours and 30 minutes. We expect to arrive in London at 2030 Local time, and I would like to remind you of the one-hour time zone change. Our route today will take us over the French & Swiss Alps, visible on the left hand side of the aircraft. The en route weather is clear skies, which will give us a chance to point out some specific landmarks. The London weather is partly cloudy skies and a cool 10 degrees Celsius. On behalf of my crew, I hope you enjoy your flight."

Keep in mind that what is SOP (Standard Operation Procedures) for you is not necessarily normal for the customer. Perhaps you deice your aircraft numerous times during the winter. This is a normal situation in which you are being cautious and you know your aircraft will have a clean wing prior to departure.

This may be a very unusual situation for a frightened flier boarding your aircraft. He is well-versed in media hype and knows that an aircraft that becomes airborne with snow or ice on the wings is a very dangerous situation.

Briefly explain in a non-technical way that you are going to have the aircraft deiced. When the process is finished, explain that as you turn on the air conditioning a slight odor might be noticeable and that the fumes are harmless and will dissipate quite quickly.

Explain that safety is your number one priority and you are now going to have your aircraft inspected. This will ensure there is no ice or snow adhering to the aircraft. These announcements will pay great dividends by making your customers comfortable, at ease and more able to tolerate delays.

3. UNUSUAL MANEUVERS

At times, you do not have a lot of maneuvering room to fly smoothly. When you are performing a particularly demanding SID or STAR, to the untrained or unaware person this could be considered a very aggressive maneuver.

Similarly, if you are maneuvering close to the ground and there are buildings off to your left and right, brief your passengers ahead of time.

"Ladies and gentlemen, we will be flying up the river and maneuvering as we approach the airport. This is the normal maneuver directed arrival procedure for noise abatement, so please sit back and enjoy the view."

Passengers who are aware are going to be more relaxed. If there is going to be any unusual maneuver, one that would possibly be strange to people, you should tell them about it ahead of time.

If turbulence catches you unexpectedly and you quickly get the seat belt sign on, telling the PAX about it afterwards does not help because the anxiety level has gone through the ceiling. If you know it is going to be bumpy tell them in advance and characterize it appropriately in a relaxed conversational tone. This makes all the difference in the world to a timid flier.

If you do not deliver an announcement and you suddenly have even a light turbulence encounter, the frightened flier will think you are so busy trying to control the aircraft that you do not have time to talk to them on the intercom. They believe you are wrestling with the controls in an attempt to keep the aircraft right-side up.

Consider making short announcements for the following situations:

- During en route holds explain why and how long.
- For diversions, explain why and how far to the alternate and what the new destination weather is.
- For a missed approach or go-around, only state that the surface winds were not stable. If time permits, tell them what you're new sequence is. Always thank your passengers for their patience.

When you are in uniform or recognized as a pilot, people are looking at you and making a value judgment. They cue into how you walk through the terminal, present yourself, and your flight bag. Pilots think stickers on their flight bag are cool. The customer looks at that and says what is this all about? In addition, they study your attire and facial expressions. These are little things that most pilots do not give a second thought to.

Your passengers think if you are neat and orderly as an individual, then you are probably neat and orderly as a pilot. "Our students have told us they do not like pilots joking around. Even if you have a great sense of humor, the customer does not want to feel their aircraft is being flown by a couple of clowns. They want reassurance. This is a not just the fearful flyer, it is all customers. They have entrusted their lives with you and want to feel that they are in the hands of a professional," says Stauffer.

Your passengers' perception of safety also radiates from the aircraft. If the interior or exterior is dirty or the accompaniments are not maintained, they interpret this as: "Well the crew does not watch the small details back here, I wonder if they watch the small details on the flight deck? I wonder how the maintenance issues are performed that I cannot see?"

FWC message to pilots is that the lights are always on and the mike is always open. You are on stage. If you look professional, act appropriately and communicate, the customers will accept you and have a pleasant experience. Go out of your way to make their flight as safe, comfortable and enjoyable as possible.

And last but but not least, remember that :

- Limit the use of the word "late," use the term "rain shower" instead of "thunderstorm," say "bumpy air" rather than "turbulence" and consider "restricted visibility" rather than "fog."

- Knowledge is power in helping a frightened flier overcome his fears. Set up a time during the flight they can visit the flight deck accompanied by one of the cabin crew. Explain in layman's terms some of the common noises and vibrations they experience.
- Limit the use of the word "late," use the term "rain shower" instead of "thunderstorm," say "bumpy air" rather than "turbulence" and consider "restricted visibility" rather than "fog."
- A few thoughts on your announcements: Keep your personal opinions to yourself. Do not make announcements when passengers cannot hear them. Wait until you level off, if possible. Use of your headset will allow a feedback-free announcement.
- Do not accept blame when an event is clearly not your fault. If a delay is caused by ATC, weather or traffic, apologize and tell your passengers it was out of your control. Remember that they want to know how you are going to fix the problem and get them to their destination. Keep your announcements short and use a variety of endings. Do not use too many ah's, umh's or thank you's.
- Be natural in your delivery. If you are not used to making announcements, jot down a few notes beforehand. Realize that you will make mistakes, and keep practicing. With time you will deliver top-notch announcements that are greatly appreciated.

Contact Fly With Confidence at (412) 366 -8112 or visit www.flywithconfidence.com.