

# MENTOR

THE PROFESSIONAL FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR



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## **Great Expectations: Customer service in flight training**

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for Instructors**
- **The Cause and  
Complications of Icing**
- **Finding the Right  
Students for You**



# position Report

## Critical Care

Serving your customers requires serving your business, too



Jason Blair, MCFI  
Executive Director

Recently, the talk of the general-aviation industry has been how badly flight instructors perform customer service, what they can do better, and what effect that improvement would have to help retain students pursuing training. While flight instructors aspire to teach their clients well, customer service goes beyond the cockpit, and it's a major function of the business side of aviation training.

At its most basic level, customer service in the training world requires returning follow-up calls promptly, providing honest information, scheduling lessons and airplanes at the students' convenience, treating these hard-working people like we'd want to be treated, and genuinely caring about their progress as budding pilots—and helping them along the way in every way we can. And as we approach the pie-in-the-sky, above-and-beyond level, we can add special perks, too, such as souvenir videos of first solos, customer-appreciation barbecues, adventure-type cross-country training flights, and a slew of other benefits that help increase

their satisfaction in their interactions with us.

Yet even "good" service is difficult to do right every time, never mind "great." Anything can happen in six, nine, or 12 months of intense training; balls will get dropped, and feelings will get hurt. What's important is intent—and concerted effort to fix things when they've gone sideways.

But a culture of service isn't enough. The reality is that many facets of customer care—particularly the more exceptional examples—require leadership, staff time, and school resources. Even with extra doses of the first, those second and third requirements have real costs associated with them. And for all the discussions about the need for high levels of customer satisfaction, how flight schools can afford the cost to achieve these levels of services hasn't yet been addressed.

In this issue of *Mentor*, you'll find dozens of ideas for improving customer service at your flight-training operation. For certain, each will help you show your customers you care, and that's a good thing. But while you're considering your customer-

service model, reflect on your business model, as well.

It's a fundamental requirement of any business to operate profitably if it's going to survive, yet many flight-training providers don't charge enough for the services they provide to cover the basic costs of their operation—much less provide even adequate customer care. For example, they figure rental prices based on incomplete calculations, which comprise only direct operating costs, such as aircraft maintenance, insurance, and fuel. In some cases, prices aren't even based on these elementary considerations, just on what "the flight school down the road is charging" or "what we think the customers can pay."

A business can't base its prices on those intangible factors; pricing must be based on what will return a profit so the business can stay in business. Anything less just sets it up to fail, sooner or later.

As a result, flight schools have to reconsider how—and who—they serve. If customers can't afford to train at a successful flight school, then they aren't able

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to learn to fly yet. Meanwhile, profitable operations will have the resources to provide the customer support that makes retention of their remaining students more successful. Ultimately, that's a better alternative for the industry than for schools to offer rates that allow more people to train but that force these operations to fail in the process. If that happens, no one learns to fly.

There are a lot of things to think about when it comes to serving to our patrons, but one thing is required in order to do any of them: serving our business, too. That's how we'll find the time, talent, and treasure we need to make our industry exceptional. Without it, all we can expect is more of the same.

Bad service is a symptom. It takes more than talk to find a cure. ■