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position Report

The Business of Aviation

Training plays a role in all segments of aviation

Just days after the 62nd Annual Business Meeting and Convention of the National Business Aviation Association, president Ed Bolen exclaimed the success of the show. It drew international visitors and attendees from all 50 states, he said, and it was the “essential place to be” for everyone with a passion for business aviation. In fact, the show was so successful that prognosticators are talking about the recovery of business aviation in 2010. That’s certainly good news for a change.

I attended the convention, both to learn more about that segment of the industry and to take part in a meeting about the General Aviation Awards program that was held concurrently. With no offense to Ed, I came away with a different opinion. For all the crowds, new airframes, and seminars, one thing was missing: any real discussion of the importance of flight instruction to the aviation community as a whole. Unfortunately, flight training simply isn’t on the minds of the scores of people who attend the NBAA show.

To be sure, the role that flight instructors play within the aviation industry is underemphasized, under-represented, and perhaps even underap-

preciated. It’s as if the industry assumes that flight instructors will always be there to train the next batch of pilots. Unfortunately, that belief needs to change. Twice in my flying career, the aviation industry has cried uncle over the shortage of professional pilots, and it only stands to get worse. The business model we’re currently operating under is near its breaking point.

You don’t need me to tell you that many flight-training organizations are only marginally profitable, and many are weathering our present downturn with personal savings and credit cards. Without steady student activity, many would wither away in a matter of months. Combine that with the increasing difficulty for professional-track students to fund their education without paralyzing student debts—if they can get financing at all—renewed threats of users fees, rising insurance rates, climbing fuel prices, and seemingly daily threats to general-aviation airports (often endorsed by the airlines themselves), and even a small burble can put our community into a tailspin.

As instructors, we focus on being the best teachers we can be for our students. Yet we can’t just be teach-

ers who run businesses; we also have to be business people who teach. All the passion for flying in the world won’t make up for that shortcoming.

Still, the attitude that we’re the black sheep of the family is pervasive. So is the belief that low pilot starts are somehow our fault, yet we’re not the ones building training aircraft that require exorbitant hull-insurance premiums and high rental fees, which dissuade prospective aviators. And we alone can’t fight onerous legislation that treats flight schools like we’re the training ground for the next batch of international terrorists, a sentiment that’s forcing thousands of international students a year to seek training in other countries—training that will eventually lead them to fly the very aircraft on static display at Orlando Executive Airport.

While, as instructors, we must do our part to promote our profession, the rest of the aviation industry could help, as well. How? I’ll admit, I don’t have a good answer to that question. But I know it deserves one, and I do know that, without it, we can’t expect the future of flight training to change.

This is somewhere you, as members of the professional



Jason Blair, MCFI
Executive Director

You don’t need me to tell you that many flight-training organizations are only marginally profitable, and many are weathering our present downturn with personal savings and credit cards.

organization for flight instruction, can help. Joining the NAFI Professional Standards member committee is one way you can join these discussions. Continuing to write for *Mentor*, to share your hard-fought experience to build our segment from the inside, is another. Supporting the advertisers, sponsors, and partners who believe in you—and in NAFI—is a third.

Eventually, the pendulum will swing, and the airlines, fractional operators, and corporate flight departments will begin to hire again. When history repeats itself, they’ll beg, borrow, and steal to fill those seats. They should hope that flight schools will still be there to answer the call. ■