

EXPOSING THE RISK: PILOTS ON CELL PHONES

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Texting And Flying

While many pilots do it, it might not be as risk-free as many of us think it is.

“There’s less to hit up there, so I don’t really think texting while I am flying is a big issue,” a friend retorted to me while we were having a conversation about the risks of texting while operating his personal aircraft.

To some degree, his isn’t wrong. And I will be honest: I do it too. Typically while cruising along on autopilot, and I feel a need to send out a couple communications. It might be as simple as to tell my wife when I expect to be home. But when isn’t it appropriate? That is where the discussion becomes more of a debate.

Is it okay to do while you are taxiing? How about while parked in the runup area with the brakes on after your run up is done and you are sending the quick text letting your ride at your destination airport know you are launching? During the takeoff or landing phases of flight? Most pilots would agree this isn’t the best time, but I also know people who have done it.

This isn’t something that goes without address in FAA testing documents, either. In the CFI Practical Test Standards, under the Runway Incursion Avoidance section, one of the items notes that the applicant should be able to *“maintain(s) strict focus on the movement of the aircraft and ATC communications, including the elimination of all distractive activities (i.e. cell phone, texting, conversations with passengers) during aircraft taxi, takeoff and climb out to cruise altitude.”* It specifically calls out the use of cell phones as something to avoid during these phases of flight!

Before you go thinking that this doesn’t apply to you if you aren’t a CFI or conducting training, we can go back to basic testing documents such as the current Private Pilot Airman Certification Standards, when it highlights under the Flight Deck Management section of Risk Management that the applicant (pilot) should *“demonstrate the ability to identify, assess and mitigate risks, encompassing: Improper use of systems or equipment, to include automation and portable electronic devices.”* While it doesn’t specifically call out

texting or making phone calls, the use of “portable electronic devices” encompasses this concern and highlights the need for pilots to consider the use of these tools, or distractions as they may be, as a part of their risk management.

As I have said in previous columns, I will share my own mistakes, so we can all learn from them.

This past summer, I had stopped at an airport for a quick lunch, then launched again in my Stinson to fly to another airport to fly with a student. Somewhere en route, cruising along comfortably at 3000’ MSL, I went heads down into my phone to send a few texts out. I thought I was in the clear.

When I picked my head up and looked outside again, I was surprised to find myself flying a loose formation with another Stinson! A fellow local pilot had seen me flying by and pulled up next to me to say hi, but I hadn’t seen him approach. My scan had stopped being for traffic outside as I got focused inside. Not a good thing. Thankfully the broadness of the sky kept us clear that day, but it could easily have been different if both of us had been heads-down texting.

So what is the right balance of using devices such as a cell phone during flight operations? Well, less is obviously better. But there are a few things you can do to mitigate the risks.

If there is a passenger with you who can do it for you, hand that device off and ask them to help.

Want to make a phone call? Well, many headsets have Bluetooth technology that may allow you to do this when in the aircraft if it is synced with your headset. This can be used effectively to call and get a clearance from Flight Service when you are holding short of a runway in a runup area at a non-

towered airport.

If the device isn’t being used for flight-critical information such as charting that you need, put it down until your attention may be sufficiently diverted in a safe manner. This probably means in level cruise flight in low workload situations, perhaps even with the autopilot on, or when parked in a runup area and not moving.

I know it certainly doesn’t mean on the takeoff roll, as you are flaring for a landing or when you are taxiing at a busy controlled airport.

The accident data on this is sparse, and I doubt

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many full-on accidents have been caused by texting pilots statistically, but I also firmly believe there have been a number of insurance claims that may have resulted from texting that don't make it into the NTSB database but end up generating claims for pilots who clipped a hangar with their wing, ran over a taxiway light or even "bumped into" another airplane, sometimes parked ones.

Being heads down on a phone texting isn't really any different fundamentally from becoming "buried in the box" when programming a new GPS that was installed with which a pilot is becoming familiar. If you are doing this while you are moving, you risk losing situational awareness and maintaining clearance from obstructions or other aircraft. Even in the air.

A few friends in the insurance industry have shared anecdotal data that indicates that this is more common on the ground than one might think. Just taking that attention away from the aircraft while taxiing, doing a runup, or

other flight critical operations to use other devices, program GPS systems, or use the phone can do the same thing in an aircraft as it does in a car. It can result in loss of what we will call separation from whatever is near the aircraft. Sure, it is less likely to hit something in the air if you stray a hundred feet off from your assigned altitude while shooting that text out, but it isn't any less likely on the ground that you won't hit something such as a taxi light or end up crossing a hold short line on an active runway and have a dreaded "runway incursion."

We all like to use our cell phones to contact loved ones or friends and update them on our arrival times or let them know when we have left, but there are definitely times when our risk management efforts should make us put them down. Before you grab that cell phone to check that text you got while operating your aircraft or send one back, think about if you really are at a point where doing so isn't going to increase the risk of other things going badly. **PP**

