

Four Ways Flight Schools Can Retain Students

- That Don't Involve Buying New Airplanes, Discounting Your Rates or Building a New Facility!

By Kathryn Creedy



Attracting new students is only the beginning of a journey for both the prospective pilot and the flight school. Flight schools can sign up students all day long but they are wasting their time if they do not make the extra effort to ensure a candidate stays the course.

For flight schools, this is even more important because the drop out rate for student pilots is astronomical.

MORE PEOPLE GIVE UP ON THEIR FLIGHT TRAINING THAN COMPLETE IT. . . ONLY ABOUT 40% OF THOSE EARNING A STUDENT PILOT CERTIFICATE GO ON TO EARN A PRIVATE PILOT CERTIFICATE. IT'S NOT KNOWN HOW MANY PEOPLE QUIT EVEN BEFORE BECOMING A STUDENT PILOT.

- MARC C. LEE, PLANE AND PILOT MAGAZINE

Why do flight students quit? Of course, it can happen for any number of reasons that may or may not be apparent as a student progresses through training.

The most extensive study on the topic was done in a study commissioned by AOPA in 2011. Although six years have passed, the findings still echo what we hear from flight students today.

MARK BENSON, APCO INSIGHT CHAIRMAN, SAID THE SURVEY FOUND THAT, ALTHOUGH MANY PEOPLE BELIEVE THAT TIME AND COST ARE THE DRIVING FACTORS IN A STUDENT PILOT'S DECISION TO CONTINUE OR DROP OUT OF FLIGHT TRAINING, THE MAJOR FACTOR TURNS OUT TO BE THE EDUCATIONAL QUALITY. BENSON REPORTED THAT FIVE OF THE 11 DISCRETE FACTORS DETERMINED BY THE SURVEY WERE DIRECTLY RELATED TO EDUCATIONAL QUALITY WITH RESPECT TO BOTH INDIVIDUAL FLIGHT INSTRUCTOR EFFECTIVENESS AND FLIGHT SCHOOL SUPPORT FOR AND MANAGEMENT OF INSTRUCTORS.

WHILE COST IS A FACTOR, BENSON SAID THAT THE SURVEY FOUND THAT VALUE, AND A STUDENT'S PERCEPTION OF A SCHOOL'S ABILITY TO BE FAIR AND HONEST, WERE MORE IMPORTANT. STUDENT PILOTS, HE REPORTED, ARE MORE CONCERNED ABOUT GETTING GOOD VALUE WITH THE MONEY THEY SPEND THAN ABOUT THE ACTUAL DOLLARS AND CENTS AMOUNT. THEY WANT TO KNOW THAT THE FLIGHT SCHOOL AND INSTRUCTORS PUT THE STUDENTS' INTERESTS FIRST AND LOOK FOR WAYS TO MINIMIZE COST AND MAXIMIZE THE EFFECTIVENESS OF EVERY DOLLAR SPENT.

– TOM BERENSEN, FLYING MAGAZINE

That is why it is of paramount importance to stay close to your students, build enthusiasm and reward progress throughout the process. Flight schools not only need to provide the training, they must be there to guide students along their journey and help them overcome the obstacles in their path. They must become the team behind the pilot to get them to the finish line.

After all, when a person has made the decision to pursue a pilot's license they should feel they have been accepted into a unique community that isn't replicated elsewhere.

1) Set a Tone of Enthusiasm & Encouragement

A flight school should set a positive tone and continually renew the enthusiasm students have when they start. It is important, however, to ensure the entire staff follows suit. As much as possible, Flight schools must attract and retain staff who mirror the enthusiasm and positive, can-do attitudes that lead to pilot success.

If you're excited, your students will be excited. Sales is a transfer of enthusiasm. Students should know they are more than just a customer; and flight schools can foster this feeling by getting to know the individual and becoming his aviation family with an equal stake in achieving his success.

The particulars of each of these motives should change the way different parts of flight training are emphasized. Granted, there are many "required" topics to cover, but you can put them into a context that's most relevant for the student's mindset. A career-oriented student will be looking for the best preparation for life as a first officer. A commuter will be more interested in cross country navigation.

2) Visualize & Reward Progress

Although you want your students to feel they have joined a unique community, it's important to help them achieve, and visualize, steady progress toward their personal goal.

The more they understand that the flight school is on the team with them, trying to achieve the same goals, (rather than just rack up the instruction and flight hours!) the more likely they are to stay the course.

Watch their social media activity and re-tweet their accomplishments. Equally important is finding opportunities to celebrate those accomplishments throughout their training and beyond. These celebrations not only mark milestones for those achieving them but also show others the way! It is all part of the support that comes from creating relationships.

You know your current training process better than anyone. Explore ways you can show students how far they've come, and celebrate small victories where possible.

3) Focus on the Relationship

To an aviator, there is nothing more fun than sharing aviation. Flight schools must create opportunities to share the excitement so students, instructors, former students and flight school managers can connect with one another and form relationships that will last a lifetime. Whether it is creating an online community on Facebook or having a monthly barbecue pot luck to get your students and staff together to share their enthusiasm for the craft, building relationships is one of the most important things a flight school can do.

Understand what drives the student to learn to fly in the first place. Are they trying to break into the prestigious globetrotting lifestyle of an airline pilot career? Are they looking for a more convenient way to travel for their business or other endeavor? Or are they looking for a recreational activity that cuts them loose from the "surly bonds of earth?"

Encourage students to share their experiences on your social media platforms. Word of mouth, after all,

is your best tool for not only attracting new students but in sharing the enthusiasm your students feel for the flight training process and the sport.

Start conversations on your social media platforms such as the toughest thing students encountered in flight training and how they overcame it. Ask them for the top advice they would give to new students. Ask them to describe the most exhilarating experience they had with your organization. Was it soloing? Was it taking the controls for the first time or was it their first landing?

3) Demonstrate Quality & Professionalism

There is nothing that speaks to the pride and attention to excellence at a given company than the professionalism it projects. It is this professionalism that engenders confidence in the staff and the school that will keep your students with you.

Aviation itself has its own brand of professionalism; especially when it has anything to do with fostering safety. But this professionalism extends far beyond the do's and don'ts of a professional cockpit, it is in the feeling evoked when a student walks through a thoughtfully designed and professionally maintained facility.

A clean, organized facility, whether in the classroom, the maintenance bay or the pilot lounge, speaks volumes about the care you take with your organization and, by extension, your students. A well-maintained aircraft is also part of the equation, which, by the way, includes the interior of the aircraft – (something strangely overlooked by many flight schools!) bespeaks an operational philosophy that shows you are dedicated to excellence.

Could You Create 60% More Success Stories?

When you get together with flight school owners and managers, you often hear tales of woe about how “the economy is causing students to drop out,” that “people are just too busy to learn to fly anymore” and that “you just can't retain students without discounting or investing in a new facility or new airplanes.” But the data, and conversations with real flight students, paint a very different picture.

Imagine the impact on your flight training program if you could retain most of the students you worked so hard to recruit in the first place!

Many of the reasons they tend to quit may be well within your control. Among them – managing instructors to set a positive tone, demonstrating the value of the program by showing each student predictable individual progress, building trust by fostering relationships, and demonstrating the educational quality of your program in a very visible way.

ABOUT FLIGHT SCHEDULE PRO

Flight Schedule Pro is a leading B2B software-as-a-service provider in the aviation industry. Customers include U.S. Air Force Bases, U.S. Civil Air Patrol, Boeing, Northrop Grumman, Lockheed Martin, and major universities and colleges across the country. Our SaaS solution is used by thousands of pilots in over 35 countries . . . and people love our service! We are a product development focused company who takes pride in doing things with excellence. We strive to provide easy-to-use products that solve real problems for our customers and help them grow their business.

Over 1 million flights have been booked on the new version of Flight Schedule Pro already!