

# Mentoring Has a Marketing Effect

By Matthew Elia

**For those pilots who aren't afraid to ask for help, checking in gives them an opportunity to ask you about various concepts in a non-threatening way.**



## Managing your student relationships

Typically during the many weeks, months or even years of training toward a certificate or rating, a strong bond or relationship is fostered between instructor and student. The dynamic of this relationship evolves over time, as each party becomes more comfortable in the presence of the other. This change happens for many reasons, but throughout the training the student knows that he can always go to his instructor for guidance. Then, the big day comes, the student demonstrates his piloting skills and abilities to an examiner, and suddenly the instructor-student dynamic is changed forever. Now what?

### The Relationship Evolves

When prospective students show up at a flight school they are often matched to a flight instructor based on availability. Some flight schools go beyond simply booking a flight with whoever the first available instructor happens to be, and a flight school representative will perform a semi-interview. The idea is to learn a little bit about new students so that they can be matched with an instructor they will get along with over time. This little bit of effort by the flight school staff can turn a two or three lesson dropout into a student that sticks with the training.

Being able to communicate effectively with an instructor maximizes the value of a student's education. This is vastly important. It is also important that the prospective student feels neutral or hopefully positive toward the teacher, but certainly not negative. This positive feeling will help foster the most important relationship in aviation a pilot can have, an open, trusting bond with his or her ambassador to flight — you, the instructor.

Early on students may take a little while to open up, as a result of all the concepts they are being exposed to while learning to fly. Therefore, it may take a while for students to come out of their shell. Ultimately, they walked into the flight school, a feat that in and of itself can be an extremely stressful venture for some.

As students approach their first solo adventure, they will be spending more time in the airplane and in the classroom with their instructor. As the student and instructor spend more time together they share more and hopefully develop a healthy teaching/learning relationship. An effective instructor must be careful to keep a professional standard while being friendly with students. Flight instruction isn't hanging out; it is a learning activity, which the student is paying a premium price for. The student deserves full attention and a professionally mannered teacher in return for this investment.

Typically the rejoicing of the solo strengthens the bond for instructor and student. This is of course followed eventually by the cross-country phase of flight training. These longer flights provide extended periods of time where the student and instructor will be very close to one another. This will encourage sharing and friendly conversation.



One technique I employ to distract my students is to engage them in a riveting conversation about something I have observed them speaking of before. For example, if a student is a big sports fan, let's talk about the Red Sox. The World Series victory was great for me as a fan and as an instructor; it gave me a great distraction discussion! However, I am only able to use this distraction because I paid attention early on and learned something about the student.

During the test prep many hours studying and quizzing will be spent together. Over the course of the required training and any other social activities such as flight school open houses, airport fly-ins, etc. ... the student and instructor spend a great amount of time together. Throughout this, the instructor is responsible for being respectful and helpful, being friendly, but not just a buddy. Then comes the day the student is no longer a student, but a former student and certificated pilot, flight instructor, etc.

## The Other Follow-up

For many flight instructors it has been many, many years since we have been through a checkride. The day before for a student is typically filled with brushing up on shaky topics. Followed by an evening of little rest due to anxiety and anxiousness. Then an early morning to plan the cross-country flight. The drive to the airport and the nervousness of getting started until finally, the first question is answered correctly and the student realizes this isn't the end of the world. Instead, the examiner is there to make sure the student is a safe pilot.

After the oral examination and flight portion, the student is issued a pilot certificate! This is the make it or break it point. You can be a memory or a lifelong friend. The giving of a gift to a former student will convey how proud you are of this accomplishment. The gift will show that you understand the effort the student has had to put forward to be successful in flight training. Moreover, going to a local restaurant to talk about the checkride over lunch or dinner gives the student a chance to interact with you socially.

Then it is best to let the great accomplishment sink in for a few days before you follow up. You don't want to smother the new pilot, but instead let her enjoy that accomplishment. When you do follow up, make it clear that you are available for advice, additional training, confidence flights or even to go and grab a meal sometime. The idea is that you want to make sure you capitalize on the existing relationship and carefully evolve from teacher to friend and mentor.

The former student should know that she has a resource, whether it is for a social reason, such as flying to breakfast, or for a training activity. Almost immediately encouraging a new pilot to join the FAA WINGS program and actively participate will only make her a safer pilot. All of your former students are, after all, your "flying family."

After the first lesson the follow-up call can be vital to getting a prospective student to come back for a second lesson. Similarly, the other follow-up after the now-former student passes the checkride is just as important to retain this new member of the aviation community.

## Sustaining a Mentoring Friendship

Checking in with your now-former students shows them that you are genuinely interested in their continued education. The old adage is that a private certificate is a license to learn. If you see a former student on the flight schedule, a few days later reach out to inquire how the flight went. Maybe the student can provide a funny story or at least give you some insight into what you could help him with in the future. For example, if he indicates he struggled with something specific, at a future time you could offer an opportunity to do some practice on the given subject. This will allow the student to receive needed help; yet not have to ask for it, which could be difficult for him to do.

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could be contrasted to a former student not wanting to ask an old flight instructor a "stupid question." The former student could be afraid asking would cause the former instructor to think she was not safe or a "moron." Encouraging communication allows former students to build trust and can also help them further their learning beyond their formal flight training.

Beyond being a resource for questions and an active counterpart for discussions on trivial matters such as flight bags and iPad apps, it can be extremely valuable to invite former students for a fun flight if possible. Throughout the years I have developed a couple of fun flights that I have turned into annual affairs. Inviting a former student to tag along while I fly, where he gets a chance for some stick time, too, allows for social interaction and friendship building. A couple of examples are when I make my annual Christmas Eve flight to fly over and rock my wings (at a more than safe altitude) to my mother (her birthday is Christmas Day) or while I cruise around above Cape Cod on the Fourth of July watching fireworks. Both of these yearly flights have given me opportunities to fly and socialize with my former students.

Ultimately my goal is to transition from a teacher to a friend, while still being a mentor. I believe that this type of relationship between instructors and students will keep pilots flying once they finish their training. Far too often students pass their checkride, fly once or twice and then don't fly anymore. By focusing on the relationship and ensuring that the new pilots stay active, we will have more people flying, which is why we should all focus on keeping our former students actively flying! 

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