

# The airline passenger a partner in the safety management system or an obstacle to it?

The passenger is a key partner in the safety management system. We depend on them to inform the crew of anything they see or smell which is unusual, to influence the behaviour of fellow passengers by their own behaviour and response to safety instructions and, in an emergency, assist the crew in the safe evacuation of the aircraft.

However, the cooperation of the passengers is not something that we can take for granted even though they have a direct stake in the safety of the flight.

By John Barrass and Professor Robert Bor

## John Barrass discusses the issue of passenger compliance with safety instructions.

*"Ladies and Gentlemen, welcome to Paris Charles de Gaulle airport... please remain seated until the aircraft has come to a halt and the seat belt sign has been switched off"*

A fairly typical and clear announcement, or so you would think. The captain was informed by the cabin crew that all the passengers were standing up and opening the overhead lockers despite their announcements. He brought the aircraft to a halt and informed the passengers over the PA system that the aircraft would not continue to the gate until they all sat down. The passengers were surprised, looked at each other, but did nothing. The captain put the parking brake on and went

personally into the cabin to repeat his instructions face to face with the passengers. Slowly, reluctantly, with indignation, and not a little surprise, the passengers took their seats.

In a survey conducted for the Australian Transport Safety Board (ATSB)<sup>1</sup>, 92% of passengers considered the primary role of cabin crew to be "to

1- "Public Attitudes, Perceptions and Behaviours towards Cabin Safety Communications" ATSB Research and Analysis Report, July 2006.  
<http://www.atsb.gov.au/publications/2006/pdf/B20040238.pdf>

**John Barrass**



served for 20 years in the UK Royal Air Force and Canadian Forces in a variety of flying, instructional, and command appointments before becoming an aviation consultant.

John has worked on most of EUROCONTROL's safety enhancement initiatives and is the current editor of SKYbrary.

The airline passenger a partner in the safety management system or an obstacle to it? (cont'd)

assure passenger safety". Strange then, that so many passengers ignore safety instructions.

On a recent flight into Los Angeles, as the aircraft descended through scattered cloud, and the city became visible below, I listened to the cabin crew making their pre-landing announcement which included a reminder not to switch on mobile phones. Even while the crew were making their announcement, the cabin was full of the noise of mobile phones. I looked around and saw people busy sending texts to announce their arrival. I thought about saying something but I was with my wife and didn't want to embarrass her – that's my excuse and perhaps part of the problem.

Now, while I've never experienced problems associated with mobile phones, except for the annoying sound of the phone transmission bursts in the headset, I'm aware of the potential for interference with

aircraft systems, I'm also aware of developments to allow airlines to offer mobile phone services using on-board base stations linked to a satellite link, and I'm aware that there are going to be continued restrictions on the use of mobile phones below 10,000 feet if such systems are installed and approved for use – but do the people around me, busy texting, have any understanding of the safety issues? I doubt it – so why do people who know nothing about these issues ignore the specific instructions of crew that they acknowledge have responsibility for safety?

## The challenge is to minimise the threat posed by passengers AND engage with them in promoting and enhancing safety



Of course, the majority of passengers do indeed listen to and obey the safety instructions, but it is easy to come to the conclusion that the design of procedures and aircraft systems must not assume that passengers will fully comply with safety instructions.

The passenger can be a safety barrier as well as a safety threat. The challenge is to minimise the threat posed by passengers **and** engage with them in promoting and enhancing safety. A great deal of research has been conducted into

the effectiveness of passenger safety announcements and safety demonstrations. This has been driven by a concern that, because of inattention of passengers to the safety communications, they are not adequately prepared for any subsequent emergency, specifically the location of emergency exits, the opening of doors and the operation of the emergency slides. However, it cannot be said that passengers are not aware of the restrictions on the use of mobile phones and personal electronic devices, prohibition of smoking, and the requirement to remain seated when the seatbelt sign is illuminated.

Nevertheless, many of the factors which influence attention to safety communications also influence behaviour and compliance with safety instructions.

For many people, air travel is a stressful experience, with physical and psychological effects. They may not show obvious signs of anxiety or discomfort but their behaviour will nevertheless be affected by the experience. The crowded cabin environment, the feeling of confinement, means that many people are relieved to reach the destination and get off the aircraft as quickly as possible. I suppose, in that context, it is not surprising that people stand up before the aircraft has come to a stop – they are "in a hurry". Of course, since many, especially on long haul flights, will end up waiting by a carousel for their luggage, there is no real hurry to get off the plane is there? But for most of us, the desire to breathe fresh air (or light up a cigarette!), get moving and just get away from the cramped conditions on the plane is a powerful motivator. For the same reasons, it is also perhaps understandable why people are anxious to inform their loved ones that they are about to land. However, in both cases, the actions of passengers are contrary to safety instructions. How can we improve compliance and turn the passenger into a partner in the safe management of the flight rather than an obstacle?



We can of course make greater efforts to ensure that passengers are attentive to safety communications. The ATSB study mentioned earlier resulted in the following relevant recommendations:

- “Airlines should develop tailored cabin safety communication strategies for frequent flyers that account for the unique challenges of effectively delivering safety messages to such passengers.
- That additional factual safety information and resources about air travel and cabin safety be made available to passengers at airports by airlines and safety authorities.
- Carriers refrain from providing passengers with reading materials (such as newspapers and magazines), amenities and non-essential information, regardless of class of travel, until the conclusion of the safety briefing and where possible, after take-off.
- Carriers vary the content or creative format of safety briefings on a regular basis, notwithstanding regulatory requirements, to increase passenger attention. Such variation should not result in dilution of, or cause confusion in regard to, core safety messages.
- That beyond the extent of current requirements, passengers be provided with an explicit direction that additional information exists in the safety card that is not contained in the briefing and that the card should be read.”

Passengers should perhaps be reminded of the penalties for non-compliance and crews should challenge and be seen to react to non-compliance. Airlines might support this publically by taking legal action against those who flagrantly ignore safety instructions. Conditions of Carriage are also a useful legal tool to enable airlines to deny boarding to disruptive and non-compliant passengers. But while such punitive measures might go some way to

addressing the problem, airlines are unlikely to use such powers in the majority of cases.

What else can be done?

One of the most important factors in passenger compliance is their perception of the importance of that compliance to the crew. Therefore, the crew must be seen to place a great importance on the safety information, encouraging attention.

As usual, we need also take a broader view of non-compliance and examine how we can better create an environment in which the passenger is well informed and whose attitude to safety, safety instructions, compliance, and the authority of the crew, is positive and contributes to system safety. It is important to accept that non-compliance with safety instructions by someone who is normally law-abiding, may well be the result of environmental and cultural factors that we, as an industry, have created and can therefore change. We need to understand better why passengers choose not to comply with safety instructions.

**Finally, South West Airlines have a novel way of improving passenger attention to safety briefings – Flight Attendant David Holmes delivers the briefing as a Rap act with passenger participation:**  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fIVcnJ5iLqs>

**and, for a more humorous view of how to give a passenger briefing, you can always follow the example of Yorkshire Airlines:**  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QJxzDYJ4C3Y>

The airline passenger  
a partner in the safety management  
system or an obstacle to it? (cont'd)



## Robert Bor provides the following observations concerning the reasons why some passengers ignore or deliberately flaunt safety instructions:

### Lack of awareness as to WHY certain procedures should be followed

Most people know where to find their life jacket but have no clue as to why it shouldn't be inflated in the a/c; or have little understanding of why they shouldn't stand up until the seat belt sign has been switched off (I know it is common sense but then not everyone is so insightful!)

### The routine nature of safety demonstrations

Because most people regard air travel as routine, banal and utterly safe, they

no longer associate safety with something they need to attend to. Also, most safety demos or the captain's briefing are scripted. I have just taken four flights with the same airline and the captain's announcement regarding safety and of course the video are identical. People can't be blamed for switching off and we need to find more effective ways of delivering the message.

### Have we overplayed safety?

We know air travel is extraordinarily safe. It is something that passengers know is 'there', but is apart from them, on a dusty shelf, so to speak; flying has become too safe and too routine in their eyes. They also don't want to know about risk and safety because it arouses anxiety and we know from research that up to 40% of passengers would prefer not to be on the plane and are suppressing some anxiety. Safety issues increase anxious feelings.

### "Accidents don't happen to me"

That is a normal reaction or response, and like the comment above, a reason why people show no attention. Again, they may have knowledge of the safety demo (my four-year old nephew can recite one regularly seen brief verbatim) but have little understanding of the 'why'.

### Inclusion

Compliance works best when people feel that they are collaborating in the process and are not being 'spoken at' as though they were naughty or ill-informed.

### Protest?

This is a bit of a long shot, but I wonder whether this is a way in which people can vent their frustration with modern air travel. They are tired of security checks, long queues at airports, poor food and service etc. and inattention to the safety briefing is a reflection of annoyance and apathy. It is also a slightly hostile way of communicating to the crew 'it's your issue and you will know how to save me if things don't work out'. It is a part of a sense of entitlement that some passengers carry with them.

### Communication

Lastly, communication needs to be personalised. For some reason, most of the safety demo goes over people's heads – literally. Countless bits of psychological research have confirmed that giving information is insufficient to effect behavioural change. We need to do something more interactive and engaging.



**Professor  
Robert Bor**

is an aviation clinical psychologist based at the Royal Free Hospital, London, with a special interest in passenger behaviour and crew mental health.

He has published widely and his recent books include 'Passenger Behaviour', 'Aviation Mental Health', and 'Psychological Perspectives on Fear of Flying'.



## Editorial Comment

Plenty of challenges here! And a few thoughts arising too...

- Perhaps it's also worth reflecting directly on the two rather different reasons that passengers might consider that safety briefings – and other safety precautions they encounter – are worth their attention. Firstly of course there is always a risk of an individual personal injury during a 'normal' flight – sudden turbulence when not secured in one's seat, a poorly stowed (by someone else of course!) bag falling from an overhead bin. There's also a remote chance that a sudden cabin depressurisation might occur at a high altitude after which there won't be any further help from cabin crew on oxygen mask use as they secure themselves during the accompanying emergency descent. There's also a remote chance that the flight will end, probably without prior warning, in an accident in which their very survival may depend upon a speedy and effective evacuation of the cabin.
- The reasons why particular passengers might ignore safety briefings can be split neatly into two groups: those who really **do** know it already (and on that particular aircraft type too) and those who don't appreciate the importance of them. The old argument that the former should pretend to pay attention so that the latter can see them doing so is understandably unpopular with a lot of regular travellers.
- Most established airlines, in Europe at least, would probably be less than keen on the notion that the 'standard' pre-flight safety briefings could be made more 'interesting' by a 'creative' and by implication 'variable' approach. Their cabin crew are trained for all their 'core' duties to act prescriptively and they are likely to set the application of 'initiative' in briefings against their responsibility for ensuring that key aspects of the briefing are **always** delivered.
- Compliance is not always a good way to engage everybody willingly. Especially when one size clearly doesn't fit all. Robert Bor makes possibly one of the most important points on this thorny subject when he says that people need to feel they are collaborating in safety..... ■

