SAFETY BRIEF

Number 5

Charity Fundraising Flying

Ever flown passengers to raise money for charity? Whether you know it or not, you've accepted a greater level of responsibility.

Under certain circumstances, the FAA allows private pilots to carry paying passengers during charity fundraising events. That's a departure from the normal rules: In most situations where passengers are paying for a flight, the FAA requires the pilot to hold a commercial certificate. In the case of charity fundraising flights, however, the FAA feels that the public benefits justify extending the privilege to private pilots.

But that doesn't mean that a charity fundraising flight is just like any other trip that you, as someone who doesn't fly for a living, might take. Regulations aside, the minute you agree to carry paying members of the general public (even if they're not paying *you),* everything changes. You cease to be regular old Joe Smith, and become "Captain" Joe Smith. You assume even greater responsibility for the lives of the people you're carrying. You implicitly agree to provide them the safest flight possible—no exceptions.

Sadly, over the years, a few pilots have failed to take that responsibility seriously, and lives have been lost as a result. Being a "captain" isn't easy. It calls for a clear understanding of obligations and an active commitment to reducing risk. Fortunately, as with most flying, the risks of charity operations are fairly predictable.

Remember: Your passengers paid for a flight, not an accident. Your primary goal is to keep them safe.

Before each flight, brief passengers on cockpit etiquette and safety—for example, being quiet during takeoff and landing, fastening and unfastening seatbelts, and exiting the aircraft in an emergency.

Safety Issues

If you participate in fundraising flights, there's a good chance you have a personal interest in helping the charity raise money. More passengers equals more money, and that can make it tempting to overload the airplane. It's easy to say "Sure, hop in" to that extra passenger…but, unfortunately, it's not easy to retract the invitation when you're struggling to climb over trees at the end of the runway.

To avoid finding yourself in a situation like that, do your preflight "homework"—and then stand your ground. What's the density altitude? How long is the runway? How much fuel is aboard? How much weight's in the cabin, and how is it distributed? Don't rely on guesswork: Be conservative with your calculations, and remember that heavy airplanes behave differently than lightly loaded ones. Standing your ground means being prepared to say "no" to that extra passenger who doesn't understand why he can't ride along in the empty seat. You may think you're doing him a favor by relenting, but he (and his lawyers) won't see it that way if something goes wrong.

While we're talking payload, it's crucial to make sure there's always plenty of fuel aboard—never less than an **hour**'s worth on landing. It seems like a no-brainer, but in the hustle and bustle of quick turns and passenger loading/unloading, it's all too easy to lose track of fuel quantity. Also remember that fuel consumption will probably be higher than normal, since sightseeing flights involve repeated climbs and relatively low altitude (i.e., rich mixture) cruise.

In-flight maneuvering is another "gotcha." If you've ever carried first-time flyers, you know how they love to look at things on the ground. They want to take pictures of the house, wag the wings at Grandma—you name it. That's fine, but doing it safely means staying on your toes and giving yourself wide margins. Resist entreaties to drop down, tighten up a turn, or kick out the tail to give passengers a better view. If you get into an accelerated stall at low altitude, you've got a serious problem. If it develops into a spin, it's game over. In your mind, apply the same "filter" to every passenger request: Does this add risk?

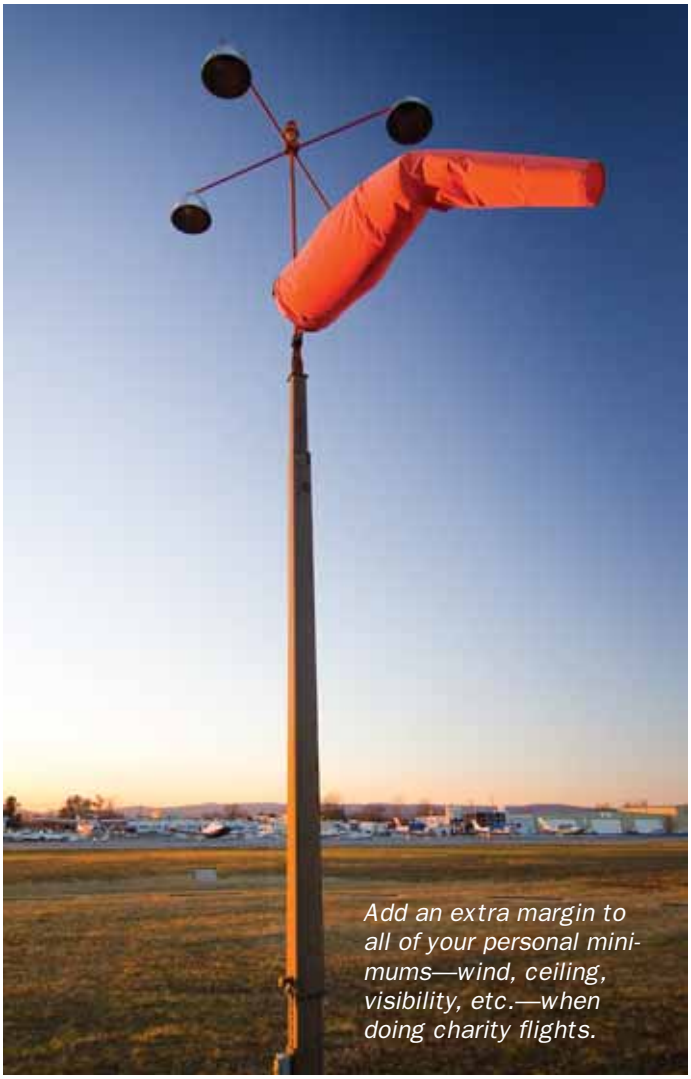
That brings us to the topic of in-flight distractions. Most of us are accustomed to flying with people who understand basic cockpit etiquette. Unfortunately, the same level of consideration can't always be expected of passengers in a charity flight situation. They may not know, for example, that they should be quiet during takeoff and landing, or that it's not appropriate to fight with their siblings in the back seat. We'll be blunt: You may be flying an expensive

Accidents

Charity flying accidents are, fortunately, very rare. When they do happen, though, the consequences for all involved (and particularly the innocent passengers who simply signed up for a fun ride) can be severe. In one accident, a Cessna 172 carrying two passengers collided with trees after hitting a downdraft during its initial climb. According to the NTSB accident report, the pilot neglected to account for changing weather conditions at the time of the flight. Fortunately, all aboard survived the accident, albeit with serious injuries.

Sadly, things don't always turn out that well. In a more recent fundraising accident, the pilot of a Beech Bonanza lost engine power shortly after takeoff and, in an apparent attempt to circle back and land on the departure runway, stalled the aircraft at low altitude. The resulting impact killed him—and his two paying passengers—instantly. The NTSB determined that the engine failed due to fuel exhaustion or starvation. Had the pilot simply checked his fuel quantity before takeoff and followed aircraft operating limitations, he and his passengers would probably be alive today.

airplane, and demonstrating an uncommon skill, but in the passengers' eyes you're probably just the "driver." So be the driver. Avoid unpleasant surprises by briefing the passengers ahead of time, but don't let down your guard. Whatever happens, your first job is to fly the airplane.



Add an extra margin to all of your personal minimums—wind, ceiling, visibility, etc.—when doing charity flights.

You're the PIC

Hopefully, by now you've gotten the idea that charity fundraising flights are different from the typical trip around the traffic pattern. Even more than usual, it's critical to remember that you are the pilot in command—a term that shouldn't be thrown around lightly. It's your obligation to say "no" if asked to do something that could put the safety of your passengers at risk.

It's also your obligation to know the difference between what you see as an acceptable risk and one your passengers would want you to take (if they knew all the facts). To remove any doubt, we strongly recommend giving yourself extra safety margins. Think of it as switching over from your personal minimums to your "airline" minimums. For example, if you're normally willing to fly with 15 knots of crosswind, maybe you knock 30 percent off that number for charity flights. If you'll normally fly when the ceiling and visibility are near VFR minimums, maybe you double or triple those numbers (passengers are more comfortable when there's a distinct horizon). Don't push ahead in marginal weather just to keep things running on schedule.

Dire Consequences

In 2004, a Wisconsin pilot giving sightseeing rides clipped power lines while flying down a river at low altitude. He survived the ensuing crash, but his passenger wasn't so lucky. In addition to the "normal" repercussions (FAA enforcement action; finding of fault by the NTSB), the pilot was charged with negligent homicide by the state. The outcome is still pending, but if convicted he faces up to 10 years in prison and $25,000 in fines.

Personal Minimums

Before participating in a fundraising flight, consider increasing your personal minimums for:

- Recency of experience:
  - Hours in type
  - Landings in the past 90 days
- Weather:
  - Ceiling
  - Visibility
  - Wind (gust factor and crosswind component)
- Physiological/Psychological factors:
  - Fatigue
  - Illness/medication
  - Overall stress level
- Runway Length

Regulatory Changes

Pilots need to be aware of some significant changes to the regulations governing charity fundraising flights. Beginning March 15, 2007:

- *Private pilots must have at least 500 hours total flight time* in order to participate (the previous minimum was 200 hours).
- Before takeoff, pilots are **required** to brief passengers on seatbelt use, aircraft egress, and (for overwater flights) ditching procedures and use of life preservers.
- For overwater flights, passengers are required to wear life preservers (unless the overwater operation is necessary only for takeoff or landing).
- Limits are placed on the number of events in which sponsors and pilots may participate (four per calendar year for charitable or nonprofit causes; one per calendar year for community events).
- Pilots are no longer required to submit to drug and alcohol testing (previously, exemptions were handled on an individual basis).

Although they've been incorporated into a new regulation (FAR 91.146), the remaining requirements are largely unchanged. Pilots are still limited to nonstop, day VFR flights conducted within a 25 statute mile radius of the departure airport. For a detailed guide to the new requirements, visit www.aopa.org/whatsnew/regulatory/charity.html.

Suggestions:

Do:

- Take a conservative approach to preflight planning and aircraft performance calculations.
- Set a "hard deck" altitude below which you won't fly (except for takeoff and landing).
- Remember that you're the PIC. Give your passengers a fun ride, but don't take risks trying to please them.

Don't:

- Explore the corners of the aircraft's performance envelope. Limit yourself to gentle, predictable maneuvers.
- Allow yourself to succumb to external pressure—schedules, impatient passengers, etc.
- Forget to check that you're in compliance with the new FAA rules for charity/fundraising flights.

Conclusion

We know that you're a safe pilot, but participating in charity flying events means accepting greater responsibility. Always bear that in mind. An incident or (worse yet) an accident could land you on the front page of the paper—and make it more difficult for other pilots to fly for charity in the future.

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