

why good flight attendants matter

DON'T ASSUME THE PERSON HANDING YOU THAT MARTINI HAS HAD ADEQUATE SAFETY TRAINING_by Robert P. Mark

HOW WOULD YOU RESPOND to an in-flight emergency? If your answer involves seeking help from flight attendants, that's not surprising. Passengers typically consider them to be the cabin safety go-to people.

But private aircraft carrying fewer than 19 passengers aren't required to carry a flight attendant. And even when one is on board, he or she may lack sufficient training to help in an emergency.

"When a CEO walks on a business airplane and sees a well-dressed employee performing safety briefings, most would believe the person to be a [trained] flight attendant," said Susan C. Friedenberg, president and CEO of Corporate Flight Attendant Training & Consulting Services. In reality, she noted, "the person might not know anything about the airplane."

Accident investigations have provided evidence for the validity of Friedenberg's point. In November 2004, a chartered Bombardier Challenger 601 carrying NBC Sports chairman Dick Ebersol and his two sons crashed, killing the captain, the flight attendant and Ebersol's youngest son. The other pilot was injured and unable to assist the passengers with an evacuation.

The flight attendant was working his first corporate flight; how much training he had received about the intricacies of opening the main and emergency exits is unknown. In any case, the attendant apparently did not conduct a safety briefing before takeoff. In another Challenger crash, this one in February 2005 at New Jersey's Teterboro Airport, the extent of the flight attendant's training was also unclear. This flight also began without a safety briefing.

In an emergency, a business-aircraft passenger may quickly learn how important it is to have a trained flight attendant on board. "Many believe they won't make it out alive [from a crash] anyway, so why bother [preparing for emergencies]?" said psychologist Beau Altman, who runs HBA Corp., an aircrew member emergency training company. "But four out of five people live through most crashes and 65 percent of them simply sit there waiting for directions."

Why don't passengers pay more attention to flight attendants and their training? Friedenberg explained that on private aircraft, passengers often value privacy over everything else. "Sometimes the flight attendant is expected to



IF YOU'RE UNSURE, ASK FLIGHT ATTENDANTS ABOUT THE SAFETY TRAINING THEY'VE RECEIVED. IF THEY SKIP THE SAFETY BRIEFING, TAKE THAT AS A WARNING SIGN.

simply disappear once food and drinks have been served," she said. Sometimes, too, jet owners simply don't want to invest in training, though annual recurrent training for a flight attendant costs a relatively modest \$5,000 to \$7,000. Another factor could be that some executives simply believe emergencies won't happen on their flights.

Friedenberg offered some advice: "When an executive climbs aboard an airplane, ask if the person meeting them at the top of the stairs is actually a flight attendant. Ask how much aircraft-specific experience the person has and where they were last trained and when. I've watched executives waste catering that costs more than a flight attendant's annual recurrent training. Passengers in back need to start thinking about what their lives are worth." ■

Rob Mark welcomes comments and suggestions at: rmark@bjtonline.com.