

Know before you go

An emergency is no time to start learning about emergency equipment.

“In the mid-1970s I was asked to address the House Air Transportation Oversight Committee, which was looking into ways to reduce the number of accidents and fatalities,” said Beau Altman, president of H. Beau Altman Corp. in Olympia, Wash. “Before everyone arrived I put a life vest under each chair. During the hearing, I had the lights turned out and told the committee members they were in an accident. I said they should don the life vests under their seats. I waited one minute, then turned the lights back on. Everyone in the room got my point [because they didn’t know how to quickly and properly put on the vests].”

Altman, who designs and delivers customized passenger safety programs, said the biggest problem when selling aviation safety is that the return on investment is often never realized. “Many executives seem to take it for granted they will never be involved in an aircraft accident, and that if they are, they’ll be able to rise to the occasion,” he explained. “That’s a terrible attitude. [National Transportation Safety Board] data show that many lives lost in aircraft accidents might have been saved had the passengers known what to do.”

As an example, Altman recalled a study at Douglas Aircraft. “We gave a group of people the standard briefing on donning oxygen masks,” he said. “Then we told them to assume the masks had just dropped. Most of the people held the mask out in front of their faces exactly like the cabin attendants had demonstrated. The problem was that cabin attendants never actually put their masks on, so it didn’t occur to about half the passengers to seal it over their mouths.”

Passengers in business aircraft have access to all emergency equipment in the

cabin, said Altman. “The problem is, very few passengers have a clue how to operate this equipment or even where to find it.” He estimated that less than 5 percent of corporate flight operations include FAA-mandated briefings to provide passengers with hands-on instruction about emergency equipment and procedures. “What kills people in the back of an airplane is typically lack of knowledge,” he claimed.

Blain Stanley, director of FACTS training for AirCare International, Ltd., also of Olympia, Wash., agreed that training is a

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key factor in saving lives. “When it comes to emergency equipment,” he said, “you have to own it, you have to be able to find it in the aircraft in the dark and you have to know how to use it.”

Stanley, whose firm provides safety training and equipment to the corporate and charter aviation industry, cited the now ubiquitous AED (automated external defibrillator) as an example. “They’re remarkably simple to operate but learning how isn’t best accomplished when someone’s life hangs in the balance,” he said. “The same goes for other emergency equipment, such as fire extinguishers.”

Stanley was critical of the first-aid kits commonly found on aircraft. “It’s typically a white box containing smelling salts and Band-Aids,” he said. “It’s stuff you never use. You should be looking at really practical equipment such as a blood-borne pathogen kit that contains gloves; mask; antiviral and



Think Safe’s emergency kit includes an MP3 player that provides spoken instructions.

antimicrobial wipes to clean up after exposure; a sharps container; red biohazard waste bags; and an agent such as Red Z that will solidify blood, vomit and urine.”

Paula Wickham, president of Cedar Rapids, Iowa-based Think Safe, Inc., has developed a first-aid kit that offers something else as well: “The average corporate aircraft passengers have no first-aid training or, if they do, they may have taken a course once,” she explained. “They’re never going to be as proficient as an EMT. So we provide a voice that turns anyone into an experienced responder.” What she means is that her kit includes an MP3 player that asks the same questions an EMT would ask in an emergency. Users respond by pressing “yes” or “no” buttons that lead them to an assessment of the situation. A voice then directs them to prepackaged supplies and instructions.

“We can set up a kit to the specifications of a company and we also offer inventory management covering the supplies,” Wickham said. “We’ll tell you when specific items reach their recommended shelf life and need to be replaced.” Think Safe also monitors emergency protocols, notifies clients and provides updates to its audio messages when appropriate, such as when the CPR recommendation recently changed from 15 compressions to 30.

“Having a system that helps the user deal with an emergency goes a long way towards reducing the helpless feeling that naturally occurs when you’re faced with a crisis,” Wickham said. □