Listen Up!

A study seeks to model — and improve — passenger attention to safety briefings.

BY RICK DARBY

Passengers do not pay as much attention to cabin safety briefings as they should, and airlines need to consider new strategies to motivate them, according to a recently published report by the Australian Transport Safety Bureau.[1] The report offers 13 suggested actions for engaging passengers' attention, as well as a model of factors influencing passenger responses, or lack of them, to safety announcements.

The report, based on a study that comprised a literature review, industry consultation, interviews of passengers following flights and passenger focus groups, concludes that the overall effectiveness of cabin safety communication is "generally weak." Although the study results are based on data from Australia, the level of attention to safety communication is "similar … to that of other countries, a level that has been regarded almost universally by cabin safety experts as too low to maintain good passenger safety," says the report.

"Perceived relevance" of safety information is one key to passenger attitudes, the study says. Although it seems axiomatic that passengers would be interested in facts that might help keep them alive in an accident, negative assumptions — such as skepticism about the likelihood of surviving — could stand in the way. As one respondent said, "If there is going to be a problem, I think all hell is going to break loose, so [safety information] is not going to make any difference."

Other factors influencing passengers' attention to safety communications included:

- **Overconfidence.** "Results showed that passenger ability to recognize messages presented during safety communication is high," the report says. "This is endorsed by high levels of passenger agreement with 'having seen all the content in the briefing before' and 'knowing all the information I need.'"
- **Social norms in the aircraft cabin.** The report says, "Passengers associated those who pay attention to safety communications with undesirable stereotypes, such as the nervous or inexperienced, and identified peer group behaviors that tend not to favor paying attention. … The impact of such norms appears to be greatest on infrequent and younger travelers."
- **Repetition.** "Most respondents believed they had heard all the content in the briefing before," the report says. "Ten percent provided unprompted feedback that they considered the briefing too boring, and 29 percent agreed, when prompted, that the briefing was boring. Feedback from focus groups supported this notion to an even greater extent."
- **Confusion between recognition and recall.** Passengers tended to believe that recognizing a standard safety message meant they understood or could remember it. "However, the results also suggested that ability to recall safety information and perform safety actions when required may be lower than passengers expect," says the report.

Planned Behavior Model

The study showed that "passengers recognize the importance of cabin safety and are aware of behaviors expected of them; however, the perceptions and actual behaviors do not reflect this recognition." The report offers a framework for understanding

the dissonance between perceived and actual behaviors.

Icek Azjen, currently head of the Division of Personality & Social Psychology, University of Massachusetts at Amherst (U.S.), formulated the theory of planned behavior (TPB).[2] The theory "has been a significant and influential social-psychological model used in the determination of consumer decision making and attitudes toward behaviors for some time," the report says.

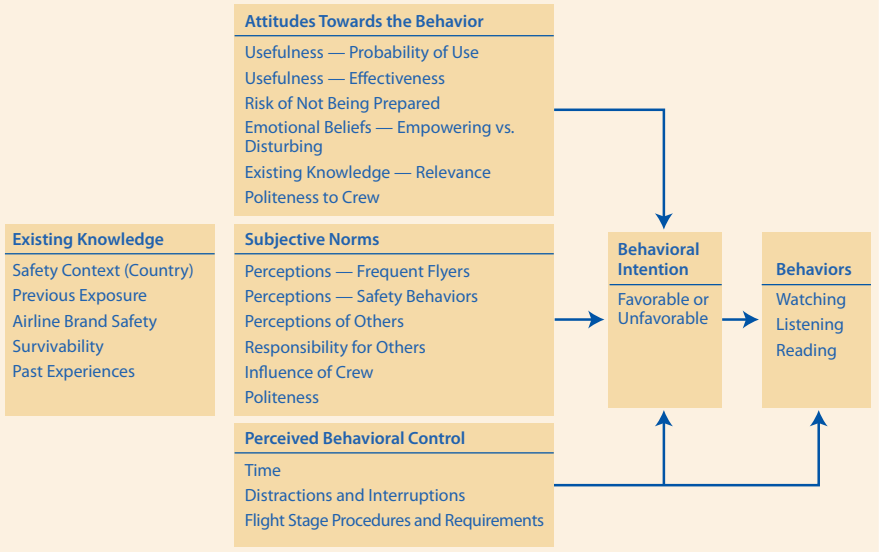
According to the TPB model, human behavior is driven by intentional and motivational factors that influence "how hard an individual is willing to try or how much effort they are planning to exert in order to plan the behavior." The individual's existing knowledge, the starting point or context, is influenced by three independent variables, described by the report as follows:

- **"Attitudes towards the behavior** — the degree to which a person has a favorable or unfavorable … appraisal of the behavior in question, including behavioral outcomes;
- **"Subjective norms** — the perceived social pressure to perform or not to perform the behavior, including motivation to comply with others' expectations; and,
- **"Perceived behavioral control** — the perceived ease or difficulty of performing the behavior, reflecting past experience, as well as anticipated impediments and obstacles."

The TPB is shown schematically in Figure 1.

The report considers how each component of the TPB plays out in cabin safety communication.

Theory of Planned Behavior: Attention to Cabin Safety Communication



Source: Australian Transport Safety Bureau

Figure 1

Attitudes Towards the Behavior

The report says that attitudes that could contribute to inattention to cabin safety communication include the perception that needing to apply the information is improbable; the discomfort that safety information produces in some or, conversely, the reassurance it offers others; the perception that the passenger recognizes the message and considers his or her safety knowledge to be good; and the perception that safety information may not be effective in an emergency.

Subjective Norms

The report says, "In establishing what subjective norms could contribute to low levels of attention to cabin safety communications, this study has identified that some passengers consider paying attention socially undesirable; consider peer group compliance to pay attention is low; observe a lack of flight attendant enthusiasm; [and] do not perceive an inter-dependence on other passengers should an emergency arise."

Perceived Behavioral Control

Perceived behavioral control measures, in effect, how much pressure a person experiences to perform a task. The more pressure, the lower the perceived behavioral (self-)control. A high level of perceived behavioral control means the person feels in control.

Generally, perceived behavioral control among passengers is high because nothing particularly demanding is required to pay attention, the report says.

"To a limited extent, perceived behavioral control may influence passengers through the distractions of other tasks," the report says. "This may arise by the perceived priority of other tasks relative to the priority given to in-flight safety (communicating with other passengers, sorting personal possessions, etc.). Perceptions of the availability of time to perform these tasks during this stage

of flight may also be a contributing factor."

The 13 suggested actions (Table 1) are in some cases designed to counteract factors described in terms of the TPB. Because the perceived behavioral control in connection with cabin safety communication is typically high, it can be inferred that attitudes towards the behavior and subjective norms offer the best opportunities to improve passengers' attitudes and behavior.

For example, the "I've heard it all a hundred times before" attitude of many frequent flyers might be countered by Action no. 1: "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." Action no. 6, "Content variation," might also be helpful in reaching this audience.

The perception that flight attendants are unconvincingly delivering the safety briefing by rote is addressed by Action no. 7, "Flight attendant briefings," designed to encourage better flight attendant performance through training and observation. Distraction factors can be minimized, Action no. 8 suggests, by airlines refraining from providing newspapers and magazines, amenities and nonessential information — "regardless of class of travel" — until after the safety communication or even until after takeoff. ●

Notes

1. Australian Transport Safety Bureau (ATSB). *Public Attitudes, Perceptions and Behaviours Towards Cabin Safety Communications.* ATSB Research and Analysis Report B2004/0238. Final Report. June 2006.

2. Azjen, Icek. "The Theory of Planned Behaviour." *Organisational Behaviour and Human Decision Processes* Volume 50 (1991), 179–211.

Suggested Actions for Improving Passenger Attention to Cabin Safety Briefings

Title	Action No.	Suggested Action
Frequent flyers	1	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.
Passenger information	2	Additional factual safety information and resources about air travel and cabin safety should be made available to passengers at airports by airlines and safety authorities.
Escape slides	3	Additional detailed information and/or emphasis regarding the operation and use of escape slides should be provided to passengers during safety briefings.
Brace position explanation	4	Carriers should be encouraged to detail the brace position during safety briefings. Where a video-based briefing with visuals of the required brace positions is not provided, carriers should be required to provide a detailed verbal explanation of brace positions in the safety briefing/demonstration.
Brace position understanding	5	Further investigation should be made into methods of improving passenger understanding of the brace position, particularly where the safety card is the primary means of information delivery.
Content variation	6	Carriers should 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.
Flight attendant briefings	7	Carriers should monitor and enhance the ongoing performance of cabin crew in relation to delivery of the safety briefing. This may be achieved within existing crew management processes through training and observation.
Passenger distraction	8	Carriers should refrain from providing passengers with reading materials (such as newspapers and magazines), amenities and nonessential information, regardless of class of travel, until the conclusion of the safety briefing and, where possible, after takeoff.
Safety cards	9	The safety regulator, the civil aviation safety authority, should implement guidelines and approval processes for testing of the effectiveness and comprehension of airline passenger safety cards.
Interaction effects	10	Beyond the extent of current requirements, passengers should 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.
Safety disposition	11	Carriers should seek to understand the unique safety disposition of their passengers (versus that of other airlines) and tailor their safety communication strategies to suit.
Safety media development	12	Airlines should utilize the resources of professionals experienced in consumer psychology and/or communication disciplines when designing future safety communications and associated media.
Theory of planned behavior	13	Additional research should be initiated to investigate and validate the dimensions of the theory of planned behavior model presented in this study.

Source: Australian Transport Safety Bureau

Table 1