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Angle of Attack

Join the Club The Role of Type Clubs in Enhancing Aviation Safety

If you have a hobby or favorite activity, no matter how common or unconventional, there is probably a club somewhere out there that caters to that interest. Auto clubs, TV show fan clubs, and book clubs; these are just a few among the myriad organizations that appeal to nearly anything you can imagine. But how about a club that can help save you time, money, and possibly even your life one day? Sound good? If you're an airman, it most definitely would.

Of course we're referring to aircraft "type clubs," which, for decades, have helped aircraft owners and pilots become more in tune with the performance and safety of their machines. In fact, anecdotal data suggest that members of an aircraft type club are less likely to have an accident than their non-member colleagues. If that piques your interest, please read on.

Getting "Type"-Cast

Aircraft type clubs are organizations formed to support airmen who share a common interest in a specific make, model, or manufacturer of aircraft. Although type clubs vary in how they operate and the services they provide, they generally function as a safety and informational support network to keep members abreast of best practices, as well as any changes or news regarding their aircraft. This is particularly important for a pilot transitioning to a new aircraft type, or one who owns an aircraft no longer supported by the manufacturer.

Enhancing safety among type club members is accomplished in a number of ways. It is facilitated chiefly through the availability of technical and safety-related information, and supplemented by the first-hand knowledge and expertise of its members. How this information gets disseminated can vary among different type clubs, but Web sites, publications, and seminars are the more common vehicles.

In addition to making available a ream of online statistics and data about their aircraft, many type club Web sites also use blogs and chat rooms, allowing users to ask questions, post comments, and exchange ideas about anything ranging from which engine oil is the best to use, to where the best airport diners are. "These interactive discussions allow for a constant stream of dialogue that can cover several issues at any given moment," says the membership director for one major type club, who also likened trying to absorb all the information available on its Web site to "drinking water from a fire hose."

This type of open communication has also been the catalyst for some aircraft type club members, particularly those of more recent design, to play a part in discovering and developing safe practices for undocumented issues, sometimes before the manufacturer gets wind of a problem. A good example that surfaced on one type club's online forum addressed what to do when a door inadvertently opens in-flight. Input from various members who had firsthand experience helped determine that more problems came from pilots trying to close the door than from just landing without being distracted by it. Such examples reinforce the safety role of type clubs and demonstrate why so many manufacturers maintain close symbiotic relationships with associated type clubs.

Smaller type clubs, which are often run by a volunteer staff, may not always offer a sophisticated Web site or on-demand technical support. But what they may lack in digital savvy, they often make up for in other ways, like producing informative

Events like EAA's AirVenture often have designated parking areas for specific aircraft types.



Photo by Tom Hoffmann

newsletters and magazines, as well as organizing safety seminars and pilot proficiency programs for their members. These live programs usually feature speakers well-versed in safety matters germane to their type-specific audiences, and can sometimes be supplemented with additional one-on-one flight training sessions.

Another excellent safety promotion tool some type clubs offer are service clinics, where maintenance professionals will visually check a club member's aircraft for areas or items that are historically problematic. So whether you're more technically inclined, or prefer a more traditional hands-on approach to keeping up to speed on your airplane, you're bound to find a type club learning solution that suits your needs.

My Type of Club

Directories available on the AOPA and EAA Web sites list more than 270 type clubs and flying associations, covering every group of aviators from Cessna, Piper, and Mooney pilots, to those more taken with amateur-built, light-sport, or vintage designs. Then there are niche organizations based on pilot demographics, occupation, or locality and which have targeted audiences ranging from musicians and chiropractors to octogenarians and wheelchair aviators. While these groups don't necessarily focus on the safety aspects of a particular aircraft, they are still extremely useful in keeping members up to date with more generic safety matters, or issues that are relevant to their profession, area of interest, or specific environment.

For example, maybe you're new to the Colorado area and want to expand your knowledge of high-altitude flying. What better way than to chat with experienced mountain flyers in your area?

And in case there isn't a club in your particular area, start one! All it takes is a few folks with a common interest to get it going.

Spreading the Good Word: Safety

In keeping with its strategic plan to reduce GA accidents, the FAA is looking to leverage the tremendous influence type clubs have on aviation safety. One method being considered to help spread the word is to provide aircraft owners with type club contact information during the new re-registration requirements for GA aircraft, as well as when pilots purchase or insure a new aircraft.

"Aircraft type clubs, by virtue of their ongoing promotion of professionalism and safety education,

have an inherent benefit that should not be overlooked," says Mel Cintron, manager of the FAA's General Aviation and Commercial Division. "Their importance to aviation safety should be recognized and promoted across the full spectrum of the industry and the GA community."

FAA also made a point to emphasize the importance of type clubs in a recent Advisory Circular regarding the flight characteristics of experimental aircraft. In addition to providing guidance for training

and operational experience, AC 90-109 also recommends using type clubs to

help build familiarity when transitioning to a new experimental or unfamiliar aircraft.

There's a lot to gain from being a member of an aircraft type club: shared information, tried and true tips, trend data, locality-specific issues, not to mention a club's ability to provide important social and professional networking outlets for like-minded aviation enthusiasts. You may also consider joining a type club to offer up some of your own talents and expertise.

Groucho Marx was once quoted as saying, "I wouldn't want to join any club that would have me as a member." Although regarded largely as a tongue-in-cheek remark, Marx's comment could resonate in some ways with pilots who might feel intimidated or lack the experience to feel like they could be a valuable asset to a type club. If you hear that, be sure to let the speaker know about the mutually beneficial value that an aircraft type club can offer to both newcomers and expert flyers alike. And if that doesn't work, grab your Groucho glasses and tell them the "secret word"—safety!

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For More Information

List of Aircraft Associations and Type Clubs on AOPA Web site

<http://data.aopa.org/associations/>

List of Aircraft Associations and Type Clubs on EAA Web site

www.vintageaircraft.org/type/index.html