



THE VIEW FROM WASHINGTON

BY RIC PERI
VICE PRESIDENT, AEA GOVERNMENT & INDUSTRY AFFAIRS

Just the Facts, Ma'am

All We Want are the Facts

Nearly everyone recognizes the classic statement attributed to the old TV series *Dragnet*: “Just the facts, ma’am.” This statement certainly is applicable in today’s aviation industry.

Whether it is listening to Congress challenge the FAA over airline over-

name it, and somewhere in the last couple of months there has been something negative written about it. The news media is having a feeding frenzy keeping you on the edge of your seats anticipating the next shoe to drop. The media markets to your emotions.

Read the business journals or headline news, and you’ll find reporters taking potshots at the ethics of the FAA or questioning the performance of “un-named” inspectors. 2008 was a tough year for the Agency.

In the process of my travels so far this year, I have come across an interesting and often overlooked issue with regards to local inspectors: ethics. Not the legal ethics as defined by FAA policy, but the moral ethics confronting all of us from time to time.

We have placed our local FAA inspectors in a difficult position. They know too much. Often, because of a relationship with you and your shop, an inspector knows all of your dirt.

Certainly, the FAA has specific guidance on ethics, but this guidance is more about the legal side of job

performance; it really doesn’t address confidentially or, even worse, community consideration.

Occasionally — and I do mean occasionally — I hear about an inspector who is sharing inappropriate information with a third party. It usually takes the shape of something like, “My inspector was telling my customers...”

I have never been able to follow up with anyone who confirmed these accusations. But, in moral ethics, it really is about perception. The perception was, an inspector was discouraging potential clients from visiting a particular shop.

The Perception of Trust — or Mistrust

It is the inspector’s job to know everything about your business — the good, the bad and the ugly. Inspectors have their preferences of who would work on their personal planes and who wouldn’t.

Recently, I was visiting a friend who was having some problems with her hand. Nothing too serious, maybe carpal tunnel syndrome. She

We have placed our local FAA inspectors in a difficult position. They know too much. Often, because of a relationship with you and your shop, an inspector knows all of your dirt.

sight, or TSA over foreign repair station security, or a local inspector’s “personal preferences,” or an AEA member’s complaint about its inspector, we all are victims of perception. Sometimes, I am reminded to go back to the basics: Take perception out of the equation, focus on the moral right and deal with just the facts.

2009 has started with a roar. The economy, the election, the bailout, unemployment, fuel prices, you

wasn't sure. But the husband of one of her friends was a local surgeon. She knew he would never recommend one doctor over another, so she carefully phrased her question: "If Sue had this problem, where would you send her?"

The AEA staff often is asked a similar type of question during trade shows, at training sessions and through e-mails. When asked what repair station we would choose, the answer is, "We provide a membership directory of FAA-certified repair station. Any of these shops would be a good choice. Take the time to interview the shop to make sure it is qualified for the work you are asking to be done."

Inspectors also are asked a similar question. Many inspectors are part of their local aviation communities — they participate in flying clubs, belong to local EAA chapters, or just hang out around airports on weekends. The question they often are asked is, "If you were having your avionics worked on, where would you go?"

How an inspector handles this question reflects his or her moral ethics. We seem to have no problem asking them questions about our competitors — maybe even our customers. But, take great care. If your inspector will share "personal" feeling about them to you, what will he share about you with them?

It is completely human to have your favorites. Somehow, however, FAA inspectors must distance their personal feelings from the facts.

I work with a lot of folks from nearly every regulatory authority the AEA represents. By and large, they all are aviators who share our same passion for flight. This is where it becomes that much harder to main-

tain the perception of total and complete trust — moral ethics.

Recently, I was visiting an FAA office and experienced a troubling scenario: An FAA inspector had allowed his personal relationship with one repair station to jade his view of another repair station. This isn't a judgment of the inspector; I'm not sure I might not have fallen victim to the same actions if placed in the same situation. However, falling victim to these very human traits causes the Agency as a whole to share a blemish.

Before you send me hate mail, don't defend another division of the Agency by pointing out "your division" doesn't do this or that. You all get your paycheck from the Administrator; so, like the Three Musketeers: One for all and all for one. If one inspector embarrasses himself, he embarrasses all of you.

Back to the local scenario, which was not a pretty one. It was a business nightmare with disputes, legal action and lots of accusations between the repair stations. Instead of staying above the fray, the inspector (and possibly the district office) got knee-deep into the muck. He allowed his personal feelings about the "home team" (the long-time repair station) to affect his objective judgment about the "visiting team" (the new upstart company). The result: delays in certification, excessive administrative burden for the applicant and wasted government resources — and, by the way, loss of trust.

The situation has been resolved, but what about the losses? These are things that simply cannot be returned. Once trust is gone, it takes time and effort to rebuild. When both sides believe they were in the

right, no one is willing to give in to start the rebuilding process. The inspector believes he was technically correct, while the applicant believes his moral trust was compromised. The inspector allowed the perception of favoritism to show.

The Agency needs to look out for each other. When an inspector is faltering, he needs to be reminded of the perception he is portraying.

How Can We Help?

Let's not put our inspectors in this position in the first place. Had the home team not involved its inspector in a business issue, the inspector likely would have stayed with "just the facts" in the application process from the start.

Let's not ask questions of our inspectors we would not like asked of ourselves. If we don't want inspectors to offer "opinions" about us, let's not ask them to share their opinions of others.

If we don't want our inspectors to offer competitors "brother-in-law" deals on regulatory compliance, let's not ask for them for ourselves.

The Agency needs to look out for each other. When an inspector is faltering, he needs to be reminded of the perception he is portraying.

And, of the inspectors themselves, what do we ask of them? Just the facts. □

If you have comments or questions about this article, send e-mails to avionicsnews@aea.net.