



Bringing in new blood



With PPL issues down by 40 percent in ten years, Delta Aviation is doing its bit to introduce new people to flying – and it needs help, as Pat Malone reports

Wanted

Tiger Moth instructors. Must be experienced, personable, and good with the nervous. Pay very good by flying instructor standards, hours to die for. Must be prepared to have a whale of a time.

Your would-be employer is Delta Aviation, a company whose success makes you wonder why general aviation is on its knees. Delta has tapped into the enormous latent demand for GA in this country, and has introduced thousands of newcomers to the thrill of hands-on flying. Many have gone on to become pilots, making Delta one of the best recruiting tools in our industry.

Delta Aviation has everything going for it – a solid concept, a bottomless pool of customers, enviable cash flow. Most importantly, it is run by two men whose expertise lies in sales and marketing, talents that are in woefully short supply in this industry.

The problem Delta now faces is an ageing workforce. It has a roster of some 50 Tiger Moth instructors, most of whom are gentlemen of a

certain age. Hence the above want ad – many of Delta's pilots won't be active ten years from now, and the company needs to bring on some youths to fill their flying boots. Are you up for it?

Terms and conditions are good. Pay is about double the average for a flying instructor, and you get turning-up money and some expenses. Attractions include fair weather flying in a legendary aircraft, and the deep satisfaction of introducing new faces to aviation. A Delta customer returns to earth with the Tiger Smile across his face, and often as not he tacks into the nearest flying club and comes out with the literature.

The story of Delta is a heartening one that shows that if we can package this flying caper properly, we can halt and even reverse the decline in uptake. It began in 1993 when a chap called Mike Dalton started offering trial lessons in a leased Tiger Moth from Old Warden. In his first year Mike carried 47 paying customers. Delta was the first of the dedicated 'experience flight' specialists, and it grew rapidly through the 1990s as the experience agencies like Red Letter Days took off. Mike Dalton soon bought his own Tiger, G-AGPK, and funded by a steady stream of agency work, spread out to White Waltham, Sywell and Stapleford.

Eventually he added a second Tiger, G-ADGT.

In 2004 Mike decided to retire. At the same time, Matthew Byatt and Richard Baker, two young pilots who had met with some success in corporate marketing, had come to that disconcerting point in life when one wonders whether being yoked to somebody else's cart is all there is to it. Delta looked like the opportunity they were searching for.

Matthew and Richard had met at Bristol University and learned to fly on Bulldogs with the University Air Squadron. Although they had gone their separate ways they had kept in touch, and both carried on flying – Matthew's share in a Duxford-based PA-28 was an early casualty of the fund-raising drive that brought Delta into their ownership. The purchase of Delta was partly underwritten by aviation finance experts Air & General, for whom Richard and Matthew are full of praise.

They are serious and dedicated businessmen who do not fly Tiger Moths. Matthew says: "There are too many hobby owners in aviation who play with planes, too many people who look on their companies as free flying opportunities. We're not in the business of owning a sweetshop in order to eat the stock. We are building Delta Aviation into a major leisure company."

One gets a glimpse of the scale of their ambitions when Matthew says: "Delta has flown

Above: Delta has flown 20,000 people, 5,000 last year alone

some 20,000 people in its history, of whom 5,000 flew last year. That leaves between ten and twenty million potential customers who have not yet bought their flights."

They are growing the company fairly aggressively. An early deal brought a competitor, Avia Special, into Delta. Avia was owned by James Black, who worked out of airfields like Barton, Netherthorpe and Leicester, and who also wanted to retire. Avia was a good fit, and brought with it Tiger Moth G-AMCK and the agency franchise for the north of England to Delta.

In March 2005 they also bought the de Havilland School of Flying at White Waltham, whose Tiger Moth, G-ACDJ, was subsequently involved in a fatal accident while in the hands of a self-fly hire pilot. de Havilland had been flying between 200 and 300 people a year, and ownership of the name sets up new potential avenues for exploitation in the future.

Says Matthew: "The agencies want to deal with a single company, rather than having to



Above: Tiger Moth teaches flying skills that are vanishing
Left: Matthew Byatt (left) and Tiger Moth pilot Mike Derrett
Below: instructors and students must wear helmets

and it's also important to give the instructors a rest – we don't want someone at the stick for hours at a stretch."

Delta is also looking for more ground crew members, and according to Matthew, keen PPLs are particularly well suited to the job. Part of the reward is the opportunity to fly on positioning and ferry flights in the Tigers.

The typical Delta customer is a male in his 40s and 50s, and his flight is bought for him by a female relative who is often not aviation-savvy. Delta's website therefore has to explain what you have to do, and what you get, but even the least aviation-aware person knows what a Tiger Moth is. Matthew says: "We get a call in January and we arrange a flight in April. Much depends on where he is – if he has quite a distance to travel to the airfield we won't schedule him for an early start. We pay for a full weather briefing the day before the flight and decide whether or not to cancel – some 20 percent of flights have to be rescheduled because of weather. Next morning the pilot eyeballs the weather, checks the met and makes a final decision. We have company weather minima set down in our operations manual."

On arrival they are given a full pre-flight briefing before being introduced to the pilot. "Everything is designed to quell nervousness," says Matthew. "We make sure the planes are clean and polished – I cannot abide tatty aircraft. We always try to exceed expectations and make it a day to remember for a lifetime. We are aiming to give them a fantastic experience, instill in them a love of flying that will hopefully lead to them learning to fly, and turn them into walking advertisements for our company. Most of our promotion is word-of-mouth."

Each student is dressed in an original Irvin flight jacket, and company rules say they must wear a helmet. Flights are videotaped from a camera on the trailing edge of the upper wing – a useful quality control aid – and 70 percent of students buy the video.

Students tend to spend two or three hours at the airfield and display a marked reluctance to leave, which makes everybody happy. Matthew says: "Airfields love us because we pay lots of landing fees and buy lots of fuel. The restaurants love us because each student brings two or three hungry spectators along. The flying clubs love us because often, the student walks in after his Tiger flight and inquires about learning to fly."

"Mark Edworthy, one of our senior pilots,

find chaps in hangars here, there and everywhere with working Tiger Moths. Delta has a national footprint that makes us a one-stop shop for the experience agencies. We now have between 90 and 95 percent of the Tiger Moth trial lesson market."

With its fleet augmented by two more Tigers, G-ANMO and G-ANTE, Delta services some 80 percent of its own business while passing the remainder to a network of affiliates. "We have access to four privately-owned Tigers with public transport C of As, and we have affiliates with Tigers at Sibson, Henlow and Gloucester, and with a Chipmunk at Eaglescott," says Matthew. "They give us the flexibility we need to manage capacity. We also have a large network of affiliates who do our aerobatics trial lessons, none of which we do ourselves."

The flying season starts in April and runs to October, but the buying season for trial lessons is year-round. "We give vouchers that are valid for 12 months," says Matthew. "Revenue is relatively steady across the year, with a spike before Christmas and another in July and August. Expenditure is heavy through the summer, but the cash flow picture is generally good."

A Tiger can do up to a dozen 20-minute trial lessons a day. Most people go for the half-hour version, and Delta also offers 40-minute and hour-long lessons. A flying day means putting a Tiger, a pilot and two ground crew into an airfield, and getting the fundamentals right. Here again, expertise in marketing shows its worth. "It's the small things that really count,"



Matthew says. "Things like having clear signage telling them how to find us at an airfield – often they're nervous and on edge, and small difficulties can be magnified in their minds. We have worked hard to make it easy for them."

The two ground crew – usually one experienced hand paired with a younger go-getter – are the first and most important interface with the customer. Matthew says: "Some of our best ground crew are retired pilots who can put people at ease with fascinating stories of their flying lives. As well as being responsible for safety, they are a reassuring presence and can cover for delays, resolve minor problems and generally make the whole experience an unforgettable one."

"We are not running a conveyor belt. We don't do running changeovers – there's at least a 15 minute break between flights. These are all highly personal experiences for the students,



used to be a research physicist until he had a trial lesson. He was instantly hooked, and flew tailwheel aircraft for years. After working as Tiger Moth ground crew for a season he changed his career, becoming a commercial pilot and a full-time Tiger Moth pilot."

Matthew adds: "We have never had a single complaint about our flights from our customers. You don't even get noise complaints with Tiger Moths – people look up and think, ah, de Havilland... and quite often they'll follow the Tiger into the airfield."

Delta pilots include ex-Concorde captains, military fast jet men, people who have landed on aircraft carriers, and civilians with masses of Moth hours. Mike Derrett, Delta's Pilot Consultant, has been an instructor with Bill Ison's Cambridge Flying Group for 20 years. "We take only top quality Moth pilots," Mike says. "You'll need 100 hours tailwheel time and a full instructor rating. We check out your paperwork first, and you need to fill in a comprehensive questionnaire. Then you'll get a check flight that really puts you through the mill."

"The Tiger is a challenging aircraft to fly. The controls are not well co-ordinated, the ailerons are poor and it suffers a lot from adverse yaw. It has a narrow undercarriage that makes landing a challenge, especially in a crosswind, and the high centre of gravity when you have fuel on board makes matters worse. A Tiger Moth will definitely show up a pilot's weaknesses."

"Modern training aircraft will teach procedural skills, but not good handling skills. People never gain those skills today unless they fly aircraft like the Tiger, the Stampe and the CAP-10. Some of our pilots are airline captains who desperately need a change from pushing a computer around the skies. All are part-time, and most work three or four days a month in the summer."

Like Tiger pilots, Tiger engineers are a vanishing breed. Delta has begun its own engineering and restoration operation at Sywell, in the hands of Ian Castle, the enthusiast who restored PK to pristine condition for Mike Dalton. They offer engineering services to Tiger owners and expect to restore at least one Tiger Moth every year. Ian, who at 50 years of age is one of the youngest Tiger Moth engineers in the industry, is also taking on apprentices.

Right: one of Delta's beautifully presented Tiger Moths operates out of Sywell
Above: students get the loan of an authentic Irvin jacket to enhance the experience
Below: pilot and ground crew at Sywell – Delta needs more of both

"Moth craftsmen are dying out," says Matthew. "As well as putting new Tigers into the air, reconditioned and restored, we will be fostering and passing on the skills that are needed to keep them flying. The Gipsy is a bit of a tractor engine and it needs coaxing. Things drift, and you have to retune it all the time. When they used to go touring they'd take along a flying spanner, and they'd have to work on them almost every day. The woodwork and rigging need close attention, the wing structure is complicated, and the fabric needs to be looked after. Fortunately we have the ultimate enthusiast in Ian Castle, and he is keen to pass on his skills to the next generation."

Delta Aviation flights are not cheap – some of

them work out at £329 an hour. A good Tiger Moth can cost £70,000, which will bring tears to the eyes of pilots who remember Tigers being stacked on top of each other when they ran out of room for them at Croydon. Matthew Byatt does not believe that lack of money is the root of general aviation's troubles. "People who should be learning to fly and buying aircraft are sitting in bars in The City sipping champagne while planning which Porsche to buy next," he says. "The question is – why has it not even occurred to most of them to learn to fly? We do not make a good job of putting an attractive proposition in front of them, and when we do manage to get their attention, we make flying difficult for them, what with all the regulatory hoops they have to jump through. But the primary problem is not money. There is room to firm prices if we get the marketing right."

"Marketing is one of our strengths at Delta. We pride ourselves in opening up general aviation to new people, something GA desperately needs, and in giving people a positive impression of aviation – and of course, the Tiger is the perfect vehicle for that."

*Delta Aviation's website is at www.deltaaviation.co.uk. You can call Mike Derrett or Matthew Byatt on 01223 874346. ■

