

▲ **CONTRACTED SERVICES**

Know when it's time to change
contracted service provider

▲ **AIRPORT GURU**

The accelerating danger of diesel
exhaust fluid contamination

▲ **FBO MATTERS**

How can FBOs effectively handle
hundreds of aircraft types

airport business

LANDSIDE \ TERMINAL / AIRFIELD

ECONOMY INFLIGHT



Across the country, general and business aviation airports are capitalizing on a strong American economy to grow and become the economic drivers of their region.

FBO MATTERS

AUTHOR Douglas Wilson

FBOS AND OEMS: Strange Bedfellows

How can FBOs effectively handle hundreds of aircraft types when OEMs have no cause to engage with FBOs?



PHOTOS BY JOSH SMITH, AVIATIONPROS

WHEN THE Bombardier Lear 45 series first rolled on to the ramps of FBOs across the country, FBOs hadn't seen a truly new Learjet in years. The venerable 30-series Lears, and later 55 and 60 series were all outgrowths of the same basic airframe.

For FBOs, that commonality meant ease of ground operations and relatively common service points. Yet, when the Lear 45 arrived on the scene, some well-meaning FBOs didn't fully grasp it was not a derivative of the 30 series and damaged the nose gear steering mechanism using the same towbarless aircraft tug they had used on every Learjet previously. Despite the

understandable frustrations of aircraft owners who experienced this early learning curve of FBOs, the mistake was somewhat understandable.

The 45 was the first clean-sheet Learjet aircraft developed by Bombardier, and was designed to "look" like the classic Lears, adding to the confusion. Save for slightly different windows and a longer fuselage, the configuration is eerily like the 31 series. Further, few in the industry were truly ready for the aircraft's introduction, because there is no regulatory requirement for OEMs to coordinate with FBOs and other ground handlers when a new aircraft type is introduced.

While perhaps surprising to some, the reason is rather logical. FBOs – those say, providing only fuel, line services and aircraft storage – are neither aircraft

operators themselves nor aircraft owners, and unless providing factory-authorized maintenance for a given OEM, are not even direct vendors of the OEM. Because of this, FBOs are completely peripheral to an OEM, except when maybe playing host to an OEM's event featuring an aircraft static display. There is simply no relationship in the industry between FBO and OEM. It's somewhat the equivalent of buying a brand-new BMW and taking it to a gas station that still provides full service (I'm looking at you Oregon and New Jersey) and wondering why they're not sure how to service the vehicle or what grade of fuel it takes.

So what is an FBO to do? How can FBOs effectively handle hundreds of aircraft types when OEMs have no cause to engage with FBOs?

To achieve this, most FBOs have historically relied on several tried-and-true sources on aircraft servicing and ground handling. Third-party publications such as the Sandpiper Media's classic Aircraft Ground Service series has been a staple for years in the line offices of FBOs across the country.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DOUGLAS WILSON

Douglas Wilson is the president and founder of FBO Partners, LLC, an aviation consultancy providing business management advisory services to Fixed Base Operations (FBOs). Wilson can be reached at douglas.wilson@fbopartners.com





Likewise, software and cloud-based programs that aid in ramp and hangar management such as One Mile Up and Stax provide overhead views of common aircraft types to help FBOs efficiently handle a multitude of aircraft. And of course, the internet itself is a treasure trove of esoteric aircraft information as well; one only need know where to look. Yet all these resources are “unofficial” information in the sense they are neither licensed by the OEM nor verified as accurate.

This would seem to point FBOs in the direction of contacting OEMs directly to support their common customer – the aircraft owner or operator – in order to obtain accurate ground servicing information. Yet even when the OEM knows the answer to the FBOs questions, they’re not obligated to assist. One FBO shared just such an experience.

After refueling a customer’s aircraft to capacity, the flight cancelled, and the aircraft operator instructed the FBO to simply put the aircraft back in the hangar. This however was no small task, as the aircraft in question is a large business jet with intercontinental range. Though an unusual request simply because few flight departments prefer to leave their aircraft parked overnight at capacity, the FBO complied and found to their surprise when maneuvering the aircraft with the tow vehicle, the aircraft was damaging itself. Due to the weight of

the aircraft, the landing light assembly, positioned over the nose gear torque link – which itself must be disconnected for towing – kept striking the upper part of the torque link, damaging both the torque link and landing light assembly in the process. The FBO contacted the OEM to find out that not only had the OEM known about this issue, mechanics at the assembly plant had created an adapter tool to be used in towing when the aircraft is fully fueled. Delighted to hear of the solution, the FBO inquired as to the adapter’s part number and how to purchase it. Somewhat predictably, the OEM wouldn’t sell it, because it had no part number – it was an unofficial solution to the issue, and not for retail sale.

Have we uncovered the dark underbelly of aircraft ground handling safety? That the manufacturer of an aircraft, after it is sold, actually want nothing to do with the third-party companies that support the operator of that aircraft? Those answers are no and yes, respectively. This phenomenon is both completely normal not specific to aviation. Example: If any of this strikes you as odd, try calling the builder of a house you’re now the second owner of, with a question about its original construction and see if they go out of their way to help.

Perhaps the closest to an official source for ground servicing of aircraft

– particularly towing – are towbar/tow head manufacturers and aircraft tractor (tug) manufacturers, all of whom must ensure their design does in fact meet the specifications set forth by the manufacturer. On that note, FBOs should consider reaching out to GSE manufacturers as new aircraft enter service. GSE manufacturers tend to be on a parallel path with OEMs because by definition – the aircraft and its specific support equipment must enter service simultaneously.

Finally, if all else fails when the latest swept-wing-high-speed aluminum tube graces the ramp of an FBO, line service employees can rely on the disarming conversation-starter that spans aviation’s century: *What kind of plane is that?* As more and more FBOs seek accreditation as an IS-BAH FBO/Handler that notion is especially true today. Such FBOs have a safety culture where an employee should be able to simply ask the aircraft operator to point out the various service points and attendant limitations without the slightest embarrassment. And, rather than concluding such an inquisitive FBO employee untrained, the aircraft operator should consider the employee is trained so well in fact, they know they can –and should– remove any doubt when servicing an unfamiliar aircraft. ▀