

HOW TO FIND A GOOD ULTRALIGHT MANUFACTURER

by Jon Thornburgh

This is an article that I really didn't want to write. It doesn't give me any pleasure to air the dirty laundry of the ultralight and experimental aircraft community.

So why am I doing it?

The May issue of ULTRAFLIGHT published an article I wrote entitled, "How To Find A Good Ultralight Instructor." The article generated enough interest that ULTRAFLIGHT and I received dozens of comments. Many prospective students said that the article was a great help in seeking out an instructor.

But quite a few callers said that they had already found a good instructor. Now they wanted to know how to find a reputable source from which to purchase an ultralight.

Unfortunately, the world is full of frauds and charlatans. We hear about it all the time: con men who target the elderly, telemarketing fraud, Internet scams, bogus tax shelters, and insurance fraud are just a few examples.

The ultralight community also has its share of what you might call "veracity impaired" persons. Which is to say, they're dishonest.

Ultralighting is more susceptible to dishonesty than general aviation because the manufacturers, dealers, and instructors do not come under close FAA scrutiny. There is no ultralight "lemon law" for protection against defective products, such as the laws in many states pertaining to automobile sales.

There is no monitoring by the Securities and Exchange Commission, or the Corporations Commission, or Consumer Reports. The field is pretty much unregulated. Which is nice, unless you get gypped.

If you are new to ultralighting, you have NO WAY of knowing who is trustworthy and who is not. You can't rely on fancy advertising. Some of the most reputable manufacturers have almost no advertising, and some of the most beautiful full-page color ads are placed by the least dependable companies. Why? Because the ethical manufacturers are booked up with sales made by word-of-mouth recommendations from satisfied customers, whereas the unscrupulous manufacturers need the fancy ads to capture the unwary.

This is not to say that every beautiful ad is placed by an unsavory manufacturer. Some are, and some aren't. As a novice, you just don't know which is which.

The fact that a magazine prints an ad, is NOT an endorsement of the product. Magazines rely greatly on advertising for their income. They can't afford to turn away advertising revenue just because the manufacturer may have a questionable reputation. In many cases, the publisher may not even know if a manufacturer is reputable or not.

Even the fact that a manufacturer has been in business a long time is not a guarantee of principled business practice. There have been cases when a manufacturer with a long and distinguished history has fallen on hard times, or been taken over by new management, and slowly degenerated.

I can attest to this from personal experience. I was a dealer for two different manufacturers whose business deteriorated. One of them was the oldest and most famous ultralight manufacturer in the business. Due to a combination of unfortunate circumstances, poor management decisions, and stockholder revolts, the company self-destructed in a period of two years.

There is nothing worse for a dealer than getting calls every day from irate customers who've not received a kit which has already been paid for. Or from a customer who has received a kit which is missing some key component that prevents him from flying, even though the airplane is 99% complete.

And there is nothing more frustrating for a dealer than calling the manufacturer and getting the same old story that it will "be there tomorrow," or "were working on it," or "we'll have to call you back on that."

One of the above mentioned manufacturers went out of business after accepting thousand of dollars in deposits for kits that it knew it would never deliver. The other manufacturer is struggling toward recovery, and hopefully will regain its former position as a premier ultralight company. But it left behind a legacy of embittered and angry customers, and it must overcome the tarnish to its reputation acquired in the past few years.

Such change in circumstances is not limited to ultralight companies. Who would have thought that Eastern Airlines and Pan American would go out of business? Certainly not the hundreds of stranded passengers who bought tickets on an airline which suddenly declared bankruptcy.

But enough of the negative. Let's talk about the good guys for a moment. Fortunately there are some great companies. They charge a fair price, deliver their product on time, the kits are complete, they have a good construction support network, and they have dealers who will teach you how to fly.

Another positive fact is that even the lousy companies usually build well-designed and well-constructed airplanes. The days of flimsy aircraft kits, containing nuts and bolts from the local hardware store, are long gone.

Almost all manufacturers use aircraft quality material. The airplane designs are very sophisticated; some use NASA designed wings. Aerodynamically, the vast majority of the aircraft are safe and well tested. The ultralight engines are reliable if properly maintained.

No company wants to be responsible for injury caused by a defective product. They wouldn't stay in business very long if there were a rash of accidents, followed by lawsuits.

So you don't have to worry much about the quality and flying characteristics of the aircraft. Unless perhaps it's a new, one-of-a-kind design.

What I'm referring to in this article is the integrity of the manufacturer: the quality of the kit, the nature of the customer service, and the ability to deliver a complete kit in a timely fashion.

Can you get replacement parts readily? Does the company have a system of service letters to notify you of problems which are discovered as the aircraft get older? Is the kit really as easy to build as the ads claim they are? Is there a dealer network to offer you support and training? These are the questions that are being addressed herein.

This article does not intend to evaluate the comfort and flying characteristics of the aircraft. There are several writers who do an excellent job of airplane evaluation. The most notable, in my opinion, is Dan Johnson, who writes for Ultralight Flying!

By now you might be asking, "Why doesn't the author just cut to the chase and tell us straight out who are the good companies and who are the bad ones?"

Sorry, I'd love to, but I can't. First of all, I really don't know all the companies intimately well enough to say for sure. I know some, but not all. It wouldn't be fair to name a couple of great companies that I'm aware of, and omit some other, equally meritorious ones that I don't know about.

Secondly, this publication could face a libel suit if I name the companies, which, in my opinion, are not so scrupulous. It's mighty expensive to prove yourself right in court.

In addition, in some cases, a bad company may be on the verge of reform. I'd hate to squelch its chance of redemption.

There is, however, a certain magazine, which is notorious for naming names, and will tell you in no uncertain terms who the bad apples are. This publication is so controversial that I hesitate to even mention it by name in this article.

My hat goes off to the publisher of Brand X. He is truly a brave individual, and he has definitely suffered for his bravado. He has been sued, harassed, lambasted on the Internet, physically threatened, investigated, and reviled. Plus losing thousand of dollars in advertising. All because he has the temerity to tell exactly who's a crook in this business.

If you'd like to know who Brand X is, you may contact me by e-mail: 70232.232@compuserve.com. Sorry, it's the only way I can tell you. No, I won't get a commission for revealing who it is: the publisher and I don't even know each other personally.

There is another resource, which is less controversial than Brand X magazine, but which does an excellent job of evaluating both the company and its aircraft. Each evaluation includes forthright ratings, with rankings from "Outstanding," to "Highly Recommended," "Recommended," "Check This Out," "We Advise Caution," and "Not Recommended."

The book is called "The SportPlane Resource Guide." The first edition is over 700 pages long. The publisher claims that the second edition will be 1100 pages. The price is \$40. The toll-free order line is 800-356-PROP. Again, I do not know the publisher personally, and have no economic interest in recommending this book, nor does ULTRAFLIGHT have any connection with it.

Other than Brand X and the "SportPlane Resource Guide," I believe that you cannot rely on any other flying magazine for an honest evaluation of the manufacturer.

Flying magazines do an excellent job, however, of reporting on the flying machine: you can trust the author when he says that an aircraft is "stable," or "has a gentle stall," or "lands easily." But you won't see anything on the manufacturer. It's just too controversial.

(However, once and a while in an article, you will see some hints; such as the comment, "While this company has experienced some growing pains, they are striving to improve their customer service." If you see anything like this, beware; what the writer really means is "I sure like his airplane, but I wouldn't trust the company with a dime of my money.")

Let's say you have an interest in a particular airplane, and you're trying to decide if you should buy it. Other than having a definitive list of the good and bad manufacturers, how can you evaluate for yourself whether or not the company is trustworthy?

Here's some tips to make an evaluation.

1. How long has the company been in business? If the company has been around a long time, it's probably more likely that it's delivering a good product and good service. But this is not

absolutely certain. Remember, I was a dealer for the oldest and best-known manufacturer in ultralighting. It had the largest market share of anyone. And it practically went the way of Eastern Airlines.

How long is a sufficient time to have been in business? I'd say at least five years. It takes about that long for the word to spread about a company's reputation.

What do you do if you're interested in an airplane built by a start-up company? Well, my friend, you're in the same league as those who buy lottery tickets, or IPO stocks on the Internet. You takes your chances. You may be on the ground floor of the best deal of the decade; or you might get burned.

One thing you can do with a start-up company is to request that your deposit be put into escrow. The funds are not to be delivered to the company until it's ready to ship the kit. Then you go to the factory (or the dealer, if you're buying from a dealer) and give the kit a thorough inventory to ensure that not one item is missing.

Missing items, called "short kits" are a real thorn in the side. The missing items are sometimes practically impossible to get from the manufacturer after he's gotten your money.

Actually, it's not a bad idea to ask any company, whether start-up or not, if there is a provision to put your deposit into escrow. Look in the telephone book for an escrow company in your area. They should handle a simple escrow such as this for a hundred dollars or so. If you can't find an escrow company, then try a lawyer that you and the manufacturer mutually agree on.

2. How many airplanes has the company sold, especially the model that you're interested in? There are some companies which are 10 years old or so, but only sell a few airplanes a year. This could mean that each airplane is hand-crafted to your individual taste. Or it could mean that the company barely makes a profit from year to year because not many people are happy with its product. If the company only sells a few airplanes a year, ask why.

3. Visit the factory. You're about to spend anywhere from six to twenty-five thousand dollars. Don't you think it's worth a few hundred dollars to take a little vacation and visit the maker of your dream machine?

If you really want the inside scoop, don't rely on the dealer. Visit the factory yourself. Most of the time the dealer is just a pawn in the marketing game. He's as helpless as you are if the manufacturer turns surly. Often he doesn't know any more about the manufacturer than you do. He just buys kits and re-sells them to you.

The dealer can help you put the kit together, and give you flight training, but I'd wager he sure doesn't know the manufacturer's inner secrets. I sure didn't.

You can learn a lot from visiting the factory. Is it well organized? Does it have a stock of spare parts? Are the employees happy and enthusiastic? Do they appear to be the kind of people that you would want to be building something that you will bet your life on? Or are they slovenly, disgruntled, and barely speak, like, you know, decent English, dude?

Unless you've already flown the airplane with a dealer, don't leave the factory without taking a demo flight. (In ultralight-speak, a demo flight is called an "introductory flight lesson.")

There is no substitute for your personal flight experience in the aircraft. Don't take "no" for an answer. You may hear excuses like, "Well, we normally do give demo flights, but right now our airplane has a little problem with the whatchamacallit."

Oh, yeah? Well, if the factory itself can't fix the whatamacallit, how can you expect to maintain the airplane they sell you?

Sometimes the factory airplane is down for a legitimate reason, such as an annual inspection. To get around that problem, schedule your visit in advance to coincide with the time that the demo plane will be flying, not grounded.

Another common excuse is, "Our insurance won't allow us to take up prospective buyers." This is bull. Go to any airshow, especially ones like "Sun 'n Fun," or "Oshkosh," and you'll see manufacturers giving hundreds of demo flights with no concern about "insurance."

If the manufacturer can't get insurance, then you'd better start researching whether or not you can get insurance for your own flying.

What do you do if the airplane you're interested in is a single-seater? In this case, the factory has a legitimate reason for not letting you take it up for a test flight. Especially if you're not even a pilot yet.

My suggestion is to at least sit in the airplane. Is it comfortable? Are the rudder pedals (or seat) adjustable? Does it have a shoulder harness along with the seat belt? Is there room for baggage? Does it have an emergency shutoff switch? Can you reach the emergency parachute easily? Does it have toe brakes, or the more difficult to operate heel brakes? Does it have brakes at all?

Can you start the engine while seated in the cockpit? Can you re-start the engine in flight, if it should quit? Does the engine have a single magneto or two? Is it mounted upside down, which tends to foul the spark plugs more easily? Is there room on the front panel for sufficient flight instruments?

Don't sit in the airplane for just a few minutes. Stay in it for an hour or more. After all, that's how long you expect to be flying in it. Is it really comfortable?

4. Besides visiting the manufacturer, probably the best way to evaluate an ultralight company is to talk to other customers. It's not sufficient to just talk to other pilots who fly the same airplane. These pilots may have bought the airplane second-hand, and never have had any contact with the manufacturer.

What you need to do is to talk to someone who has purchased a kit or aircraft directly from the manufacturer. He's the one who can tell you most accurately about the quality of the kit and the extent of the factory's support.

5. Interestingly, you may get information about the manufacturer from a rival company. Although it's probably not sporting to openly denigrate a rival, you'd be surprised how often it's done. You may learn a lot if you compare what company A says about company B and vice versa.

6. Contact the Experimental Aircraft Association (EAA) to see if they know of any problems with the manufacturer or its product, especially if you are considering an airplane appropriate to the Experimental category.

The EAA has an excellent Technical Advisor program. Ask for a list of Technical Advisors who are knowledgeable about the kit you're interested in.

The purpose of the Technical Advisor is to give the builder advice during construction of the kitplane, and to periodically inspect the assembly. They become very aware of problems with the kit or the manufacturer.

The EAA also has a Flight Advisor list. These are experts on the flight characteristics of the particular aircraft. The Flight Advisor specializes in advice about how to conduct your first test flight. He may also know about the manufacturer's reputation.

For a list of Flight Advisors and Technical Advisors contact the EAA at 920-426-4800.

7. Call one or more of the United States ultralight organizations. Someone on the staff may be willing to divulge information about the manufacturer. The organizations can also direct you to a competent instructor.

The Program Administrator of the ultralight division of the EAA is Timm Bogenhagen at 920-426-6527. Jim Stephenson is President of Aero Sports Connection (ASC) at 616-781-4021. Tom Gunnarson, Director of Safety and Training at the U.S. Ultralight Association (USAA), may be reached at 301-695-9100.

8. Ask the manufacturer for copies of magazine articles about its product. Also ask for a copy of its own internal flight test reports.

9. Offer to purchase a copy of the aircraft assembly manual and the flight manual. You can learn a lot about the manufacturer from these two publications. Are the assembly drawings clear and concise? Does the manual lead you through the assembly in logical steps?

Is there a technical assistance telephone number? If so, call the number and see if it's always busy or if you just get a recorder telling you "how important your call is." Leave a message and see if anyone calls you back.

In addition to the assembly manual you can check the flight manual. Is it thorough? Does it include preflight procedures? Emergency procedures? Airspeed and structural limitations? Performance charts?

If the manuals do not include these items, or worse still, if there is no manual at all, look elsewhere. How can you expect the manufacturer to have a conscientious, professional attitude toward you individually if it doesn't even have satisfactory manuals for the pilots in general?

10. Ask for a copy of the Purchase Agreement. Look for these items: how long is the warranty? How long do you have to wait for delivery? What penalty does the manufacturer incur for a late delivery, or for a delivery of an incomplete kit?

What are the payment terms? Is there a provision to put the purchase funds into escrow until shipment is made? Is there a dealer network? Does the manufacturer have a list of instructors for your training? Does the price of the product include a certain number of training hours?

As you can see, it's not easy to find out if you're dealing with a reputable manufacturer. But you do have research tools available, if you're willing to take the time, effort, and expense to do the proper investigation. Consider your endeavor to be your most careful and thorough preflight inspection.

Don't neglect to scrutinize both the dealer and the manufacturer. It may save you a lot of money and heartache later on. It could make the difference between a nightmare of trouble or fun-filled days of enjoyable flying.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jon Thornburgh is both an ultralight and FAA-certified flight instructor. He is also a Flight Advisor for the EAA. He has an ultralight flight school in southern California, and is a dealer for several manufacturers.

Jon's previous articles for ULTRAFLIGHT MAGAZINE include, "The Differences Between Ultralights and General Aviation Airplanes," (May 1998); "Trike Pilot Makes Aviation History," (August 1998); and "How To Find A Good Ultralight Instructor," (May 1999).

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