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## Paris 2011: Passenger power pushes demand for in-flight connectivity

By: Charles Alcock

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The market for in-flight connectivity is about to step up a gear as passenger power pushes demand to be able to use personal smart phones, laptops and tablet devices, according to leading provider OnAir. The Airbus/SITA joint venture's CEO Ian Dawkins told **AIN** that experience from the just-completed first full year of availability for its GSM-service (voice, SMS and mobile data) and in-flight Internet access has established that when this level of connectivity is assured, passengers will quickly embrace it and regard as a necessity.

OnAir, established in 2005, has some 36 operators either using its service or waiting to have the systems installed in their fleets. Most of these are airlines, with about half a dozen being operators of executive or VIP aircraft. The Swiss-based company said it expects to see a steep increase in new orders, even from an airline sector that is still struggling with relatively soft demand and increased operating expenses.

Dawkins argued that easy-access connectivity, for which voice calls are priced at no more than standard international roaming rates with billing directly through the customer's own cellphone provider, is becoming a key service differentiator for carriers looking for new ways to attract and retain high-yield passengers. "We do expect to receive new orders this year," he predicted. "The market is more buoyant and there is a real hunger for connectivity."

This year, OnAir expects to complete at least fleet-wide installations for four more airlines. Installations are generally done during C- or D-check overhauls, with work being performed by approved STC holders selected by OnAir. Among the launch operators are Oman Air, Saudi Arabian Airlines and Egyptair.

With greater urgency to provide connectivity, supplier readiness is becoming a more significant issue in the market, according to OnAir chief commercial officer Stephan Egli. "The timing of when a supplier can deliver has become a more competitive issue," he said. "With the market moving more quickly now, the time to enter the market has been a big factor in recent [airline] bids and that's good news for the industry."

OnAir claims to be the only provider offering both GSM mobile telephony and wireless Internet connectivity in one package. "We have real data on what passengers prefer to use and we've seen from the first year that 95 percent of passengers will want to use smart phones when they have the choice," said Dawkins, referring to passengers who had used the service.

OnAir's market research from a first full year of operations, which ended in April, has also shown that consumer use of the connectivity available mirrors that of smart phone roaming use on the ground, in that they are generally not downloading large amounts of data to access, for example, video streaming. "And airlines are finding that it is a way to connect with their passengers by offering additional services directly to their phones and other devices, such as letting them know where their luggage will be at the airport for their next flight departure if they are connecting," said Dawkins. The system can also be used to pre-arrange rental cars or order limousine service.

According to OnAir, the performance of the service generally has been very reliable in the first year. There have been a few teething problems involving interfaces with the satellite communication or in-flight entertainment systems, as has often been the case with new cabin systems.

So what about the sustainability of the technology underwriting OnAir's connectivity—a combination of Pico cells to allow GSM phones to be used in flight safely and the ubiquitous Swift Broadband satcom service? Is this a system architecture that's in it for the long haul, or will operators find themselves depending on technology that has been superseded by the next big idea in mobile communications?

Given the global reach of Inmarsat's SwiftBroadband, it is unsurprising that it remains the dominant satcom solution. The only anticipated change on the horizon is the availability of the Ka-band, from 2014, as a capacity-enhancing alternative to the existing L-band service. OnAir is essentially agnostic on this possible switch, which could be accommodated by the relatively simple installation of a new Ka-band antenna. "The fact is that there is more than enough capacity for current levels of usage for four or five more years," said Dawkins, claiming that OnAir is the service provider offering the most straightforward transition to Ka.

"This is the right technology today and there is a simple upgrade path," Dawkins maintained. "Other technologies are available but they are not as easy to upgrade. There have been issues [for operators] with services that were stopped. But, SwiftBroadband also provides excellent clearance for roaming service around the world, and it isn't easy to do this."

The hardware for OnAir's service weighs little more than 75 kilograms. It can be installed in an overhead baggage bin in a typical airliner.



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