



A LOT CAN CHANGE IN A YEAR

WORDS BY JONATHAN NORRIS

A little over a year after taking up a new position, Ian Dawkins, CEO of OnAir, took time out to give his views on the developing inflight-connectivity market

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FLIGHT MODE

OnAir has seen only slow growth of inflight use of laptops



When Ian Dawkins joined OnAir on 1 June 2010, the market was in a state of confusion over what technology airlines should or would choose for their inflight connectivity solution – or if indeed they would choose to have any inflight connectivity at all.

In the short time since then, there has been a real shift in the market. Airlines now see that having connectivity on their aircraft brings a real competitive advantage. “In the past, OnAir had to go and talk to airlines to push inflight connectivity,” says Dawkins. “Now the airlines are approaching OnAir.”

Another significant change in the market is that there are now a number of large airline fleets (Singapore Airlines and Emirates, for example) having connectivity systems both line-fit and retro-fit across their multi-type aircraft fleets.

A positive trend that Dawkins has observed in recent months is that some airlines (Saudi Arabian Airlines, for example) are reporting passengers booking tickets asking whether the aircraft is connected – with passengers willing to change flights to ensure they get a connected flight.

“There is still a lot of hype in the market,” says Dawkins. “OnAir is the only company offering a ‘full service’ – that is, both cellular and WiFi services. This is seen as a major differentiator for OnAir’s connectivity service portfolio.”

“OnAir are actively talking to US airlines and discussing the introduction of mobile phone usage in anticipation of the ‘hang-up ban’ being lifted”

STAY CONNECTED
A few of the components needed to keep passengers connected inflight



Across the three current OnAir full-service airlines (Oman Air, Egyptair and Saudi Arabian Airlines), the predominant usage (98 per cent) is from passengers using their smartphones to connect via mobile applications rather than using other media such as streaming video content.

OnAir is seeing only slow growth in the use of laptops and tablets on aircraft installed with their systems. Dawkins cites two main drivers for this: firstly, most business travellers have no idea what their mobile phone bill is each month; and secondly, the ease of use (i.e. avoidance of any payment transaction by the passenger) means that smartphones prevail.

Despite this, OnAir is working with the telcos to introduce better rates for international roaming and are looking at packages of applications on aircraft, which Dawkins believes "is an untapped market". OnAir states that its aim is "to try and bring down the rates to an equivalent level as national roaming".

According to Dawkins, "a lot of airlines are recognising the marketing support that OnAir is providing them – with a specific focus on operational improvements, onboard communications, messages to passengers and e-ticketing."

As an example, Dawkins confirms "the average level of regular usage, triggered by ease of use of the GSM/GPRS services, for British Airways is 45 per cent averaged across their day and night-flights between LCY and JFK".

"Voice calls still remain an important service for the passengers that are using it," says Dawkins. "In-service experience is that passengers making voice-calls during flight are courteous to other passengers and in fact due to the ambient noise within an aircraft cabin you're really not overheard whilst making calls."

With the OnAir system, airlines can tailor the voice-call service "on-the-fly" – and can restrict all voice-calls – or just restrict incoming voice-calls. According to Dawkins, "OnAir

"More and more business travellers are not carrying laptops on short trips any more as smartphones meet most of their needs"

has not received a single complaint since they introduced the voice-call services."

"Different geographical regions have very different usage trends with different business models," says Dawkins, so OnAir remains flexible to provide a tailored service specific to an airline and/or a specific region.

"It's particularly important to work closely with both the airline and the telcos in the region," says Dawkins. "We've worked very closely with TAM in South America to create a tailored package." Dawkins believes that "within months, we will see the Chinese market opening up for business".

Interestingly, according to OnAir, unlike the Middle Eastern airlines, European airlines seem content to follow rather than lead the evolution of providing inflight connectivity services to





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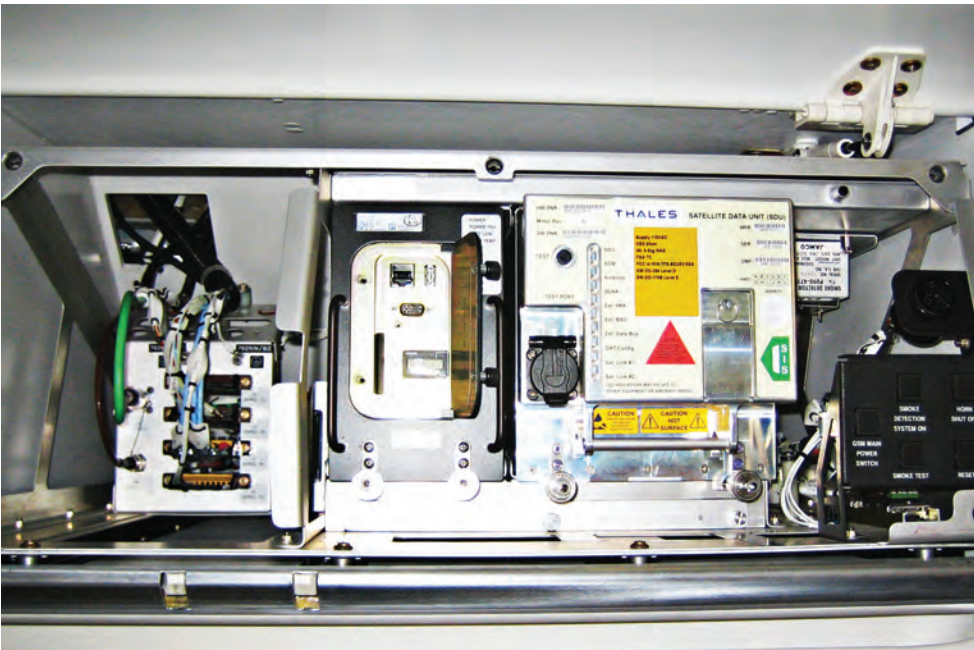
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▼ End of the mobile phone ban in the US?



passengers. The US market, in the opinion of Dawkins, remains confused, since it is completely WiFi focused, as the use of mobile phones on aircraft is prohibited, and therefore the passenger doesn't have a choice. "OnAir are actively talking to US airlines and discussing

"US airlines are seeing what is being offered in the Middle East and want to deliver these same services to their US customers"

the introduction of mobile phone usage in anticipation of the 'hang-up ban' being lifted," – something Dawkins predicts "will happen in the short to medium-term".

"US airlines are seeing what is being offered in the Middle East and want to deliver these same services to their US customers," says Dawkins. "More and more business travellers are not carrying laptops on short trips any more as smartphones meet most of their needs."

On the issue of Ka-band services, Dawkins believes that Ka [Inmarsat Global Xpress] is going to be early as Inmarsat is pushing hard to improve upon the published timeline of the first quarter of 2014. "Ka-band/L-band swapping during flight will be available 'out-of-the-box' – from one service provider – as Inmarsat will provide a simple global network of L-band (SBB) and Ka-band satellites. If airlines want to upgrade hardware 'early', it can be installed in advance on an aircraft during build (or retro-fit) and then go 'live' on day one of the Ka-band satellite operation." Inmarsat are reported to be selecting the terminal supplier(s) by the end of August.

It is Dawkins' belief that there will be an ongoing market for L-band services for at least the next three to five years as currently only about 10 per cent of L-band capacity is being used. He foresees a "shift of bandwidth need over the next three to five years as airlines and service providers optimise the pipe to give the best service. The challenge is how to provide services for all passengers and not just a few of them – it's a question of balancing functionality against bandwidth."

"Four SBB channels is an interim step," he says. "There's still scepticism from the market on Ka being available on schedule. Safety services via SBB will become the de-facto standard on all long-range aircraft with Ka as an optional add-on with tailored coverage from one global provider." ■



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