

OnAir CEO Seeks Broader Audience for In-Flight Phones, Internet
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By Andrea Rothman

June 17 (Bloomberg) -- OnAir NV, which provides in-flight phone and Internet services, aims to move beyond its initial 25 customers to make the offering standard on commercial flights, its new chief executive officer said.

The mission in coming years is to make telephony something flyers expect to find on every flight, Ian Dawkins said in an interview today from the company's Geneva offices. Dawkins became CEO yesterday, succeeding Benoit Debains. In three years under Debains, OnAir signed customers including British Airways Plc, Qatar Airways Ltd. and AirAsia Bhd.

"We have today a number of aircraft flying in different regions, but we're not yet tipping the balance where passengers can board a plane and know he or she can work on the flight," Dawkins said. He declined to comment on profitability, saying OnAir doesn't publish its accounts.

British Airways offers OnAir on only one Airbus A318 for business-class flyers between London and New York. British Airways spokesman Michael Johnson said that while the service works well, it has a "niche audience" of well-heeled business travelers. "If we had it on our long-haul leisure flights I'm not sure the take-up would be the same, as there isn't this imperative to get in touch with people on the ground."

Dawkins was previously senior vice president and head of future programs at Airbus SAS, which owns 30 percent of OnAir.

The other 70 percent is owned by SITA the world's biggest provider of air transport-related applications and communications.

Asian Service

AirAsia, the first carrier in Asia to order in-flight phone and e-mail services, signed up with OnAir in 2007 to equip as many 150 planes, and will install the system in 5 Airbus SAS A320 aircraft in coming weeks.

Other customers include TAP SGPS SA, running trial services with one A319 plane; Oman Air, with telephone and Internet services from Muscat to London; Qatar Airways on A320s; Royal Jordanian Airlines on A320s and Hapag-Lloyd AG, using it on one ship since June 15.

Customers planning to start such services this year include Saudi Arabian Airlines, Tam SA, Hong Kong Airlines, Egypt Air and OAO Aeroflot. Airlines that have said they plan to use the services, without indicating exactly when, include Qantas Airways Ltd. and Kingfisher Airlines Ltd.

Ryanair Holdings Plc, Europe's largest low-cost operator, started using OnAir services for phone calls, e-mail and text messages on 20 of its planes in February 2009, with plans to expand to 50 in six months. In March 2010, the airline suspended the service after OnAir exercised a right to end the contract.

Neither side gave more detailed reasons for the break.

In the U.S., where OnAir doesn't have a presence, the chief provider of in-flight telephone and Internet services is AirCell LLC.

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