



Gaining The Advantage

In-Flight Entertainment & Connectivity (IFEC):

It will differentiate your aircraft from the rest.

by Brian J. Wilson

Whether you are in the business of charter, aircraft sales, aircraft management, or you are an owner/operator with a corporate aviation department, it's a fair guess that having a competitive edge is important to you.

For example, if aircraft charter was simply a commodities business, charter operators would tailor their passenger experiences to something akin to those offered by the low-cost airlines. As if to underline the fact, the paradigm shift in the last few years from an ideology that small-sized aircraft would suffice for charter and air taxi to unprecedented orders for larger aircraft and corporate airliners should serve to confirm that Charter is a value-based business.

The global economy is slowly recovering from one of the worst downturns in history and now - more than ever before - the corporate jet is viewed less as a luxury and more as a mobile business enabler.

It was only a few years ago that over-worked executives would endure a forced period of relaxation aboard their aircraft - a

safe haven where they couldn't be reached by associates and colleagues. Today, executives greet the crew with, "is the Wi-Fi working?". (If you doubt the importance of this, try talking to a colleague of mine who recently had to travel half way across the world with the internet down on their corporate aircraft!)

With the trend moving very much towards in-flight connectivity, the question needs to be asked by any aircraft owner or charter operator as to when the last time they took a good look at their entertainment system was?

Does it consist of a few monitors, a DVD and a moving map? In case you haven't noticed, in the past year, in-flight connectivity and entertainment went mainstream, and aircraft not properly outfitted will be left sitting on the tarmac. [I am reminded at this juncture of a past *Rent-A-Car* commercial where the competition standardized their fleet with GPS navigation units. The frustrated CEO of the company left behind responded by saying, "We have a navigation system... It's in the glove compartment and it's called a map!"]

IFEC - THE DIFFERENTIATOR

Maybe you operate a charter fleet and your charter utilization rates are flat, or maybe you own an aircraft and are trying to sell but it isn't getting the attention you'd hoped for. Is it possible that you are failing to providing the right level of 'passenger experience' that truly differentiates your aircraft from the rest?

For those who are looking to retrofit their aircraft with a new interior, now is the perfect time to look at In-Flight Entertainment & Connectivity (IFEC).

The acronym 'IFEC' is very new, and clearly defines that these two features are on a converging path. IFEC grabbed most of the headlines at the latest Interior Expo show in Hamburg, Germany, and later at EBACE in Geneva. Joint venture announcements between leading IFE companies and Connectivity companies to align their strategies to specialize in IFEC upgrades have also been made during the year.

Entertainment and connectivity are two key selling-points for capturing corporate clients. Clearly they are emerging as the leading attraction after aircraft price and interior size.

IT'S ALL IN THE APP

Today's passengers are entertaining themselves by bringing their laptops, tablets and smart phones on board aircraft, and I imagine they are not only frustrated by the fact they can't charge these devices but by the singularity of the device itself. The current trend is to integrate these devices with the IFEC systems.

The trend-setter for this integration is applications. The architecture for the hard-

ware has also changed from legacy units (that "switched" audio and video commands) to smart units which are software-driven. For simplicity, think of today's entertainment system just like your intranet system at work: each device has a pseudo IP address so when a touch-screen command is given the signal rides on a control bus and only "speaks" to the appropriate device. This is the same logic that allows your computer to know which printer to use, or where to send an email.

Tomorrow's passengers will walk on board the aircraft and use their personal devices to control anything from the IFE system to the window shades as long as they have the right applications loaded. Avionics shops and equipment manufacturers are working together to provide these applications free of charge, or at a very nominal rate

(\$20-\$40). The concept is to allow the user to enjoy the same comfort and convenience in the air as they do in their home or office.

ENRICHING THE PASSENGER EXPERIENCE

There's nothing more re-enforcing than having your own personal experiences to relate to when researching a project, benchmarking your business, or defining the level of customer service your company provides.

We have probably all experienced a flight where we forgot to bring along our favorite book or magazine and the airline had no mode of entertainment or connectivity - thus we were forced to read the airline magazine while periodically staring at the repetitive time to destination (TTD) moving map on the screen. Three-to-four hours later, we reached our destination feeling like half a day had been wasted!

The truth is that however much more comfort a business aircraft might offer over a commercial airline, the feeling left with the passenger will be much the same - whether for corporate or charter passengers - if the aircraft they are flying on is not properly outfitted.

I am aware of one charter operator that lost full-fare and future bookings because the client - a leading entertainer - was frustrated by the malfunctioning IFE system on board the aircraft they had chartered.

The entertainer's response may have been different if a mobile device had allowed him to review over 100 of the latest films, control the volume and lower the cabin temperature without leaving his seat - all of this being possible while receiving an incoming call to his cell phone. While the call is answered, the movie is paused on the portable device, and an email is then sent to his party at his destination.

Such technology exists, and allows passengers to arrive refreshed, satisfied and



informed at their destination. Advances in technology have brought connectivity to the smaller airframes with a price-point acceptable to anyone who feels the need to stay connected. IFEC upgrades are also less labor intensive resulting in cost savings to the customer and reduced downtime.

Although there are systems available that deliver streaming media through the internet connection, industry research has found the majority of business jet travelers would be content if they could just view their email, SMS text message and do some light web surfing. Simply by enabling passengers to communicate with colleagues and family, do a little work and watch a feature film could make all the difference to the passenger experience.

IT'S IN THE CLOUDS

So what does an iPad, a server and an internet connection provide you with exactly? Well if it's the right combination of hardware, software and applications you will have a complete IFEC system capable of doing anything from controlling the cabin temperature to watching Live TV.

Cloud computing (the logical computational resources (data, software) accessible via a computer network (through WAN or Internet, etc.) rather than from a local computer) simply allows anyone with an internet connection to interact with content on virtual servers anywhere in the world. Imagine passengers flying on an aircraft with a pre-loaded iPad either provided by the charter company, or by their own personal device from which they could access a video library like NetFlix and watch whatever movie they selected.

The movie could then either be viewed on the personal device or the existing monitor - even in High Definition (HD). Maybe a passenger is less interested in watching movies (having forgotten to order flowers for that special someone), or is curious to know the points of interests or restaurants (business lunch/dinner reservation) at their destination town. All can be tended to from the comfort of the aircraft seat.

On the business side using a computer based on cloud technology has your apps, documents and settings all stored safely in a virtual server. So if you started numerous projects on your desktop computer while at work, you could access and finish these same projects while in-flight, using your laptop.

Let's imagine you are on a business trip and your computer is lost, stolen or damaged. Are you aware that you can simply borrow a business associate's computer (or purchase a new one), log on to the internet and all your files, pictures and contacts will be restored on an IFEC system?



APPLICATIONS ARE A KEY TO IFEC MOVING FORWARD

The chances are that most business travelers utilizing Business Aviation are using a simple form of cloud computing already... if you have Gmail, or access your email account via a web address, you will be using cloud computing - but have you explored the full potential of cloud computing aboard the company/charter aircraft?

CHARTER AND FRACTIONAL IFEC SPECIFICS

Fractional and charter companies are keenly aware that their clients expect to remain connected and entertained wherever they are. Research has found a direct correlation between the length of the flight and the demand for connectivity.

Flights averaging two or three hours (or longer) seems to be the benchmark, so it's not surprising that companies in the United States and the Middle East exceed their European rivals in the percentage of fleets currently outfitted with IFEC. (One leading charter company reported a 10% increase in utilization rates for aircraft outfitted with connectivity as clients specifically asked for this feature when booking.) On average, 70% of charter flights are made for business purposes and connectivity is seen as a vital tool for growing companies and their leadership.

Today's IFEC products are very scalable, compact, lightweight and can be tailored to meet your needs and price point. In the case that you find the speed or coverage of your

high-speed data system does not suffice due to higher than anticipated usage or new routing for your fleet, a simple change of antenna will increase the speed and coverage area. The legacy platform remains the same.

The same principle applies to today's entertainment systems. Let's assume passenger feedback about the IFEC system indicates they prefer to have more media selections to view on the monitors. You could simply add another Blu-ray player, juke box or media player and the software change could be loaded in the field. Older systems will likely have required the switch panel legends to be removed and shipped for modification, literally grounding the aircraft.

Passengers are not the only people to benefit from having connectivity on board. Imagine how the crew could communicate with the home-base. Pilots have a multitude of features from which to draw - from charts to real-time weather updates. Last minute changes on routing or passenger manifestos can quickly be sent from the home base to the crew too.

One of the greatest benefits of today's applications is that the crew can be contacted on their personal or business smart phone/tablet just like they could be on the ground thereby eliminating any concerns that additional communication equipment or software must be purchased. Further, there is no need for protocol or procedures to be changed.

The IFE server can even store the aircraft manuals, documentation and minimum equipment lists vital to making a decision on departure for Part 135 operators.

THE KEY TO AN UPGRADE

It is essential to make sure when considering an upgrade to your aircraft/fleet that you pick a shop with testimonials from other satisfied customers. The shop you select should handle all the facets of the project from the equipment to the design, installation and activation of the service. Further, make sure the shop provides an intuitive operators’ manual so the passengers understand how the system works and can fully benefit from all of the features.

The billing for the services can be used in a variety of ways depending on your business model. One idea for charter operators is to purchase vouchers that allow passengers some free air-time and data access - once they exceed this limit, they would pay. Another idea is to add a premium to the charter price allowing passengers unlimited access. Alternatively, you could just add the

actual charges to the invoice at the end of the flight. Service providers have implemented the software to provide real-time charges to the account.

Installation costs and return on investment are two figures any CFO will want to review before making a business decision - but I would caution that IFEC is a “must have” feature to differentiate your aircraft/fleet from that of your competitors.

Having taken the time to review the websites of a dozen top charter operators from North America to the Middle East, I was astounded to discover that only one mentioned the operator offered Wi-Fi on board.

Common features listed under the travel/passenger experience menus listed the usual company attributes - including modern fleet, great service, luxurious interiors and club cards. I might not be a marketing expert by trade, but even I can see a marketing niche exists to revise these menus to really capture the reader’s attention - a fleet that is outfitted with IFEC. Better yet, direct the client to click on the ‘passenger experience’ link and have a short video demonstrating the features and

benefits of IFEC.

I might not be a business mogul, but if I had actually been looking to charter an aircraft for the first time, or looking to see what the competition was providing, a passenger experience demonstration using IFEC would have been my differentiator!

► **Brian Wilson oversees all activities related to Banyan Air Services’ avionics department – including sales promotions, aircraft avionics installations, bench and line troubleshooting, engineering and used avionics component sales. His avionics career started 30 years ago, when he joined the U.S. Navy as an Avionics Technician. Wilson has also worked at Midcoast Aviation, Raytheon, Bombardier/Learjet and most recently at Jet Aviation in West Palm Beach where he headed the Avionics, Engineering and Interior departments. He also serves on the Rockwell Collins Dealer Board. He can be reached at 954-232-3606 or email bwilson@banyanair.com**

