

## SITA AND ONAIR

**S**ITA does a lot when it comes to connecting people in, around and between airports. The private member (primarily airline) owned company is focused on IT and communications solutions that enable airline, aircraft, airport and passenger-related applications throughout the air transport industry. SITA began providing operational aircraft communications in 1985 and added passenger communications in the early 1990's, when aircraft satellite communications systems were first introduced.

Already pioneers in connecting, adapting and streamlining essential passenger services such as sales and distribution, pricing, reservations, baggage tracking, departure control and more, top brass at SITA long ago noticed a trend toward the creation of services that play into the growing consumer pull for online services in the palm.

In response to this consumer demand SITA, back in the early 2000's, began work on GSM (Global Systems for Mobile Communications) services. Although the project began as a singular endeavor, a partnership was eventually formed with one of the world's largest aircraft manufacturers.

"The decision was taken to work with Airbus on the next generation of cabin connectivity, which led to the formation of OnAir in 2005," explains Damien McCormack, director of satellite services at SITA. "OnAir and SITA work together in a number of areas, but in particular on the development of on-board passenger services, exploiting the increasing sophistication of mobile devices as well as the increasing availability of passenger connectivity options."

OnAir.jpg: A joint venture between SITA and Airbus, OnAir CEO Ian Dawkins feels they are in a "very strong position" to become a leading inflight connectivity solutions provider.

Having parents like SITA and Airbus certainly doesn't hurt a young connectivity service provider trying to make a name for itself in a market that offers a tipping scale of success and failure.

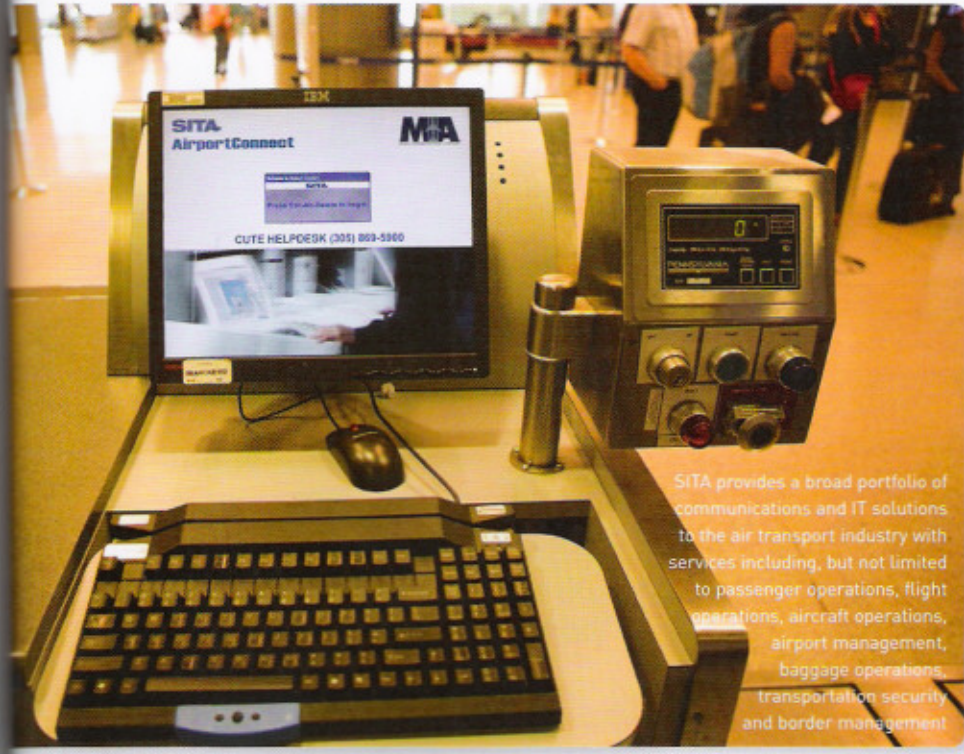
One of the main challenges in making connectivity work for airlines, whether it is passenger or operational connectivity, is having a solution installed and operating consistently throughout a fleet, a sub-fleet, or at very least a popular route. This way, passengers become accustomed to the service, begin to trust the service, and hopefully will use the service. Another hurdle, one might say, is installation. Oftentimes money, red tape and aircraft downtime can turn cash-strapped airlines off a deal that would otherwise be cleared for takeoff.

"I think at the moment we are in a very strong position," says Ian Dawkins, newly appointed OnAir CEO and former vice-president and head of future programs for Airbus. "It's important for airlines to have something from the OEM because the testing and certification process is then compliant with the aircraft. From the SITA side, there is a lot of opportunity. SITA has a lot of systems with the airlines and the airport operators and so what we are really trying to do is look at how we can better utilize the activities of SITA to get an end to end connection from the ground to the aircraft that is seamless, and create portals that provide the most appropriate services in the most efficient and effective way for the passenger."

The idea, says Dawkins is to make it so that the passenger doesn't even know that they've left the ground from a connectivity point of view. Of course, seamless service is something that is also affected by bandwidth use. Too little bandwidth operation and the system slows down. OnAir was the pioneer integrator of Air Transport SwiftBroadband



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SITA provides a broad portfolio of communications and IT solutions to the air transport industry with services including, but not limited to passenger operations, flight operations, aircraft operations, airport management, baggage operations, transportation security and border management

and has been successfully using the L-band Inmarsat4 generation of satellites, which together with Inmarsat's newly announced KA satellites future-proof OnAir services for the next 25 years. When a passenger is texting or emailing, a few second's delay in sending the message is hardly noticeable. However, attempting to download a movie from the Internet to watch inflight could have very bad results, not only in terms of a poor viewing experience, but also for other passengers who are sharing bandwidth with the individual who is downloading.

"I think the technology we are using today is the optimal and most cost efficient technology for airlines," Dawkins maintains. "Just because we are not proactively selling

KU-band does not mean that we would not offer a KU solution if a customer wanted it. We will continue to focus is on what we have today, while keeping an eye on the future of KA-band secure in the knowledge that if we need to integrate those new bearers, we will have SITA beside us integrating the flight deck safety service element, much as SITA has done today for the Inmarsat-4 satellites."

Regardless of equipment and signal types, connected service for passenger and crew remains a large investment for an airline. It also remains one that, despite the best intentions and airtight business models, will not result in massive return on investment in a hurry. Just as much as airlines dif-

fer in their passenger services and branding initiatives, so too do they differ in their expectations of what offering connectivity will bring them.

"Passenger use is definitely on the rise and airlines using it are seeing a reasonable take rate," says Dawkins. "Revenue will all depend on strategy. Some airlines want to use connectivity to enhance their brand and other airlines are looking at how they can utilize other services (e.g. inflight diagnosis of medical conditions to determine if emergency landing is really required). They all have different models for what they want to do. At the end of the day, the airlines haven't yet realized how to exploit the full use of connectivity."