

Mobile technology to step up a gear

By Alastair Carthew

The use of mobile technology on the ground and in flight will increase substantially in the next two to three years after a slow start, according to SITA's 10th Airline IT Trends Survey 2008.

The survey found that while results in recent years showed inflight communications such as SMS, e-mail and internet access had not evolved as quickly as expected, partly because of a lack of mature technology, airlines are now planning a big increase in on board connectivity and services.

SITA chief executive officer, Francesco Violante, told *Orient Aviation*: "The convergence of wireless and internet is shifting passenger expectations of the cabin experience and opening up productivity opportunities for the crew."

On the broader issue of how new technologies will drive change, Violante said: "The pace of change will continue to accelerate. We are standing on the threshold of a new era in the air transport industry with the arrival of wireless broadband such as 3G and wiMaX [fourth generation, or 4G wireless access]."

"We will see a 'mobile web' integrating with customer applications that will be used for distributing products and servicing customers."

The survey looked into six inflight mobile communications areas: voice calls, text messaging, GPRS (BlackBerry), instant laptop messaging, internet access

and email access. Its findings were:

Mobile phone voice calls: 8% of airlines have this capacity, but in the next three years 42% of airlines planned to introduce the technology. Fifty percent said they had no plans to do so.

Text messaging: 8% of carriers provide the service while 54% plan to introduce it.

GPRS: 51% of airlines are planning to introduce it into service. Three percent are already using the technology.

Instant laptop messaging: only 4% of carriers operate this service, but 53% plan to introduce it in coming years.

Internet access: there is 4% usage at present with another 55% of airlines hoping to adopt the service in the next three years.

Email access: again 4% of carriers offer the service with

another 52% planning to adopt it.

When it came to funding the onboard services, charging for internet access was by far the most popular method.

The survey found that a combined 46% of airlines planned to introduce some form of charging over the next three years. Currently 3% charge for this service.

The situation changes significantly when considering free internet access with sponsor funding through advertising.

Only 1% of carriers use this method now with another 32% adopting it in the foreseeable future. Twenty four percent of airlines plan totally free internet access. Currently just 1% offer the service.

The survey also looked at services airlines may introduce on

board. Internet connectivity to support staff was a possibility viewed by 43% of airlines while retail marketing on mobile phones was seen as a plus by 40%.

Most of the future options centred on ground services such as the Bar Coded Boarding Pass [BCBP] 72%; staff internet services (roster management) 55%; e-payment by mobile phone 55%; and fast check-in through BCBP 48%.

Looking at passenger self service on the ground, the survey found the proportion of passengers using the internet to check-in (18%) has caught up with those using kiosks (17%). By 2009, SITA predicts internet check-in will leap to around 30% of all check-in services while kiosk check-in growth will slow to around 26%.

Mobile phone check-in, around 1% in 2008, will grow to around 6.5% in 2009.

Violante said evidence suggested the more people fly the more likely they are to use self service. In 2007, 35% of tickets worldwide were sold online.

He identified baggage as the main reason people did not use self service, suggesting that "handlers adjust their infrastructure and processes to offer effective baggage treatment in a self service world".

More than 200 airlines took part in the survey which examined the key trends of IT, the environment, self service, the adoption of emerging technology, travel distribution and security. ■



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Francesco Violante
Chief Executive
SITA