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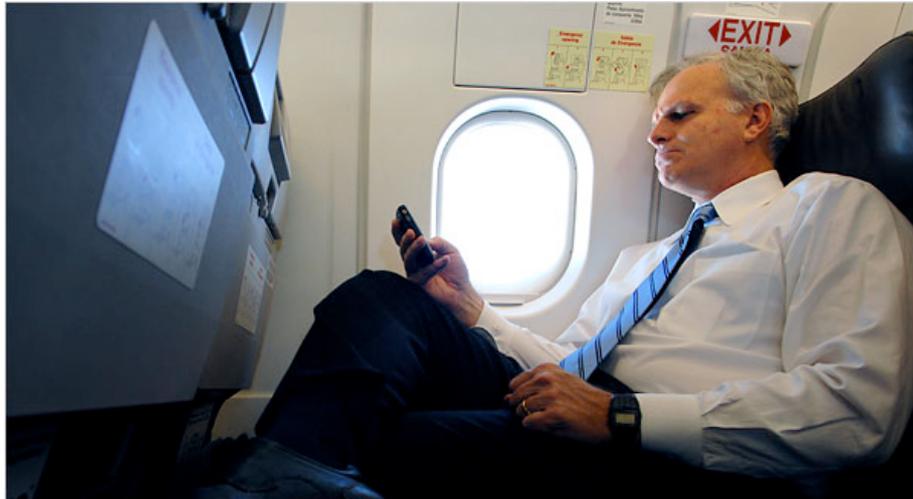
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Web Access and E-Mail on Flights



Robert Stolarik for The New York Times

On Tuesday, JetBlue will begin offering a free e-mail and instant messaging service on one of its aircraft. David Neeleman, the company's founder, demonstrated the new service.

By SUSAN STELLIN
Published: December 7, 2007

Passengers may soon hear a new in-flight announcement: "You can now log on."

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Peter Wynn Thompson for The New York Times

Aircell's chief executive, Jack Blumenstein, with antenna gear that will be placed on the exterior of planes. Aircell has already arranged partnerships with American Airlines and Virgin America.

Readers' Comments

"It's a horrendous idea for personal assistants. The downtime we get when the boss is stuck in a plane is invaluable."

Starting next week and over the next few months, several United States airlines will test Internet service on their planes.

On Tuesday, JetBlue Airways will begin offering a free e-mail and instant messaging service on one of its planes, while American Airlines, Virgin America and Alaska Airlines plan to offer broader Web access in coming months, probably at a cost around \$10 a flight.

"I think 2008 is the year when we will finally start to see in-flight Internet access become available," said Henry Harteveldt, an analyst with Forrester Research, "but I suspect the rollout domestically will take place in a very measured way." "In a few years time," he added, "if you get on a flight that doesn't have Internet access, it will be like walking into a hotel room that doesn't have TV."

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The airlines' goal is to turn their planes into the equivalent of wireless hot spots once they reach cruising altitude. These services will not be available on takeoff or landing.

Virgin America even plans to link the technology to its seat-back entertainment system, enabling passengers who are not traveling with laptops or smart phones to send messages on a flight.

The network can potentially be used as well for communications within the plane, like food and drink orders — something Virgin America already does with its seat-back system.

While the technology could allow travelers to make phone calls over the Internet, most carriers say they currently have no such plans. Many travelers find the prospect of phone calls much less palatable than having a seatmate quietly browsing e-mail.

Onboard phone calls are "one of those 'just because you can doesn't mean you should' types of technologies," Mr. Harteveltdt said. "The last thing you want is to be in a crowded tube at 35,000 feet for two or three hours with some guy going on and on about his trip to Vegas."

While companies have been promising airborne Internet service for years — the aircraft maker [Boeing](#) offered a system that was adopted by a few international carriers but is now defunct — JetBlue will be the first carrier in the United States to offer access to the Web, at least in a limited way.

Yet if a test flight on Wednesday is any indication of the challenges that airlines and their technology partners face in trying to offer Internet connections at 35,000 feet and 500-plus miles an hour, travelers can initially expect travails that recall the days of dial-up access — slower and more prone to glitches than connections on the ground.

"Sometimes you just have to put things out there and see what happens when people try to use it," said Nate Quigley, chief executive of LiveTV, a JetBlue subsidiary responsible for the airline's Internet service as well as its in-flight entertainment system. "We'll find the bugs and eventually get them worked out."

After years of false starts, LiveTV is one of several companies aiming to introduce in-flight Internet access in 2008. LiveTV's air-to-ground cellular system, however, functions only over the continental United States. It also involves a hand-off process between cell sites as a plane travels across the country.

Since LiveTV's proprietary network uses spectrum space licensed from the [Federal Communications Commission](#) that was once reserved for seat-back phones, it does not interfere with cellphone service on the ground. But the hand-off process does create the potential for the airborne equivalent of a dropped call — a problem that occurred during the test on Wednesday.

It is also one of the reasons JetBlue is not charging passengers to log on.

"Why charge for something that doesn't work very well yet?" said David G. Neeleman, JetBlue's founder and chairman, a self-described BlackBerry addict.

JetBlue and LiveTV are betting that their messaging capability is more important to travelers than surfing the Web, which requires more bandwidth and therefore a fee.

But other companies are convinced that plenty of travelers will pay for more robust Web access. That view is bolstered by a recent survey by Forrester Research that found that 26 percent of leisure travelers would pay \$10 for Internet access on a two-to-four-hour flight and 45 percent would pay that on a flight longer than four hours.

"I think that the airlines will see that the demand is there," Mr. Harteveltdt said, adding that besides sharing the revenue from these fees, airlines could potentially earn money from advertising on these services or use the cabin's Wi-Fi network to enhance their

The New York Times

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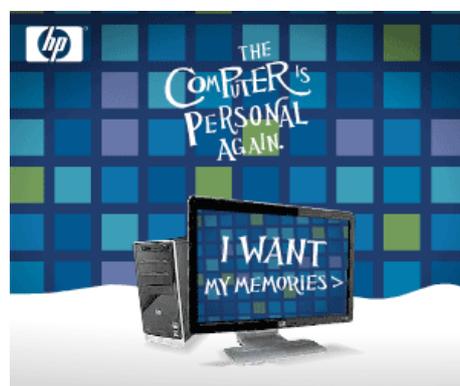
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operations.

“The airlines can justify the cost if only for their own operational efficiencies,” said Jack Blumenstein, chief executive of Aircell, which is developing its own air-to-ground cellular network.

Aircell has already arranged partnerships with American Airlines and Virgin America and plans to install its equipment on an American 767-200 this month.

The airlines would not predict a date when it would become available to fliers, but Mr. Blumenstein said it would probably be ready to go by early spring.

A third company competing to offer airborne Internet service is Row 44, which is developing a satellite-based system that will also function over oceans and internationally, though the plan is to offer service in North America first, said John Guidon, Row 44’s chief executive.

So far, Row 44 has signed a deal with Alaska Airlines, and Mr. Guidon hopes to have the equipment installed on a plane, either with Alaska or another partner, by the second quarter of 2008. That schedule essentially fits Alaska’s plan.

“We’re going to test the system on a single aircraft in the spring,” an Alaska Airlines spokeswoman, Amanda Tobin Bielawski, said, “and based on the outcome of that trial, our plan is to equip our entire fleet by the end of 2009.”

One potential pitfall, from a regulatory and technical standpoint, is that the connectivity would make it possible to initiate voice-over-Internet phone calls using services like Skype. American and Alaska will not allow phone calls with their services, but Charles Ogilvie, director of in-flight entertainment and partnerships for Virgin America, said, “We’re definitely not automatically ruling anything out.”

That may send chills down the spines of frequent travelers, many of whom are strongly opposed to the prospect of dozens of chatty passengers in a confined space, which was one of the reasons the F.C.C. decided against lifting the ban on cellphone calls in planes.

“I absolutely would not be in favor of voice,” said Jeff Haber, a real estate lawyer in Los Angeles, adding, though, that he would like Internet access in the air, even if he had to pay for it. “One of the things that’s nice about airplanes is that people aren’t on cellphones all the time.”

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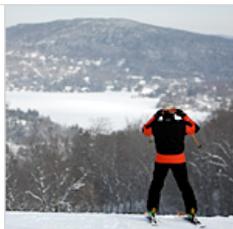
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