Airtext nickel messages are a passenger favorite

by Kerry Lynch

The era of the five-cent call is back, with Airtext+ texts that cost a nickel apiece.

Airborne messaging specialist Send Solutions (Booth N1329) is expanding the capabilities of the Airtext+ Iridium satcom, along with the reach of the system to include new fleet and FBO customers.

The Airtext+ system, which enables passengers to send and receive text messages while in flight anywhere in the world for five cents apiece, has been enhanced with a new "Big Data" capability to facilitate high-speed transmission of data-intensive images and crew access to Digital Automatic Terminal Information Service (D-ATIS). With Big Data, the system can be internally switched to a high-speed datalink to enable passengers and crew to send and receive documents and pictures. Pilots can also request D-ATIS information.

"These enhancements to our services are just the latest in the ongoing evolution of customer-requested communication capabilities that we offer at extraordinary savings," said Send Solutions CEO David Gray.

Airtext began by offering a simple Iridium-based text-messaging capability that could accommodate up to 16 simultaneous users, Gray noted. Introduced in 2014, Airtext is designed as a lightweight (1.2 pounds), low-cost satcom system that can accommodate a range of aircraft, including smaller types. The system connects iOS and Android personal devices to the Iridium satellite network.

Send Solutions built on that with Airtext+, which incorporates a bigger modem to enable phone calls as well as increased capacity to handle 64 concurrent users. Voice calls are available through a prepaid Iridium sim card.

"Now we're taking it up a notch with high-speed graphics and digital capabilities so that passengers and crew members can use visual media to ensure precise and accurate understanding of their messaging," he said.

The Big Data capabilities also can be used for service and maintenance functions, Gray added. "In the event of an in-flight anomaly, the pilot could take a picture of an illuminated warning light and send the image to a maintenance technician. Or a flight plan could be filed while en route to expedite the time spent on the ground when an itinerary change is made while airborne."

D-ATIS has been typically limited to airliners or larger aircraft with high-end avionics suites. Airtext+ now can use Iridium satellites to request the D-ATIS data from the FAA and show it on a personal electronic device such as a tablet-based electronic flight bag that is used for other information in the cockpit, such as weather imagery, moving-map displays and charts, Send Solutions added.

Along with the Airtext+ enhancements, the company is growing its customer base with new targeted programs. During last summer's EAA AirVenture show, Send Solutions announced a new FleetLink program, designed for fleet management and messaging. Fractional ownership provider PlaneSense is the launch customer. ATI Jets, a charter service and repair station in El Paso, Texas, has become the newest customer, installing Airtext FleetLink on board its Learjets. ATI operates a mix of eight Learjet 60s and 55s and a 35.

With Fleetlink, crews are able to access international Metars and Tafs, send and receive messages and communicate with dispatcher computers.

In addition, FleetLink detects when the aircraft reaches flying speed and generates an airborne message and then monitors progress of the flight to landing, providing a summary of each trip. This function will enable Airtext users to collect data on hours and cycles flown and identify maintenance issues, as well as track position of Airtext-equipped aircraft

Along with the fleet program, Send Solutions is rolling out FBOlink with Wilson Air Center as its "beta launch" customer. Wilson Air is implementing the system at its FBOs in Memphis and Chattanooga, Tennessee; Charlotte, North Carolina and Houston.

With the program, an FBO can receive text messages from the aircraft via the Iridium network. "It can be generated at any point in the flight, taking the burden off pilots who previously had to wait to communicate over radio until they were within VHF range," said Wilson Air founder Bob Wilson. "With FBOlink, pilots can communicate in-flight changes to itineraries or accommodate unique passenger requests during the relative calm of en route cruise segments."

Messages sent via FBOlink incorporate the aircraft tail number, type and pilot's name. At the FBO computer terminal, a pop-up box alerts CSRs to incoming messages. ❑