

Will iPads revolutionize in-flight entertainment?

January 14 2013, by Nancy Trejos

Paul Tamburelli prefers flying United Airlines or British Airways when traveling internationally. It's not just because of the price and schedule. Tamburelli, a vice president of government relations for a Phoenix company, likes that flights on those airlines aren't too boring.

"Their at-seat entertainment systems with movies, TV shows, music and games make even the longest flight bearable," he said.

His least favorite option is on [American Airlines'](#) MD-80 aircraft "with nothing but movies on my [iPad](#) for a four-hour flight," he said.

Travelers are increasingly demanding that [airlines](#) provide in-flight entertainment systems that replicate or even transcend the TV experience they have on the ground.

Eager to breed loyalty, airlines are responding with more elaborate entertainment options. No sooner have they loaded their planes with Wi-Fi and electronic hardware in seat backs and armrests than they're turning to handing out tablets loaded with entertainment or installing wireless systems to stream content onto passengers' personal devices.

"This is a really fluid time," said Michael Planey, an [airline industry](#) analyst at H&M Planey Consultants. "There are multiple paths being taken by individual airlines and companies in trying to find a niche in the market," to lure new customers and retain existing ones.

It used to be that airlines did little more than hand out earphones for passengers to watch a movie on a screen dropped down from the ceiling or, on certain aircraft, embedded in the seat back in front of them. Now airlines are offering an extensive range of entertainment options, from expanded video content to unique online offerings.

In-flight entertainment "used to be restricted to a movie, which just played every two hours on a loop," said Adam Weissenberg, vice chairman and leader of Deloitte's U.S. travel, hospitality and leisure practice. "There are now on-demand, massive libraries of movies both old and new, television shows, news programming, taped sports, video games, huge music libraries, etc., and not just in first and business class, but also in coach."

The carriers are experimenting with new ways to deliver the content. Some are lending tablets for the duration of a flight. OpenSkies, a subsidiary of [British Airways](#), will distribute iPads loaded with more than 70 hours of programming on its new flights between New York and Paris. Israel's El Al Airlines offers iPads loaded with movies, television series, games and music channels in business class on some flights. American Airlines issues Samsung Galaxy Tabs in premium cabins on some transcontinental and international flights. All are offering the devices for free, but some, such as Australian low-cost carrier Jetstar, charge for them.

Other airlines are installing wireless systems with a variety of programming that passengers can stream onto the electronic devices they carry on with them.

"Just go back a couple of years and there weren't any tablets period, and now we're talking about putting them on aircraft," said Russ Lemieux, executive director of the Airline Passenger Experience Association. "The technology is changing on the ground. (Passengers') expectations

for what they can get on an airplane are changing. The industry is trying to meet those changing demands of the consumer, of the passenger to the best of their ability, given constraints and budgets."

The constraints are largely financial. Outfitting a typical wide-body plane with seat-back screens can cost \$3 million or more per plane, airline executives and consultants say.

Emirates Airline, for example, spends an average of \$15,000 per seat on embedded screens. For an Airbus A380 with 517 seats, the total cost to install seat-back monitors would be approximately \$7.8 million. And that doesn't include the content.

"It is the most expensive thing after the engines," said Patrick Brannelly, vice president of product, publishing, digital and events for Emirates. "It is a ginormous investment by the airline. But it's one that's paid off, because the airline has done very well."

Maintaining the equipment also adds to the cost. Brannelly said the airline is always thinking about what the "next generation" of the technology will be.

"You have to be two years ahead," he said. "It is a continual evolution, with the occasional revolution."

Emirates has had TV screens on every seat in every class for more than two decades. But the product has grown along with the airline. Over the years, the screens have gotten larger. First-class seat-backs now have 27-inch screens, while business class has 20-inch screens and economy has 12.1-inch screens. The content, too, has gotten more elaborate.

In 2007, the airline moved to widescreen and high-definition programming, and the number of channels jumped to 1,400 from 600.

Mary Kirby, editor-in-chief of the Airline Passenger Experience Association magazine, said most carriers are still ordering seat-back embedded screens for their existing long-haul aircraft. "It's almost like buying a car without a radio," she said.

But the advent of in-flight Wi-Fi has opened the door to new entertainment options, especially on shorter flights, she said. Airline Wi-Fi provider Gogo now operates on 1,600 commercial aircraft domestically. Row 44 provides Wi-Fi to 440 aircraft worldwide.

Some carriers are exploiting that connectivity to offer more programming. Southwest, for instance, this summer began wireless live television though Row 44 that passengers can stream on their own devices. Virgin America recently started offering YouTube programming.

Several companies are coming up with other strategies to entertain fliers.

Lufthansa Systems has developed BoardConnect, which lets passengers stream movies, see destination information and even read menus and engage in duty-free shopping on their personal devices or on carrier-provided devices.

Gogo stores movies and TV shows on its servers for Wi-Fi equipped planes. Passengers can buy a TV show for 99 cents or a movie for \$3.99 and watch it on their personal devices for up to 24 hours after they land. US Airways, Delta and American have signed on for the service on some of their flights.

Norbert Mueller, head of program management for Lufthansa Systems' BoardConnect, said carriers in Europe and Asia have for years equipped both their short- and long-haul aircraft with in-flight entertainment options. But now he's seeing more U.S. carriers seeking to offer

entertainment even on short flights.

"We are seeing demand from airlines to offer something like that to differentiate themselves from their competitors," he said.

Australia's Jetstar is one of several airlines that offer passengers pre-loaded iPads for in-flight entertainment.

Handing out tablets or offering streaming on personal devices is cheaper for airlines. Using iPads might cost about \$600 each, vs. the thousands of dollars a seat-back screen would cost.

"They can distribute these with relatively minimal disruption," Planey said. "It's a low-cost, low-investment, no-installation option."

The strategy is also appealing because personal devices are not as heavy as hundreds of seat-back systems. And a lighter plane translates into financial savings.

Rob Fyfe, CEO of Air New Zealand, said that for every 2 pounds of weight on a 12-hour flight from Auckland to Los Angeles, the plane burns about half a liter of fuel. So for every 2 pounds of weight removed from a wide-body aircraft on long-haul routes, the airline saves \$400 per year.

"There is an enormous economic incentive to reduce the weight of the systems," he said.

Air New Zealand has not resorted to handing out tablets. Instead, the airline recently signed on with Panasonic Avionics to try its new eXLite system, a seat-back screen that weighs just 3.2 pounds, less than half the usual weight.

Some airline executives say they would never give up on seat-back screens. Handing out tablets, said Brannelly, seems like a shortcut.

"Whether they are innovations or stopgaps is the big question," he said of the strategy. "There's nothing better than a TV already fixed there for you. Having to set up a tablet on your meal tray is not that convenient. I don't think you want to go from the embedded experience to that experience. I don't think that will ever compete."

And Kirby points out, the airline-owned tablets come with their own baggage. "There are headaches for the crew involved," she said. "They all have to be charged ... and updated with content."

Flight attendants also have to make sure passengers are abiding by Federal Aviation Administration restrictions on the use of electronic devices in-flight. Cameron King, an American Airlines spokesman, said flight attendants distribute the devices once they reach the altitude at which it is safe to turn them on and collect them before devices have to be turned off for landing.

Letting passengers stream content onto their own devices also has one major drawback. Hollywood studios are reluctant to let airlines give out pre-DVD movies for people to stream on devices they can take home with them. "It's such a revenue generator for them, and they're not ready to let it go," Kirby said.

Whichever strategy an airline chooses, chances are it is not making much money from it, experts say.

"I don't think airlines view (it) as a way to make money, but more as a way to build loyalty to the brand," Deloitte's Weissenberg said.

Most airlines don't charge for in-flight entertainment on long flights.

And it's too early to tell how many fee-weary passengers will be willing to pay for wireless streaming or tablet rentals.

If airlines' experience with Wi-Fi is any indication, travelers may take awhile to warm up to the new systems.

Gogo CEO Michael Small said on a typical flight, 6 percent or 7 percent of passengers pay for the Wi-Fi. He said that will increase as the technology improves and the bandwidth expands, providing faster connections.

Neil James, executive director of corporate sales and product management at Panasonic Avionics, said airlines can eventually turn in-flight entertainment systems into moneymakers if they take advantage of their captive audience for advertising or product sales, perhaps.

"That's a unique opportunity that the airlines really need to take advantage of," he said.

Lufthansa's Mueller has grand expectations for in-flight [entertainment systems](#) and thinks they will transform the flight experience. "The speed of the connectivity will change, so you can do more," he said.

He offered one idea: "You can have people comment on a movie on Facebook while they're watching it."

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Citation: Will iPads revolutionize in-flight entertainment? (2013, January 14) retrieved 26 June 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2013-01-ipads-revolutionize-in-flight.html>

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