

Have Phone, Will Travel?

Think using a wireless device during a flight is a good way to pass the time? Think again. Many airlines do not permit the use of wireless devices unless the plane is at the gate and the main cabin door is open. While safety is cited by airlines as the reason behind their policies, potential new services for which the airlines can charge passengers may also make wireless-exclusion policies beneficial to the airlines. Most airlines have in-flight telephone service, for which they can charge lofty fees to their captive audience. And now Boeing has announced agreements with three carriers—American, Delta, and United—that will bring high-speed data service to travelers for as much as \$20 an hour.

What do the wireless-device makers think about all this? "It is practically a non-issue since the existing wireless data networks operate in a very spotty way, or do not operate at all at 35,000 feet," says Ed Colligan, co-founder and chief operating officer of Handspring. "You can still use the devices to manage your mail or work on projects offline, and the device would update when you land and come back in coverage."

But the issue is evolving. Airline officials may not permit you to use your PDA even offline, as the device can be "pinged" by wireless towers. Pinging involves the transmission of a signal from a wireless tower to a device and is used to set location preferences and roaming designations—even when the user is not connecting to the Internet.

Which airlines prohibit the use of wireless PDAs during flight? We asked domestic and international airlines about their policies regarding PDA use during flight, and most (including

America West, American Airlines, Asiana Airlines, Horizon Air, Singapore Airlines, TWA, and US Airways) restrict PDA usage to before and after flight, with the cabin door open. United permits use of the devices when the aircraft is above 10,000 feet in altitude; SkyWest does not permit the use of PDAs on board its aircraft at any time.

"Since the scope of potential consumer devices is quite large, and potential impact on aircraft systems and use in-flight are untested and hence uncertified, limits on their in-flight use are both prudent and necessary," says Bob Mann, an independent airline industry analyst and consultant with R.W. Mann & Company, a consulting firm specializing in the airline industry.

He expects the situation will improve, though. "Future air navigation systems standards will be based on autonomous, independent, satellite surveillance and will require only a small fraction of the communications capabilities now being unveiled," he says. "Responding to customer desires, airlines and airframe manufacturers will continue to lead the charge to provide commercially attractive services, following rigorous testing and certification. The FAA mandates as a part of the airline certification process that airlines make and enforce policies on activities—such as use of communications devices—that may affect safety of flight."

"In the long run," says Colligan, "I think it will be very hard to control small wireless-device use unless the airlines ban all mobile device use on planes, something that would cause them to have a lot of unhappy passengers."

In the meantime, if you plan to work wirelessly while you travel, be sure you check with the airline about its policies. —Diana Ascher

news based on ticker symbols you've added, as well as alerts. When a news item or event takes place and it matches a ticker symbol or key word you've selected, the service sends a text message to the phone. "The Internet provides an almost overwhelming amount of information," says Seward. "The goal of mobile and wireless applications is to distill everything into a form that is accessible, relevant, and brief."

Eric Fulton, a computer consultant based in Rowlett, Texas, describes wireless Web access as "having the entire office in your pocket." Using a Palm Vx

equipped with an OmniSky wireless modem, he taps into CBS MarketWatch and MSNBC for financial news and stock prices. "You go to lunch or a meeting and you're no longer disconnected from your office or a PC," he says. "It's all about knowledge."

Of course, the volume of content available may intimidate users. Howard Manus, vice president of operations for BusinessWeek Online, suggests that investors learn what's available and focus on what adds value. "Sometimes, you have to ask yourself, 'How much is too much information?' Just because it

is available online and through mobile and wireless devices doesn't mean that it's useful. It's about finding the right information and putting it to work."

When that happens, many investors find themselves better prepared to deal with the intricacies of today's markets. Concludes Wu: "Mobile and wireless tools are helping investors become more savvy and make better decisions. Today, it's essential to have the right information at your fingertips." ◀

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