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World Cruise

Industry Review

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Royal renaissance

Cunard's Queen Victoriarules the waves

Crew calls

Rob Marjerison is vice president and COO of Wireless Maritime Services LLC. During his 20 years in the cruise industry, he has become a recognised authority on shipboard telecommunications. He told World Cruise Industry Review about the next stage in the development of onboard mobile communications.



Rob Marjerison

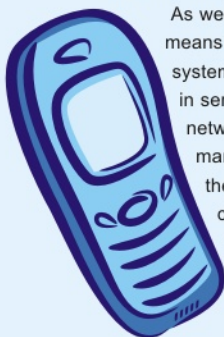
WCIR: The use of mobile phones by passengers onboard vessels has grown rapidly. What is the next step the cruise industry can take to leverage the capability of cellular infrastructure to deliver better services?

RM: We have seen innovations emerge in ship-board telecommunications that have been highly significant in bringing

mobile communications for passengers up to a level where they are on a par with the service quality they would experience on land. Today there is little if any difference between land-based and ship-board cellular services. While ship-board mobile services will continue to develop and evolve over time, just as they do on land, the emphasis now is on offering mobile services specifically designed for the crews working on these vessels.

WCIR: What kind of benefits would shipboard mobile communication services offer crew members?

RM: Knowing the way that crew members have traditionally made phone calls, we saw the opportunity to develop a mobile service that lets them use their own mobile handsets. They are able to buy a pre-paid SIM card, available onboard. They put this into their own phone and it gives them access to the same low call rates they enjoyed when using the existing wired line service.



As well as being more convenient, using a mobile means that there are no capacity issues. Our system is scalable and can be upgraded easily in service. Compared with the wired ship-board network, which must be shared with passengers, management and everyone else on the ship, the cellular network has a much greater capacity. Most ships have cellphone services, so for the crew it is easy to make the shift to using the pre-paid SIM cards.



Crew can buy SIM cards to insert into their own mobile phones.

WCIR: Using their own handsets obviously offers crew more functionality and more freedom when it comes to making and receiving calls, but are there other benefits to the onboard mobile service that make it particularly appealing to the cruise industry?

RM: Because crew can use their own handsets they can also use their own address book, which will already store their own important numbers. Unlike existing systems, they will also be able to receive calls. Perhaps the most crucial thing is that they will be able to send and receive text messages.

Cruise lines recognise that their crew plays a critical role in defining the quality of the passenger experience. Therefore, they seek to provide a good working environment to make the crew's life onboard as pleasant as possible. This is particularly important now given that there are more ships at sea than ever before, and more are coming into service each year. It can be competitive to recruit and retain the most experienced crew members.

Text messaging is an extremely important means of communication for the crew. There is ample evidence to indicate that keeping in touch with family and loved ones is very important to crew. Offering them a more convenient way to do that – at no extra cost in terms of the call charges crew members will pay – contributes to the crews' quality of life and reduces attrition.

It is also interesting to note that approximately 20% of seafarers come from the Philippines. This is relevant here because worldwide, the Philippines has among the highest, if not the highest, per capita use of text messaging.

WCIR: Have cruise line partners been involved at any stage in the development process, or do you have other ways to validate the performance of the technology before its launch?

RM: The system is currently in operation on two ships run by a major US cruise line. It has been operating successfully for some time, and we are now talking to several major cruise lines about deploying this technology on their vessels.

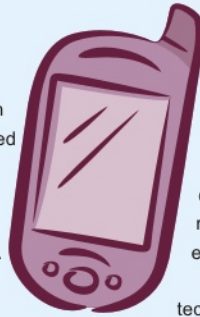
It has taken us some time to develop this capability and to ensure that it works properly in the unique environment of the

maritime industry. We had to make sure that we designed it with the needs of crew in mind, which meant we needed to understand what they wanted before we developed and deployed the service.

I've been on over 650 cruises, I've spent 12 years working on cruiseships, and I've sailed on every class of ship operated by every cruise line. Over that time I've seen first hand what crew members need, want and demand in terms of telecommunications. I'm very confident that this service is just what they are looking for. We expected a positive response, but the initial results have exceeded our expectations.

Cruise lines were not actively involved in the development of the technology. We rolled out a fully tested and functional product to our first client. It is too early to talk about the rate of uptake, but feedback from crew has been very positive.

WCIR: Although the technology is only in place on two cruise vessels and has not been widely experienced in a practical application, it seems that very concept of what the technology can deliver is generating a lot of interest. Given its obvious advantages over the current technological infrastructure for ship-board calls, how confident are you that the mobile service will catch on quickly in the cruise industry?



RM: I fully expect that this technology will become an industry-wide standard within the next 12 to 18 months. That may sound optimistic, but it's the market conditions that will drive this. Some cruise lines can see that there is demand for this service and will want to move forward rapidly. It is a great service to crew and helps to offset the expense to cruise lines of satellite bandwidth.

If we do see this kind of rapid growth in the use of the technology it will not be a problem in terms of providing the service. We can certainly accommodate it as it is a relatively straightforward process to add this capability to existing cellular networks on ships. The back-end infrastructure is in place, and though the shore-side infrastructure requires considerable upfront investment, it won't be terribly expensive to add the capability to additional ships.

I think we will soon see this technology spreading to more cruise vessels and it will have far-reaching and positive implications for the cruise lines and the crew onboard these ships. **wc**

Wireless Maritime Services LLC is the world leader in providing cellular voice and data services on ships at sea. Its solutions are engineered specifically for the maritime market. For more information, visit: www.cellularatsea.com

COMPANY
profile

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