

By Scott Fowler, Marketing Manager, Air BP

# FBO MARKETING AND THE INTERNET

*Reflections on the state of this art, and how companies can better utilize the Web*

**Editor's Note: Scott Fowler heads up the marketing efforts for fuel supplier Air BP. Following his marketing seminar for fixed base operators that was held at this year's Aviation Industry Expo, we asked him to share his insights on the state of marketing in our age of electronic communications, as well as how FBOs and others can better utilize the Internet for capturing and keeping customers. Here's his report.**

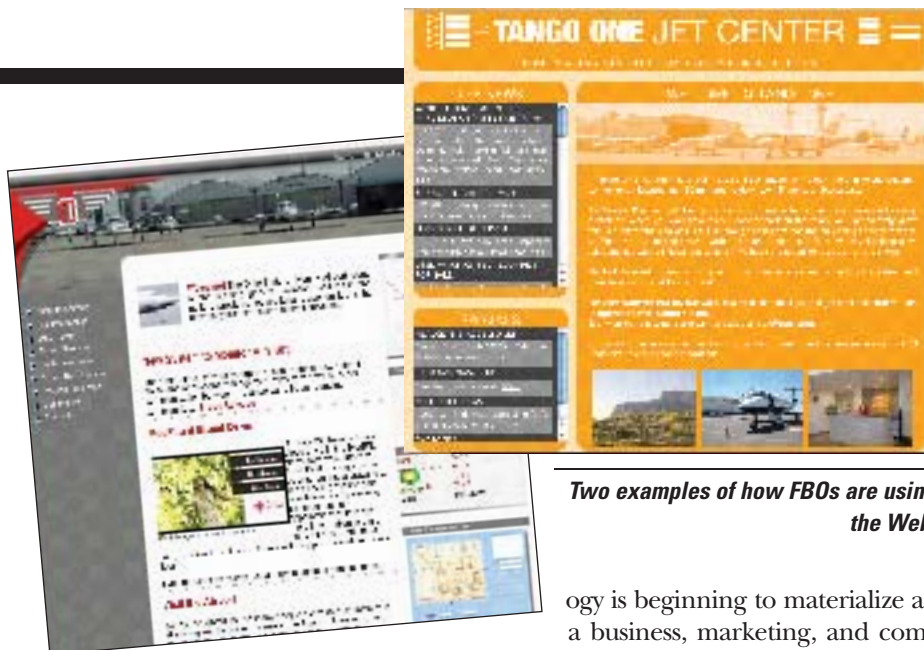
## THE NEW MARKETING TOOLS

In 1964, a little known English professor from Toronto, Marshall McLuhan, published a book entitled *Understanding Media*, which, in short, explored the future state of mass media, and its effects on our society and the individual.

As the chapters of the book unfold, you learn that McLuhan predicted the emergence of a 'new electronic media' which would develop into a 'global village' and improve the two-way interac-

tion between individuals and groups. It is unfortunate that Mr. McLuhan did not live to see what we now commonly refer to as the Internet, the very medium that would upend traditional media by changing the way people interact on a massive scale.

For nearly ten years, a large percentage of the world's industries and their customers have fueled and spurred the growth of the Internet by developing two-way, high-speed, real-time, scalable,



Two examples of how FBOs are using the Web.

and interactive tools that increase the ability to communicate with, attract, and maintain critical customer bases.

In turn, the business marketing tools that have evolved are now less of a proposition to solicit and more of an invitation to communicate. What started out as 'brochure-ware' websites of the '90s has migrated into a mind-boggling array of mechanisms that literally involve and engage customers more than ever before.

Oddly enough, it is the general aviation business that represents a very small percentage of industries that appear reluctant to utilize and fully embrace this powerful marketing medium. Stranger still is the observation that in an industry as inherently technological as aviation, it is only now that technol-

ogy is beginning to materialize as a business, marketing, and communications method.

"It is as if the marketing and flight planning aspects of technology did not follow operations in aviation," states Mike Eppley, business development manager, Ohio State University Airport, which provides FBO services. "The advancements in electronic media that have long been available and that everyone could benefit from, are just not exploited on the level they could

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be." (Poetic justice?)

There was a time when many in aviation were leery of the Web's two-way charms — with all this communication, thought many, why would anyone need to fly to meet customers to talk face-to-face? As it turns out, technology influenced the ease of global communications, providing a fertile ground for multi-cultural and economic exposure, which ultimately increased demand for flights, domestic and international.

Still, the current lack of technological sophistication can be narrowed down to a couple of key factors. Equally, it is only a few practical roadblocks that prevent the inevitable boom in technical marketing communications that will soon be realized in our GA world.

The key question is, who will be the leaders?

## CONNECTIONS, CONNECTIONS

With technology, connections mean everything. Remember the 14.4K modem? Simply stated, that transfer speed, 56 kilobytes per second, has migrated in a very short time to what

we now call high-speed Internet, which transfers megabytes of information packets at an equivalent to 1,000,000 bytes per second. Thanks to these transfer rates, we have convenience, real-time multimedia, and the advent of interaction through efficiency. Cases in point: the blog; online transactions; and real-time animated visuals and A/V (as in YouTube, unheard of a few short years ago).

This technology of high-speed connections has been a cornerstone of resistance to newer technology. The reason is not the lack of demand but lack of resources. There continue to be a number of geographic areas where an FBO remains an island away from high-speed access. Indeed, some will tell you that dial-up products, such as ISDN, are all that exist. They will also tell you a fax or a phone call continues to be better than a web-based product. As time catches up to high-speed availability, this trend will change and users will increase, along with more demand for web-based products.

#### FBO VIRTUAL REALITY: MANY TOOLS, ONE GOAL

Even when technology is fully embraced by FBOs, flight planning departments, and the like, another issue emerges: Both parties have access to many technological tools, but few that are comprehensive. Recent surveys show that flight departments and FBOs may use up to five different computer and

online-based tools to plan, investigate, review, and reserve aviation services. From a marketing perspective, this issue is profound.

Each year, as we see more and more computer and online offerings that revolve around planning, the marketing message can be easily watered down or even lost due to online ads that may not reach the intended audience. Add to the mix cost-effective but diluted rotating banner ads (one ad space, numerous advertisers, refreshed pages to view), the act of targeting the online customer takes on a new science. Equally difficult is the availability of ad space.

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media.**

"In the end, we have to cater to two distinct customers: the flight planner, be it a pilot or scheduler, and the FBO trying to attract them to their facilities," relates Paulo Santos, president of AirNav. "The advertiser's message is becoming richer now because there are more opportunities to blend ad messages and increasing content for flight planning."

Ultimately, our messages are destined to reach our targeted audience, wherever they may be. The increased use and non-use of technology only

makes the marketers' job more difficult. The trick, unless you have wildly unlimited budgets, is the balance of both traditional and electronic media. Audience targeting and powerful messages are crucial.

#### TIPS, TRICKS, RANTS, AND RAVES

So, what does all this mean?

First, the recipe for online and tech marketing success will hinge on the ability of FBOs to seek out web-based and technological tools. Tools which will target end-users' demand and current use in day-to-day business.

Second, of the (likely) multiple tools that end-users exploit, marketers must target a very short list of services that actually can be solicited on (or in). This does not mean we should limit our thinking to online services only. Strategic alliances with manufacturers of many types, including software/application service providers and others, have been and continue to be successful.

Third, as technology providers, increase subscribers and (fourth) develop more comprehensive tools. The FBO marketers will have an easier time to target media to solicit. On the other hand, as providers gain a foothold on larger users, there will be even more competition to own advertising space. And, if you secure exceptional ad space, be darned sure your ads are 'world class.' Bad online advertising is ugly and lacks class (hint: be careful with animation).

Fifth, and maybe the most important, we have to wait until they are all online. Unfortunately, connectivity availability on a geographic scale is not where it needs to be. It is up to the FBO to find any means possible to have the targeted community acquire this valuable means of communication. Dial-up is dead, and it won't do an FBO any good in terms of real online presence or success.

Sixth, think outside the box: Do you offer Wi-Fi, online flight planning, email greetings, blogs, real-time services, web cams, web-based confirmations, peer-to-peer exchanges/referrals, services via online flight planning services, and other time-saving products? Do you retain customer lists, retain valuable fuel transaction histories, and offer online specials or rewards to your returning customers via reporting methodology?

You soon will be.

#### About the Author



Scott Fowler joined Air BP Aviation Services, serving as the U.S. general aviation marketing manager, in 2003. A graduate of the University of Minnesota, Scott built his marketing career by way of sales, trade show, advertising, and e-commerce management positions. He has developed advertising campaigns, audio production, broadcast media, and web initiatives for domestic and international companies.

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