

Wi-Fi Service Expands Its Reach

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Wi-Fi is finally rolling into America's airports.

In the last couple of years, Wi-Fi, or high-speed wireless Internet access, has invaded Starbucks stores and McDonald's restaurants as well as Marriott and Wyndham hotels. But it has been hard to find in airports, the one place that business travelers are most likely to have time on their hands.

That is partly because so many potential users -- not only the throngs of passengers passing through airports, but also airlines and tenants like retailers and restaurants -- have had to jockey for access to wireless networks.

"There are so many layers to how airports work, every airport operates differently," said John Yunker, a wireless-technology communications consultant from Escondido, Calif. "The more audiences the airport wants to serve with the network, the more complicated it is to deploy. We're still in the early stages of Wi-Fi deployment."

But the pace is picking up. According to a recent report by IDC, a research firm in Framingham, Mass., Wi-Fi hot spots, or locations available to the public, will more than double at American airports this year to 379 from 178 in 2003. IDC predicts the number will nearly triple to more than 1,000 by 2008, exceeding the rate of hot-spot growth at hotels, cafes and restaurants.

Another sign of growth, said Richard Snyder, senior vice president for marketing at **Concourse Communications**, a Chicago company that operates wireless networks: 19 of the top 50 United States airports either offer Wi-Fi in public terminals, or are installing it; another 6 are accepting bids for the service. Among airports offering Wi-Fi are Logan International in Boston, Dallas/Fort Worth International, Denver International, Detroit Metro, La Guardia and Kennedy International in New York, Minneapolis/St. Paul International, Newark Liberty International, Philadelphia International and San Francisco International.

However, airports in major cities like Hartsfield International in Atlanta, O'Hare International and Midway in Chicago, and Ronald Reagan National and Dulles in Washington are only now taking bids from Wi-Fi providers, Mr. Snyder said.

And while the number of public hot spots in the United States already surpasses 10,000 and is likely to reach 65,000 by 2008, according to IDC, the number of users per location is expected to be much greater at airports than elsewhere because of the density of the traffic.

Of course, wireless access in airports is a convenience that many business travelers would rather not do without. Chuck Blaisdell of San Ramon, Calif., a regional minister for the Christian Church of Northern California and Nevada, says that being able to log on during stopovers on his frequent flights to Southern California and to Indianapolis, where his church has its headquarters, makes his workweek easier.

Mr. Blaisdell, who subscribes to T-Mobile's Wi-Fi service, says the service helps him stay on top of his correspondence, "so I don't have 100 or 200 e-mails waiting for me when I get back to a regular connection."

At airports, Wi-Fi can be accessed in many ways. These include terminal-wide access, offered at airports in Austin, Tex., Kansas City, Mo., Denver and San Francisco. Other airports -- like Kennedy, La Guardia and Newark Liberty -- present offer the service selectively, in certain terminals or gate areas.

Rates for the service vary, depending on how it is provided. T-Mobile, which serves San Francisco International, charges \$9.99 for a 24-hour pass; it also offers monthly rates for unlimited usage that range from \$19.99 to \$39.99.

Concourse Communications lets travelers who are already customers of telecommunications providers like Sprint PCS or SBC pay for the service through those companies, which can mark up rates. **Concourse Communications** also offers unaffiliated travelers a \$6.95 rate good for 24 hours.

Fort Lauderdale/Hollywood International Airport offers Wi-Fi free in its terminals, though Julie Howlett, director of information systems, says it may eventually charge for the service.

Another way to access Wi-Fi at airports is dining at restaurants that offer the service.

T-Mobile, which runs hot spots in some airport terminals and airline lounges, also operates them at many Starbucks; its rates are uniform. Wayport, a Wi-Fi provider based in Austin, Tex., operates hot spots in airline terminals and at many McDonald's; its rates for service in airport terminals and at McDonald's restaurants in airport terminals are \$6.95 for one day's usage and \$29.95 for one month's unlimited usage.

A third company, HMS Host, has begun to offer Wi-Fi service at its airport restaurants in Stevens Anchorage International in Alaska, LaGuardia in New York, Miami International, San Diego International and Palm Beach International in West Palm Beach, Fla.; it charges a variety of rates, including a daily fee of \$7.95.

Airlines are also hopping on the bandwagon. Jet Blue offers Wi-Fi free to passengers in its terminals at Kennedy and at Long Beach Airport in California. Carriers like American, Delta, United and US Airways have hooked up with T-Mobile to offer Wi-Fi in their airport lounges. Northwest Airlines has begun to install Wi-Fi at its domestic airport lounges and charges \$6.95 a day. Continental and Alaska Airlines both offer the service free to airport lounge members.

For information on the availability and pricing of Wi-Fi, executives can consult a variety of Web sites, including Jiwire.com, Wifihotspotlist.com and Wifi411.com. One unpleasant discovery that they are likely to make is that they cannot "roam," that is, log onto the hot spot of one service provider at one airport at the beginning of the day and log onto the hot spot of another service provider at a second airport later in the day, all for one fee.

Also, fees can be high, especially if you are a novice and unsure how to log on. "Unless you're going to be at an airport for a pretty good length of time, it's not cost-effective," said Jerry Olivier, an information technology consultant in Overland Park, Kan. "By the time you log on and mess with getting into the airport's system, you've lost 20 minutes."

Jeremy Coyle, a software consultant in Hoboken, N.J., is a devotee of the Wi-Fi service at Continental Airlines' lounges. But he refuses to pay a daily fee if he is in an airport not served by Continental.

"Seven dollars and ninety-nine cents per session is difficult to justify if you're only going to use it for one hour," he says.

Another issue is security: According to experts, if you or your employer have installed a virtual private network, or software that provides secure access to your employer's data bases, on your laptop, as well as a personal firewall that prevents unauthorized users from accessing your computer, your e-mail transmissions generally should be secure. However, they say, when in doubt, do not send any sensitive information in an e-mail message.

Beyond the projected growth in Wi-Fi hot spots, travelers can expect richer services at airports in the not-too-distant future. Mr. Snyder of **Concourse Communications** says his company will soon test a service that allows users to print their work once they step off an airplane, and will also test a voice-over Wi-Fi service that allows users to make phone calls from their laptops and other devices. Similarly, Dan Lowden, vice president for marketing at Wayport, says his company is testing live TV over Wi-Fi and will eventually offer music and movies over Wi-Fi.

More practically, **Concourse Communications** also is looking at charging users an hourly fee -- rather than a daily fee -- which could make the service more affordable.

Henry Harteveltdt, an analyst in San Francisco for Forrester Research, predicts Wi-Fi usage at airports will become so widespread that it will eventually force airlines to redesign their lounges.

"Wi-Fi destroys a key benefit of airlines' private, fee-based airport lounges: dataports that members can use to go online," Mr. Harteveltdt said. "So, in today's value-conscious environment, some club members may think twice when the club renewal notice hits their mailbox."

To keep them, he said, airlines might shift the emphasis at their clubs to services "that will reduce travelers' stress, entertain them and generate revenue, such as shoulder massages and restaurants."

Photo: Travelers take advantage of a free wireless Internet access in Concourse C at LaGuardia Airport. The availability of wireless Internet access is slowly increasing at airports around the country. (Photo by Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)