

Fleet gathers speed

Inmarsat is offering two new services to the shipping industry, both of which will enable crews to communicate from the ship to the shore more easily and cost-effectively

Satellite communications service provider Inmarsat reports that it is pleased with the reception its newest service, Fleet, or F77, has received from the maritime community. Robert Johnson, the company's director of maritime services, says that Inmarsat had hoped that the launch would prove to be the result of a seamless transition from testing to commercial launch, and that so far this hope has been gratified, in the form of over 160 units fitted and many more in the pipeline, ready to be shipped.

From its inception, F77 was envisioned as a replacement for Inmarsat-A, the first of Inmarsat's ship-shore satellite communication services available to the maritime community. It was also meant to represent an advance in satellite communications technology, and towards this end, enables users to take advantage of Inmarsat's mobile packet data service (MPDS) capability, which basically gives the appearance of being constantly 'online' and makes it more cost-efficient to use applications relevant to maritime operations, including weather routing, internet messaging and the updating of electronic charts.

But according to Johnson, the most significant aspect of F77 is that it allows the ship to become an extension of the shore-based office, by enabling it to remain connected to the company's intranet. "Those who have embraced Fleet appreciate very much the always-on capability, as it allows the ship to be a remote node connected to the intranet of the shipping company," he says.

Best Fleet forward

While the shipping industry continues to get to grips with what F77 has to offer, Inmarsat has charged ahead with a new offering under the Fleet brandname. "We've always talked about a family of Fleet products," says Johnson. "And now we're introducing F33, a satellite phone addressed to the mini-M market, but with increased data speeds over and above what mini-M does today, and with global voice and e-mail."

F33 is intended for smaller ships, in order to provide them with the data capabilities more readily available onboard larger ships that have the room for bulky satcoms terminals, but it will have applications onboard larger ships, too, primarily as a standalone phone and as a crew communications solution. "This could be a dedicated service for crew calling," says Johnson, adding that he believes that "the F33 is going to be very competitively priced as regards the hardware".

Satellite communications hardware manufacturer Nera is currently producing the terminal, and the service should be available in the beginning of 2003.

Phoning home

Inmarsat continues to be concerned with the welfare of seafarers at sea, and with providing them with the means to contact their loved ones at home. The company will launch a new Inmarsat crew phone which it believes addresses many of the objections that shipowners and shipmanagers have with respect to the provision of crew calling services.

"We're providing what's known as a restrictive dialler on a standard crew phone with a scratchcard," says Johnson. "And they can make calls at very competitive rates, because we've looked at the satellite dial-up curves - when the satellites are being used and when they're not - and are offering pricing in the quiet times, which should allow crews to call home."

What the LESOs have to offer

The land earth station operators (LESOs), the companies which operate the satellite dishes and reception facilities which enable ships to communicate with the shore and vice versa, have moved in recent years to the provision of value-added services in addition to their primary function as providers of airtime. Services include e-mail software, crew calling packages and compression services. The complexion of their services have changed slightly with the launch of Inmarsat's Fleet 77 service, enabling them to offer packages tailored to the unique capability of Fleet to operate in both ISDN and MPDS modes.

Stratos

Foremost among the LESOs are France Telecom (France), Stratos (Canada) and Marlink (Norway). Stratos, for instance, has reported a cautious, but positive take-up of F77. Those who are aware of the benefits of the new service are keen, but as with most Inmarsat products, there is a lengthy period of time associated with educating the market.

Stratos believes that it has a special expertise related to F77 because it was the largest LESO to offer Inmarsat M4 services (the land equivalent to F77, which is maritime specific). "The benefit of long experience in the world of M4 and being the biggest M4 LESO, we were very familiar with it and were able to develop ahead of the arrival of F77," says Adrian Mac Allister, product innovation manager. "We were very focused on the fact that for many people the business case for swapping out existing Inm-B's to replace with F77 was not always immediately obvious in the maritime market, so we put the focus firmly on controlling the costs once the terminals were installed.

"We were also very aware through talking to shipmanagement companies and fleet managers that the issue of almost unfettered access to the internet gave them some concern. So we concentrated on trying to give owners and operators a great measure of control over the packet service which would allow a budget holder or administrator or the person with the main IT responsibility onboard a ship to control which sites could be visited from a terminal on a ship."

In addition to access control, Stratos also offers compression tools. Stratos 1 is a batch messaging tool for ship's communications that helps to reduce the size of files and therefore transmission times and costs for users at sea. In addition, Stratos also offers a tool called StratosNet, which helps to minimise the size of incoming internet files. This will be particularly relevant to the user of F77 who is using the terminal in its 'always-on' mode and wants to ensure that his costs are controlled.

France Telecom

France Telecom launched its Fleet service in June of this year. On the back of the new service, it has introduced a new prepaid crew calling card, available for the Inm-B, mini-M and of course Fleet voice services. The tariff available on the card is a low \$0.99 per minute, off-peak, between the hours of 11:00 PM and 3:00 AM, GMT. France Telecom is calling this time period 'Universal Happy Hour', and hopes that it will enable seafarers to make calls home inexpensively, in spite of the odd hours. The card will be available from October 1, 2002 and the service will come online in mid-October.

France Telecom also offers a weather forecasting service called Navimail, which makes weather reports and forecasts available worldwide, via satellite. The user can sign up to have e-mail weather reports sent to his inbox at a regular interval of his choosing (i.e. daily, twice daily, etc). The shipboard software is provided by France Telecom free of charge and the user pays for the airtime and the data sent by e-mail, provided by Meteo France, France's national meteorological authority.

France Telecom has high hopes for Fleet, and hopes to obtain at least a 20 per cent market share for Fleet services in the maritime market. Arnaud Mahu, marketing

director of France Telecom, points out that the main advantage of Fleet is its ability to connect the ship to a shipping company's corporate intranet, making it an extension of the shore-based office. In this scenario, the implications for the security of data and the ease of information transfer are significant.

Telenor/Marlink

Telenor is perhaps the most comprehensive of the LESOs, in that it owns Marlink, a conflation of Telenor's services division and SAIT Communications, one of the world's largest accounting authorities, which Telenor acquired in 2001, in addition to carrying out its activities as a LESO.

At the recent SMM show in Hamburg, Marlink launched a new service known as @SEA(mail) Network, a new addition to the company's existing @SEA(mail) portfolio of communication services. The 'mail' portion of the service offers compression, fax and telex transmission, message filtering and virus scanning, while the new 'network' product will also offer split billing of communications and multiple e-mail addresses, enabling owners and operators to assign individual e-mail addresses to ship officers or to offer crew communications.

@SEA(mail) Network is available over all of the Inmarsat services, including Fleet 77.

ChartCo launches new update service

Producers of electronic chart display equipment and data believe that the use of electronic charts will begin to overtake the use of paper charts by 2007. The current carriage requirements dictate that an up-to-date folio of paper charts must be kept onboard at all times, in addition to any electronic charting systems being used, and in the meantime, ship's officers will have to continue to work with both.

Chart information service provider ChartCo, has just launched a new product which will enable ship's crews to update both forms of charts easily and efficiently, called oceanXpress ARCs, an enhancement of the oceanXpress updating service that the company introduced earlier this year solely for electronic navigation charts (ENCs).

"We did the ENCs updates first because it was considered to be supporting the International Hydro-graphic Office in its objectives and also because it was technically easier. But the biggest demand is for ARCs updates in the shorter term," says Haydn Jones, marketing manager of ChartCo.

"We believe that the balance between electronic and paper charting will have changed by 2007; at that point there will be more electronic charts than paper charts, but between now and then ships will need a mix of both."

ChartCo's new software will support both forms of charts, providing updates for both formats via satellite link, and Jones makes the point that the service provides a common interface between ARCs and ENCs, making it easy to use and understand. The service is currently being tested onboard the Stolt Fulmar and will be fully available in January 2003.

ChartCo has had particular success with tanker operators and owners, who have perhaps been forced into a greater sensitivity to the hazards that out-of-date charts can pose to ship safety. A grounding leading to pollution can be both costly and detrimental to an operator's reputation in the market. Timely chart updates are therefore attractive to tanker operators, as evinced by the fact that 70 per cent of ChartCo's customers come from the tanker sector - crude carriers, product tankers and chemical carriers.

"The oil majors are showing a close interest in moving to electronic charting," says Jones, "and the interest from owners and managers who also move their own cargoes is high."