

Getting personal

Inmarsat's main business has always been keeping people safe at sea. Now they are also in the business of keeping them happy.

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There's no contradiction here, assures Drew Brandy, Vice President in charge of market strategy at Inmarsat Maritime: “It's still about crew welfare, keeping them not just physically, but also mentally healthy. Allowing them to stay connected with home and conduct their personal business helps keep them happy. And a happy crew is a more focused and motivated crew.”

While safety was the impetus of Inmarsat, founded by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) in 1979 to ensure the safety of lives at sea, Inmarsat is increasingly involved in the personal lives of passengers and crew.

“Five years ago our business was driven by operational communication. Now personal communication is on the rise,” says Brandy. “Passenger connectivity is the biggest growing need. On trains, busses, planes, ships; people expect to be connected 24/7.”

Despite Inmarsat's obvious proximity to the maritime market, Brandy acknowledges that the maritime industry has been slow to adopt connectivity for crew. “Right now less

than 36 per cent of deep sea vessels provide Internet for their crew.”

He suspects that some owners and operators still see crew connectivity as a luxury item, even though it makes up only a small fraction of total operating costs, and certainly helps with recruiting. Regardless, Inmarsat expects the trend to catch up with shipping. “We are seeing an increase in demand for content rich services. In response to this we have launched our Maritime Entertainment Service. One thing we know, the price of technology will come down.”

Diversification brings synergies

Aside from the personal connectivity aspect, Inmarsat's business has evolved significantly since its founding. Now they serve the enterprise, government, land, and aviation segments, though their business is still very much driven by maritime. One boost that diversification has provided is being able to take advantage of synergies between industries, most notably between aviation and maritime.



Drew Brandy



“The connectivity challenges are similar, on the bridge or in the cockpit, and for passengers and crew. Our technology roadmap will have to match the needs of both industries, and they will continue to influence each other,” Brandy maintains.

“The two industries look to each other. Safety services in maritime, including position reporting, are carrying over to aviation,” he reports, with recent incidents involving the disappearance of passenger jets obviously increasing the interest in being able to accurately plot the position of planes.

Maritime on its part is learning how to take advantage of access to real-time operational data. “Operational data is transmitted continuously from the air, and the amount of data is increasing.” Inmarsat’s vision for ‘The Internet of Everywhere’ addresses this for the maritime industry, allowing companies to capture every aspect of operations from anywhere on the globe, and use it to tweak or optimise performance. “Maritime operators are now developing an awareness of maintenance needs at the same level as in aviation,” Brandy observes.

Keeping information safe, too

With so much critical data flowing through the airwaves, cyber security becomes of paramount importance. In order to ensure cutting edge technology and expertise in cyber security, Inmarsat has recently signed a partnership with Singtel Trustwave to develop a Unified Threat Management (UTM) solution delivered through Fleet Xpress, Inmarsat’s next generation of maritime communications.

“We live in the internet age, where everything and everyone is connected. That means we need to take precautions,” Brandy states. “Safeguarding information is absolutely fundamental



Inmarsat control center

to our future success, and that of our customers.”

He also throws down a challenge to the maritime industry: “They need to educate themselves on threats and the need for mitigation. Many don’t see the reason why anyone would hack a ship, but the motivation is out there. Whether it’s economic or ideologic, the threat to crew and cargo is too great to ignore.”

Meeting the next challenge

How does Brandy see the role of satellite communications in the future of the maritime industry? “A lot of understanding how we can help the industry is about spotting the next trend,” he points out. In keeping with that philosophy, Inmarsat is in the process of relocating several of their offices to maritime innovation centres around the globe.

“We want to work closer with the

industry where it makes sense. For that reason we have moved to a new location in Rotterdam, and we will shortly be moving to a new office in Ålesund, Norway,” both well-known centres of maritime initiative and innovation. “We need to be in environments where we can be a part of the latest thinking and take advantage of that to our customers’ benefit, but equally support and foster innovation through working with like-minded organisations.”

One area demanding increasing attention is unmanned ships, or autonomous vessels, though Brandy cautions against confusing the two: “Autonomous vessels mean more automation on board. A totally unmanned vessel is something else entirely.”

In both cases issues abound concerning safety and regulations: is either one even really possible? “Inmarsat is interested in increasing the autonomy of vessels, not in taking crew off the

ships.” Brandy believes the trend over next decade will be to more automation and increased efficiency, leading to a safer work environment for crew on board, and more attractive maritime jobs on land.

Does he see anything on the horizon that might disrupt Inmarsat’s long record of steady growth? “There is a lot of fibre being laid, for example in the Gulf of Mexico. I think that would be the key challenge, other technologies rather than other satellite companies.”

But perhaps Inmarsat’s biggest challenge, Drew Brandy believes, lies in changing attitudes. “We need to help shipowners see connectivity and communication as more than just cost. This is now a part of doing business. If you exploit connectivity effectively, it can actually pull a out lot of cost out of your business model, and give you a stronger position for the future.”