right **on track**

Chris Beling, commercial director, Zafire, discusses product developments and the company's future plans

What did you launch at Passenger Terminal Expo (PTE)?
This year we showcased some major new enhancements to our established products, including FirstRamp, a web-based aircraft turnaround planning, servicing and business reporting application specifically designed for the management of high volume, time-critical tasks. We're aiming it at ground handlers to help them manage their operations more effectively and minimise the risk of financial penalties.

We also have the latest release of FirstBag being deployed across our network. In fact, one of our clients recently reported a 75% reduction in mishandled bags as a direct result of using the product. FirstBag Version 4 has gone live in Australia and has a number of revolutionary new features. We're focusing on interline bag improvement, vehicle tracking and process improvements, so there is a lot going on in the bag world.

We also launched the iFirstBag system, which is a tracking device that links in to FirstBag. It is a little black box that passengers can put into their bag and enables them to track their bag anywhere in the world. It is very new technology using the triangulation of GSM rather than GPS signals. In the world of free information, enabling passengers to have some idea about where their bags are provides them with comfort and some control. It is part of our longer-term plan aimed at giving the passenger much more information about their bags – when they've been checked in, when they've been loaded – and giving them that whole tracking experience.

What do you have planned for the future?
With the FirstRamp ground handling system, we have plans to add in rostering and forward planning so users can allocate resources and optimise those resources depending on their flight requirements, which is the result of feedback from our customers who want the capability to plan ahead. It is a lower-cost model as it is a hosted solution and they don't have to spend money on infrastructure, giving them a framework to grow their business.

We are also developing products for the check-in area, including FirstCheckIn, which is bringing the concept of business continuity planning to the airlines, so if their core system has any failings, their operations don't shut down and cause them a major problem. The system is going global with major international carriers choosing the system as a back-up to their current departure control system and we have spent a lot of time integrating with their core system and providing them with a very simple interface. FirstCheckIn is a low-cost, high-functionality departure control application that specialises in point-to-point flights. It is inexpensive to install as it is web based and airlines don't actually have to pay too much unless the system is used, which is a really good model for them.

In addition, to cope with our continued year-on-year growth in this global marketplace, we will be launching a new website dedicated to aviation in July, so be sure to watch out for this.

What are the main challenges facing the industry?
The current economic situation means it has been a difficult time for everyone in terms of winning business tenders from the airlines. This means companies need to be more innovative and creative in how they engage with customers on new projects. Another challenge is meeting the demand for mobile and tablet computing – people want to mobilise their workforce out in the field and provide them with a wide range of information in real time, and that is happening across the marketplace. Zafire is helping to address this issue with solutions that provide direct information flow between field and back office; process-driven software to ensure consistency and reduce errors; and visibility of the whole picture, giving instant access to business intelligence for informed, timely decision making.

Why do you attend PTE?
First of all, it is a great place to meet a number of airlines, airports and ground handlers together in one place. We have done this for six years and have got bigger every year, and it is a great place to see old faces and maintain relationships. We're looking at other companies' innovations and are also showcasing our own to the marketplace. We use it as a forum to build our brand and to have people come and see what we're doing. What people are finding this year is that they can't believe what Zafire is actually doing – we have grown from a baggage reconciliation system provider into a global innovator in aviation software solutions with a suite of products in key markets. Our innovation does not stop here – we are developing the next generation of our leading global baggage solution and this will be launched later this year. ■

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