

MARINE ELECTRONICS & COMMUNICATIONS

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Stratos teams up to lower cost of GSM connectivity

Stratos has married technology from both Inmarsat and Blue Ocean Wireless to realise its solution, which aims to minimise the costs of deploying and maintaining a GSM network

Stratos Global Corp launched its GSM offering for merchant fleets in the final quarter of 2007. Known as GSM Oceanwide, it is said to be the first such service to use Inmarsat satellites as a backbone channel for enabling seafarers to utilise their existing mobile phones while navigating the world's oceans.

Since Stratos is the largest distributor of Inmarsat satellite services to the global maritime industry, the decision to design GSM Oceanwide for Inmarsat technology is perhaps unsurprising. What is more notable, however, is that the company has also teamed up with industry newcomer, Blue Ocean Wireless.

How do these three players work together? Stratos sells the GSM Oceanwide service directly to shipowners/managers and derives revenue from calls made over the onboard GSM network. Calls are routed by hardware leased to the ship by Blue Ocean through Inmarsat's satellite constellation, which collects payment for airtime used in the normal way.

While Stratos' relationship with Blue Ocean commenced when the company was formed in 2007, it has worked with Altobridge, the primary technology provider to Blue Ocean, since 2005.

The hardware infrastructure for GSM Oceanwide comprises an onboard pico cell, gateway and two Inmarsat F33 terminals (optionally upgradeable to the new Inmarsat FleetBroadband terminal) and is deployed on a customer's vessel by Blue Ocean for a monthly fee without the need for upfront capital expenditure.

In the 12 months before officially launching the service, Stratos carried out a two-stage trial programme on two large container ships. The first stage was a technical trial in which the technology

was tested in a live environment in order to identify areas where improved performance was required. This resulted in modifications being made to the software used on the pico cell to increase data efficiency.

The second stage was a commercial trial to ascertain how crews would use the service under typical, day-to-day conditions. The most surprising result was how many texts crew members liked to send. "Texting was significantly more popular than we had originally anticipated," says the company's marketing manager for maritime, Michiel Meijer, adding that, overall, crews felt the service was reasonably priced. Users of GSM Oceanwide are charged per minute either at peak or off-peak rates for voice calls, while they are offered a flat fee for each text message.

In the future, Stratos hopes to expand the capabilities of its GSM service to include e-mail and web browsing, delivered using GPRS technology. While web-surfing from mobile handsets is likely to be more expensive than using conventional onboard PC terminals, instances will occur, believes Mr Meijer, when crew members seek increased communications privacy and would be willing to pay a premium for this privilege.

On announcing the new service, the company emphasised that minimising the upfront costs of deploying a GSM network was crucial to the uptake of the technology and thereby bringing about an improvement in crew welfare. "For a low monthly fee, GSM Oceanwide will help expedite official business communications and also serve as a crew communications solution to help recruit and retain qualified seafarers," stressed Stratos company president Jim Parm.

Mr Meijer elaborates: "Market research has shown that recruitment and retention of experienced seafarers is among the major concerns of chief executives at ship management companies today. With hundreds of new vessels being built each year, there is intense competition for qualified seafarers.

"Over the past two years, the



Michiel Meijer: "Texting was more popular than we had anticipated"

importance that ship managers attach to the quality of communications systems they offer to their crews has increased dramatically. They are also cognisant of the recent International Transport Workers Federation (ITF) recommendations stating that e-mail should be provided free to all crew members."

Mr Meijer goes on to point out that a growing number of ship managers are now providing crews with free e-mail services and prepaid voice services. Meanwhile, others are offering them a monthly stipend toward their voice calling expenses.

There is little doubt in his mind that one of the most effective ways of ensuring seafarers obtain a better deal is to provide voice, private e-mail and SMS communications systems that are powerful, economical, easy to use, and – crucially – available away from the bridge. **MEC**