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Sidebar: Free Airport Wi-Fi Takes Off

Story by Bob Brewin

OCTOBER 20, 2003 (COMPUTERWORLD) - At least three U.S. airports -- led by pioneering **Blue Grass Airport** in Lexington, Ky. -- now offer free Wi-Fi service as a way to satisfy customers and compete with larger hub airports nearby that offer pay service.

Blue Grass kicked off its free Wi-Fi service in the fall of 2001 in response to demand by business travelers who said they wanted Internet access. Marketing director Tom Tyra says the airport, which is served by six airlines, knows it's in a niche market and has to work a bit harder to compete with Cincinnati/Northern Kentucky International Airport, a giant Delta Air Lines hub that's just 75 miles away.

David Heinmiller, computer systems administrator at Blue Grass, says the airport's Wi-Fi network consists of seven Cisco Systems Inc. Aironet 350 access points connected to a T1 backbone with omnidirectional antennas.

To support travelers whose notebook computers lack Wi-Fi cards, Blue Grass also installed Ethernet jacks throughout the airport. But Heinmiller says these are Ethernet jacks with a twist: Instead of connecting to a cable, they serve as the front end to a wireless client device.

Long Beach Airport in California turned on its free Wi-Fi service in June as an extension of a project to develop a free Wi-Fi hot zone in downtown Long Beach. Whereas Blue Grass offers just a Wi-Fi signal, Long Beach decided to use the airport network as a marketing vehicle, with users directed to a Web portal splash page once they sign onto the network.

JetBlue Airways Corp. helped develop Long Beach Airport's free Wi-Fi network and sponsors the Web portal, according to Lorenzo Gigliotti, head of G-site Web & Consulting in Long Beach, which developed the portal. In return for its sponsorship, JetBlue owns a sizable portion of the real estate on the Web page, which features links to local business, information, entertainment and tourist Web sites, Gigliotti says.

Colorado Springs Airport launched its bare-bones Wi-Fi service -- just a signal, with no Web portal -- this August to give it an edge in its competition with Denver International Airport, which is less than a two-hour drive north, according to Tack Rice, an information systems analyst at Colorado Springs Airport.

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