EVOLUX HELICOPTER CHARTER PORTAL MOVES TO 'NEXT LEVEL'

News / Business aviation

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The online helicopter booking portal **EvoLux** now has 200 helicopters enrolled in the system in eight major metropolitan areas, among them New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Miami, and now founder Ray Leavitt says he is readying the company for the “next level” as he seeks an investment seed round of $5 to $10 million.

Sikorsky Innovations selected EvoLux the winner of its second “Entrepreneurial Challenge Competition” in 2013. Leavitt wants to make it easier to book a helicopter seat via two computerized platforms that let customers either book the entire helicopter through SkyLimo or open up a helicopter they have booked to friends or the general public to cut costs through SkyShare. Leavitt said EvoLux differs from its better known competitor Blade in that it allows operators more flexibility to accept, deny or shift a flight or substitute equipment as they see fit in a way that “keeps it non-scheduled and Part 135.”

Leavitt thinks his system will be a boon, particularly to small helicopter charter operators who he says spend an inordinate amount of time preparing charter bids. “Our system calculates where the aircraft is located, what the reposition would be, the flight time, the wait time, the reposition of the aircraft back and any other fees that go into it. You can go onto our site and pretty much have a search from anywhere to anywhere and have a price quoted with all that included in less than three seconds. That right there is an efficiency that doesn’t exist in the current marketplace for helicopters,” Leavitt said.

EXPANDING THE MARKET

Leavitt’s goal is to use EvoLux to get more helicopter riders–and more helicopters–in the air, thus bringing down the cost for both. “My research shows that there are 781 helicopters available for charter in the U.S. That isn’t very many when you consider that in São Paulo, Brazil, alone there are 450. On average a helicopter in the U.S.fleet flies just 0.81 hours per day, but they have the potential to do six to eight hours per day. You can open up that market to a huge population if you had something to make helicopter travel more affordable.” Leavitt thinks EvoLux does just that. “These operators can get to the point where they not only fill their existing helicopters but they can buy new ones because there is now more civilian demand for it.”

Leavitt worked as a consultant to DayJet and as a charter broker before starting EvoLux, rolling out a prototype system in 2009 regionally in south Florida, where he developed a VIP clientele and began doing high-end events such as professional golf tournaments.

EvoLux is paying close attention to infrastructure issues in the markets it serves. In Miami EvoLux uses a “heliboat” that allows it to skirt the zoning and other restrictions associated with building a helipad. What the 60- by 20-foot boat lacks in aesthetics, it more than makes up for in utility. “It’s the ugliest boat you’ve ever seen,” Leavitt concedes, but it is approved by the state fish and wildlife service, local police and the Coast Guard. Passengers are picked up in tender boats and taken to their ultimate destinations. The heliboats can be converted for $150,000 to $200,000 apiece. “We’ve had Bell 429s land on it and the downwash didn’t do anything,” Leavitt said. “The thing works really well.”

The future opening of air travel to Cuba from Miami also holds promise for twin-engine operations, Leavitt noted.

In Los Angeles, where EvoLux has 24 helicopters enrolled, the company is watching the debate over the fate of the moribund heliport at Los Angeles International Airport and sees Los Angeles

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overall as a market with lots of potential. “We think southern California is one of those markets that will organically ‘get it’ and just start using this. It’s three-hour traffic jams everywhere you go, and it is so spread out. If we can activate the LAX heliport and then bundle $200-per-seat flights to it with first-class scheduled service on American Airlines, I think you could really kick off the L.A. market,” Leavitt said.

In November, EvoLux announced that it would begin operation from Chicago's new Vertiport with partners Helimotion, Image Air and Indiana Helicopters. Leavitt noted that EvoLux also is looking hard at the Phoenix and Colorado ski resort markets. EvoLux vets its carrier partners but does not require Argus or Wyvern ratings. “We use only qualified operators,” Leavitt said. “We check a carrier’s certificate and liability insurance and we have declined to invite certain operators onto the platform.”

“We want to attract resorts and destinations that are off the beaten path that normally would take a customer forever to get there,” Leavitt said. “The resorts will want to promote us to their customers.”

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