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Fleet management vendors capitalize on wireless

Chris Shipley • Published 06/21/05

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Last week I wrote about Imagis Technologies, the Vancouver company that provides a smart federated data integration architecture. (*I was gently corrected by the company's Communications and Marketing Manager Eric Westra that the new name for the company will be spelled Visiphor, with a "ph" not an "f."*) Imagis was the first of some dozen or so companies I met during a week-long visit to Vancouver, British Columbia, and in some ways it is the odd-one-out. Vancouver has a thriving mobile and wireless developer community, and it was companies in this category that I spent the majority of my visit.

Two of those companies are doing interesting – and very different – work in wireless services for fleet management.

The first, **InMotion Technology**, creates a mobile Wi-Fi hot spot for fleet vehicles. A ruggedized unit in the vehicle establishes a wireless network for computers and equipment in and around the vehicle. The unit taps a public cellular network for the backhaul connectivity to the InMotion Connection Server. This server provides a management console for the in-vehicle Wi-Fi routers.

InMotion designed this mobile LAN architecture so it can be supported by multiple wireless networks (the box can house up to five radios) with seamless roaming to optimize reliability of the cellular backhaul.

The InMotion mobile LAN is in trials with a major ambulance service, a nationwide executive limousine service, a French transportation company, and a U.S. university. The company faces competition from two emerging companies, RaySat and Wireless Matrix, which use satellite networks for the backhaul. InMotion's modular design may prove to be an advantage, letting customers take advantage of existing and future wide-area wireless network technologies.

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InMotion is raising a Series A round of investment, hoping to put about $4M U.S. to work deploying the product with a carrier partner.

The second company, **WebTech Wireless**, is leveraging GSM networks to provide fleet tracking and management. In-vehicle devices combine GPS for location tracking with GSM and IP networks to enable commercial fleet operators to locate assets, monitor vehicles and retrieve diagnostic data, and message the driver.

Developed over the past five years by a close-knit team with deep experience in telematics, the WebTech Wireless fleet management solution has hit a sweet spot in an industry that functions on razor-thin margins. Fleet operators can do things like geo-fencing, which defines the area in which a truck can operate and alerts the operator should the vehicle venture beyond those boundaries. Operators can also remotely turn off the engine in an idling truck, more or less simulating running out of fuel. In this way, operators can conserve fuel use rather than rely on truckers to do so.

WebTech has a growing list of premium customers, including Coca-Cola, Safeway, and several local governments. One customer, a fuel hauler, discovered that its truckers were pulling off their appointed routes, selling off fuel to black-market buyers, and refilling the trucks with water or kerosene. By identifying the scofflaws, the hauler was able to stop the illegal activity and see a return on its investment in WebTech's system in four hours.

The company sells the in-vehicle hardware along with monthly subscriptions and software services, and is beginning to see a healthy revenue flow.

The closest competitor to WebTech that we've seen is the Israeli company Drive Diagnostics. That firm puts a series of sensors in vehicles to collect data on how well the driver adheres to best driving practices. Designed originally for parents of teen-age drivers, the company found its initial markets in fleet services, where the performance of drivers relates directly to insurance and service costs.

InMotion and WebTech, along with their competitors, are vanguards in a movement to provide more in-vehicle services delivered by wireless connectivity, be it cellular or satellite. The high cost of these services may keep these products in commercial vehicles, where ROI can be easily justified by improved operating margins. But advances are occurring rapidly enough to believe that vehicle wireless connectivity will be a mainstream consumer application in the next 3 to 5 years.

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