

New apps simplify charter booking

Now you can see all your options in seconds and, in some cases, even complete transactions without human interaction.

by James Wynbrandt

Apps for booking charter flights on smartphones and tablets continue to mature as accepted wisdom loses weight: it turns out that more and more convenience-minded customers are indeed willing to consummate five- and six-figure transactions without speaking to a human.

Brokers and operators build the apps to expand their businesses and stay on the cutting edge of customer service. Companies that aim to transform the industry by creating totally digital consumer marketplaces are also introducing apps.

While these apps may or may not prove transformative, they can certainly be helpful. They can provide price quotes for available aircraft for an intended route. They can also allow you to choose a specific aircraft and even the FBOs you'll use; see total charges, including all airport fees; book the flight; and pay with your fingerprint in just a couple of minutes, without human interaction. (This level of automation, available in Europe, is expected in the U.S. this year.)

At first glance, all the apps discussed below are similar. You download them from the App Store—they're compatible only with iOS devices—and create an account. Once you're logged in, you see a

screen that features fields for inputting departure and destination information; selecting one-way or round trip; and specifying the date and time, number of passengers, and category of aircraft you prefer.

You'll find that not all the apps are equally adept at recognizing airport identifiers or nominating alternative nearby airports that may reduce repositioning costs or save you money on airport fees. Most apps provide a way to make special requests that could impact aircraft availability or price before you hit the submit button, after which you wait a few seconds before the screen populates with available aircraft and estimated or exact costs. (Less commonly, some apps respond via callback or email, rather than providing instant estimates.) The apps typically list available aircraft sequentially based on price and provide flight times and other data. They also commonly present an interior and exterior photo and a diagram of the interior.

What differentiates the apps is how they handle requests, how the provider responds, and the number of aircraft available to meet your request. The state-of-the-art apps from the following charter companies illustrate these differences:



V Victor

This UK-based charter broker claims 7,000 aircraft connected to its platform, and its app provides instant estimates that are within 3 percent of the actual cost, says founder and CEO Clive Jackson. Further inquiries and booking requests then go through brokers at Victor. The app doesn't provide the "instant" automated quotes that other providers cite as an attribute; instead, within an hour of your inquiry you will receive via email three or more exact quotes with detailed information on each aircraft presented, and you can click to purchase your selected choice. Victor receives a commission from the customer on each completed transaction. (Some app providers alternatively charge operators a commission or employ other income models.)

Jackson notes that his platform is "geared up" to support fully automated bookings, but says operator resistance is an issue. "The reality is, the vast majority

of operators still want eyes on the quote before it goes out," he says. "They still want the ability to price it manually."

J JetSmarter

This Florida-based charter broker has some 3,100 jets in its system and offers both ad hoc charter and a membership discount charter program (\$9,000 annually with a \$3,000 initiation fee), entitling members to unlimited free empty-leg flights and individual seats on "shuttle" charter flights. The JetSmarter app is the portal for all access options, providing ad hoc or member charter price quotes and functions for accessing empty legs and single seats on select flights. For charter inquiries, the app displays the number of each category aircraft available for a requested flight and approximate price. Select any individual aircraft and its details and exact price will be displayed, along with a click-to-purchase button.

Stratajet

This UK company's app offers the completely automated booking capability referenced above. The platform weighs 246 variables in calculating the guaranteed price, says Stratajet's Monica Silva. If you specify an airport, the app will offer nearby alternatives that can save you money on repositioning or airport fees. You can use the app now for charter in Europe, where the company has 500 aircraft in the system, and Stratajet plans to expand into the U.S. this September with a minimum of 750 aircraft.

As for customers' supposed reticence about making large purchases on the Web, "last month we had three large-cabin flights that cost more than £100,000 per booking," Silva says, all purchased through the Apple Pay-supporting app.

Skyjet

This is the charter arm of Cleveland's Directional Aviation Capital, parent company of jet-card provider Sentient, and the Flight Options and Flexjet fractional-ownership programs, whose fleets Skyjet utilizes for its primary lift. Its new iPhone app can generate a real-time range of prices for available aircraft in a selected category.

Gloria Cocco, Skyjet's director of charter sales, notes that if you call a broker, the initial prices you get will be estimates, anyway. "Compare this with having to speak on the phone for half an hour, and you see the advantages," she says, summing up a benefit of all these apps. Actual price quotes, if requested, are generated manually, and arrive via email within an hour.

VistaJet

The bespoke Switzerland-based charter company, which owns its fleet of about 60 Bombardiers, recently introduced an app for booking and managing flights on its aircraft. The app doesn't provide estimates; it simply sends a request for a quote for a specified route and date. While you can use it to book flights, VistaJet's Pedro Nassif, the app's developer, says it's designed primarily to support customers once their flights are scheduled, allowing them to select their catering, get weather updates, and have other flight-specific information and functionality at their fingertips.

Stellar Labs

This California business aims to disrupt the charter industry with its completely automated

marketplace, fronted by the Stellar app, now in beta testing.

The app showcases the simple, stylish interface all these apps favor. Founder Paul Touw—who sold his Web-based logistics sourcing portal, Ariba, for \$4.3 billion before founding charter operator XOJet—plans to bring demand pricing, similar to what airlines have been using for years, to the charter world. By this summer, Touw expects the platform to be in operation with about 700 aircraft in the system.

"It's a monumental change for operators," Touw says, but that also applies to the complexity of joining the brave new booking world he envisions.

All other platforms behind these charter apps tie in to the major flight-scheduling software most operators use, but due to its power and complexity, Stellar's platform is incompatible with all of these systems, and it requires an intensive, multi-week transition process. **BJT**

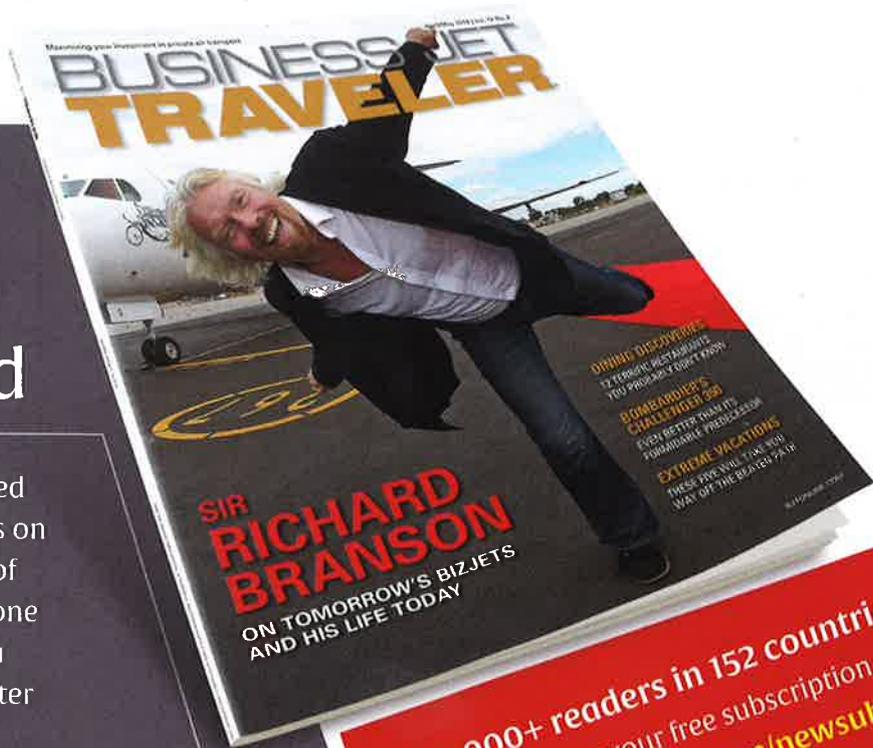
James Wynbrandt (jwynbrandt@bjtonline.com), a private pilot and longtime **BJT** contributor, has written for the *New York Times*, *Forbes*, and *Barron's*.

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