

Airbiquity Scores Telematics Win in Automotive Space

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Seattle-based software developer Airbiquity recently cemented its relationship with Continental Automotive Systems' telematics unit, which develops and markets embedded telematics and hands-free communications systems using Bluetooth technology.

The heart of Airbiquity's offerings is its in-band modem technology that transmits telematics data like crash notifications or engine diagnostics via a cellular analog or digital voice channel, as opposed to a data channel. Put another way, aqLink software enables the transport of wireless data over the voice channel of any existing wireless network in an embedded or Bluetooth hands-free telematics communication system during a voice conversation. The aqLink technology facilitates transmission of data such as a vehicle's location, airbag notifications and remote diagnostics information.

The firm's software is embedded into equipment made by Continental, which sells its gear to General Motors' OnStar automotive communication systems division. Continental claims that its telematics and hands-free systems are already included in more than 12 million cars on the road today.

Upon signing a global licensing agreement with Continental, Kamyar Moinzadeh, president and chief executive officer of Airbiquity, said the deal allows his firm to increase its sales in North America, Europe and Asia. Airbiquity has been involved with OnStar through Continental's products since 2003, and although Airbiquity's success to date has been largely tied to the rise of GM's OnStar system, the firm says it expects to announce a deal with another major car-maker by the end of the year.

"Telematics plays an important role in our efforts to integrate embedded or hands-free, in-vehicle wireless communication systems into our Active Passive Integration Approach, which focuses on creating cars that avoid crashes, prevent injuries and provide immediate assistance if a crash proves unavoidable," said Karl-Thomas Neumann, president of Continental Automotive Systems. "The significance of the ability to transmit real-time data over the voice channel cannot be overstated, which is why the aqLink product is a critical step toward implementing our strategy in vehicles made by world-class manufacturers we serve."

Continental's decision to move forward with aqLink comes on the heels of an announcement that the European Union is favoring the software as its preferred solution for the mandated eCall crash notification system. Initially founded by former Nextel Communications Inc. executives to provide an E-911 solution for handsets, Airbiquity developers decided against migrating data transmissions to carrier's third-generation networks, opting instead to utilize the carriers' voice channels, thus driving incremental revenue for the carriers by running data in the available "gaps and seams" of untouched network capacity.

"Billions of dollars have been invested in voice networks, the primary revenue driver for carriers," commented Moinzadeh. "But data networks don't necessarily meet all the emergency requirements. They are not at a point where they offer consistent service, and the roaming agreements have yet to be worked out. With voice, the roaming agreements are already there. And OEM's are interested in technology that lasts, that has longevity. Voice networks have not changed. When an OEM embeds technology, they want it to last 6 to 8 years."

"Data networks are great for downloading data, but voice is still the critical applications for carriers. Voice networks are still the safety-net."

However, the firm's use of the analog voice channel may be limited as major carriers are looking to discontinue analog service.

Moinzadeh divulged that Airbiquity has been cash-flow positive for the last 18 months and indicated that the firm is actively looking beyond the automotive industry for future growth, as the company is talking to everyone, from Homeland Security officials to portable navigation developers.

"Of course, the ultimate portable navigation device is the handset," said Moinzadeh.

But for now, Airbiquity seems happy to harvest deals in the automotive market.

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