

# THALYS WI-FI KEEPS TRAIN PASSENGERS CONNECTED

How does a high-speed train company compete with the airline industry for international business travelers? Thalys International, which operates passenger trains between Paris, Brussels, Cologne and Amsterdam, began contemplating this question several years ago. To win new market share, the company decided to offer a premium service meeting business travelers' particular requirements.

Thalys chose to offer broadband Internet access on its high-speed trains, expecting this would fulfill a growing customer demand. The only problem was, at the time, no one had developed a system that could provide commercial Internet access aboard high-speed trains.

## Space Age technology

When Thalys began their original studies for this project in 2005, European company 21Net — with the support of the European Space Agency — developed a prototype that demonstrated both the proposed initiative's feasibility and the public's high level of interest in the service. 21Net's solution combined Wi-Fi inside the train with a satellite Internet connection capable of adapting to widely fluctuating transmission conditions, due to the trains' high speeds. The positive results of this early experiment encouraged Thalys to envision a large-scale rollout.

Thalys enlisted CSC to support this complex project, based on our industry expertise in steering projects involving introduction of new technologies. CSC worked with Thalys to determine requirements, identify the best technologies and providers, and assist with testing and rollout. Thalys wanted its Internet system to be set up similarly to its concession system for other onboard services, where the operator is responsible for technical rollout and operation of the solution.

"It was a transversal project requiring sophisticated expertise in railways and telecoms, with a strong international dimension and the need for the final solution to meet very high quality expectations by customers," says Olivier Poitrenaud, CEO of Thalys International.

## Satisfying demanding customers

The project team was deliberately kept small — three CSC consultants and three people from Thalys. "Faced with a project that still had numerous areas of uncertainty, our idea was to have



a small, multidisciplinary and very responsive team," explains Pierre Kalfon, partner in charge of CSC's Transportation and Travel Services division in France.

The team's first task was to analyze proposals submitted by various telecoms providers, while also fine-tuning the economic model of this future service. Reflecting its focus on customer satisfaction, Thalys wanted to offer free Internet access to "Comfort 1" (first-class) passengers and give "Comfort 2" passengers the option of paying for access.

In September 2007, Thalys and CSC selected a telecoms consortium, comprising 21Net, Nokia Siemens Networks and Telenet, whose proposed solution involved satellites. "The satellite-based solution was not the only option to be looked at, but it turned out to be the one most suited to our needs," says Gilles Viennois, CSC director for the project.

The next crucial stage was development of an operating prototype. The consortium responsible for technical development mobilized a team of 50 people, while the Thalys/CSC team worked on several projects at the same time: defining optimal service levels, designing the access portal for users and obtaining the necessary authorizations from rail transport regulators in each country involved.

Final adjustments were made to the prototype in January 2008, paving the way for full installation of the system in 26 Thalys trains. During this phase, customer support (consisting of a hotline, onboard information and crew training) was tested to ensure that it satisfied the high level of quality expected by Thalys' clientele. In April 2008, the service went live on the Paris-Amsterdam and Paris-Cologne routes. It has since proven to be one of the most popular onboard services and today is available on all routes. ■