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Alternatives to air easier

Office on road now a reality

By Craig Garretson
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For business travelers who are less likely these days to take to the air, there is Doug Mayer. President of West Chester-based MobileNet Inc., Mayer converts cars into mobile offices for executives who would now prefer a six- or eight-hour drive over the unpredictability of flight.

He's seen a steady increase in his business since 9-11, and for a simple reason: With extra security precautions adding to pre-flight check-in time, flying just doesn't save the time it once did, he said.

For example, the 360-mile drive from Cincinnati to St. Louis takes a little over six hours — not that much longer than a flight, if one factors in the time it takes to get to the airport two hours before the flight departs, Mayer said.

"Compare the door-to-door time, and then think about the unpredictability of the weather

and the new security procedures," Mayer said. "I'd rather make a 10-hour drive to Kansas City and be sure I'll get there than be stuck at the airport."

More and more business travelers are grounded these days, with uncertainty after the Sept. 11 terror attacks, the slumping economy and increasingly high travel costs.

For most, staying on the ground means staying at the office, replacing the out-of-town meeting with the Internet, e-mail or teleconferencing.

But companies like Mayer's can literally provide an office on the road.

Airplane passengers using laptop computers to play games or write documents have become a familiar sight over the last decade. But Mayer can use wireless networking — in effect, a cellular phone converted into a modem — to use a laptop computer to access the Internet or send and receive e-mail and faxes during a drive across the country.

That's a big advantage, because Federal Aviation Administration regulations prevent the use of wireless networks, as well as cellular phones, while the

plane is in flight.

Of course the mobile office isn't quite up to par with the home office.

As cellular phone users know from experience, wireless access depends greatly on signal strength. And Mayer said connection speeds are still relatively slow — about the equivalent of a 14.4K modem — but newer technology is coming out that will allow access speeds up to 56K.

Mayer said demand has increased three times over the last four months, with individuals, corporations and car charter companies looking to install his vehicle-mounted laptop and printer stands and other equipment into cars, sport utility vehicles and vans.

That's because Americans are taking more car trips, even as business flights drop.

Fifty-three percent of corporate travel industry professionals said they're spending less on travel than they did in 2001, and many corporations said they spent less in 2001 than they spent the year before, according to a June survey by the National Business Travel Association.

Domestic air travel is down 8.7

percent from a year ago, according to a July study by the Travel Industry Association of America, and international flights have dropped more than 12 percent.

But there have been modest increases in auto traffic, which is up about 3.1 percent, based on gasoline sales, and Amtrak rail traffic, which is up just 0.1 percent from last summer.

"We're hearing, anecdotally, that driving is becoming a more popular option in some markets," said Allison Marble, a spokeswoman for the National Business Travel Association, which represents the travel industry and corporate travel executives.

"It's a decision that is not only being driven by cost, but also by convenience. Some travelers feel that with all the time spent getting to the airport, going through security and renting a car, even a short flight in the air can take as much time as it would to drive there," she said.

"There's also uncertainty with flying — will I be stuck at a security checkpoint, will my flight take off on time, will I make my connection? Some people would rather drive and feel that they're in control. 'At least I'm moving.'"



MELVIN GRIER / The Post

Doug Mayer runs MobileNet Inc., which lets drivers to convert their cars into offices.