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# Seatback telephones in planes to be pulled

By MARY C. SCHNEIDAU The Atlanta Journal-Constitution Published on: 07/05/06

You know those seatback phones on airplanes? They're going the way of pillows and hot meals in coach.

They're disappearing.



(ENLARGE)

Airplane seatback telephones

never really caught on.

Verizon Airfone, the largest provider of in-flight passenger telephone service, is pulling its phones from commercial airplanes by the end of the year.

Verizon Communications, Airfone's parent, made the decision, Airfone spokesman Jim Pilcher said.

"Their strategy is to continue to focus on broadband, wireless and wireline," he said. The service was offered on 1,000 planes flown by Delta, United, US Airways and Continental.

Verizon Pilcher declined to say how Airfone was performing, but analysts said it wasn't impressive.

"This was an idea whose time never got here," said Terry Trippler, an airline watcher with Vacation Passport. "It was just never fully embraced. I never saw

anybody use it."

It may not have been popular because it was expensive, Trippler said. Customers paid a \$3.99 access fee and up to \$4.99 a minute. A quick check-in with the home office or a relative could easily run \$30 and up.

Roger Entner, a wireless industry analyst with the Boston-based Ovum consulting firm, said passengers are not interested in voice access alone and that any successful in-flight service has to include Internet access.

Still, Verizon is not hurt by the end of Airfone's commercial service, Entner said.

"It's a side business," he said. "Revenue-wise it should be a rounding error."

Airfone, which Verizon acquired in 2000 when it bought GTE, installed the first seatback telephone in 1987. Other companies, including AT&T, had seatback phone service, but dropped it by 2002.

There are 58 Delta planes with the phones, airline spokeswoman Gina Laughlin said.

Delta was getting rid of the phones before Airfone decided to end service. About 400 Delta planes had the phones at one time, she said, but the airline started to remove them during renovations.

There was a decreased demand for the service because Delta allows passengers to use cellphones as planes taxi to gates, Laughlin said. The airline also wanted to remove the phones because of their extra weight, which contributes to fuel consumption.

Airfone will continue its service in general aviation, where about 3,400 aircraft have the phones, Pilcher said. He would not say whether Verizon is thinking of selling Airfone, only that it "has a variety of options for that side of business." The company has not decided what will happen to Airfone's 140 employees.

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