

Case study

## America West



### At a glance

**Industry:** Logistics/ Transportation

**Application:** Air Cargo

**Product:** 760 Mobile Computer

**Partner:** Wavelink, AT&T Wireless

### America West cruises under a tight deadline with the launch of a mandated mail-tracking system

“Delayed” is not a word that sits well with Joe Beery. It’s a touchy word, particularly in his industry, and one that tends to cost money wherever the word is applied. Beery does not want to hear about delayed.

His company, America West, is the second-largest low-fare airline in the United States. Its planes carry not only people, but other eagerly awaited cargo. Tons of mail, to be exact, from the United States Postal Service. The Postal Service does not want to hear about delayed, either.

So when Beery, vice president and chief information officer of his company, got word that the Postal Service would start requiring all air carriers to begin tracking mail as a prerequisite to renewed contracts, he knew that America West’s tracking system had to embark on time.

“Without tracking the mail, and without deploying the system, we would have lost a significant portion of the revenue associated with the mail that we carry,” Beery said. No airline can afford that.

But while the Postal Service was abundantly specific about its expectations and the deadline for coming up with a plan to meet them, the route to compliance would have to be charted by each air carrier. For them, this was new territory.

“As dictated by the Postal Service, you have to track the mail in ways that it had never been done before,” Beery said.

America West operates in 93 cities in North and Central America, 76 in the United States. Corporate headquarters are in Tempe, Ariz. Major hubs are in Phoenix and Las Vegas. Among its destinations, the airline tenders mail in 50 airport mail stations. But because it potentially could handle mail on any of its stops, America West had to provide tracking coverage across the continental United States. And it had to do so quickly.

Requirements were strict: the Postal Service demanded that all carriers deploy a mail-tracking system within four months of the previous deadline it had set for carriers to present a tracking plan. Any system had to meet a set of stringent requirements.

In a spirit of enterprise under pressure, America West showed how innovation could trump inexperience. Through careful consideration of all its options, methodical testing and input from its workers who actually had to use the new system, America West was able to develop and implement a mail-tracking system within 65 days.



The speed of deployment belies the thoroughness of America West's search for system components. "We looked at most of the major providers in the industry," Beery said. He knew that his tracking system would need a mobile computer that could scan bar codes, a wireless provider for sending data, and a software platform to run it all.

"AT&T is one of our partners that we use in a lot of other areas in the airline," Beery said. "We asked them to help us through this process." As a wireless provider, AT&T works in partnership with Intermec Technologies Corp. Beery and his team took a look at the Intermec® 760 Color mobile computer with integrated scanning and wide-area wireless capabilities, along with the wares of its competition.

"We had the best pre-sale experience with Intermec," he said. "We took the scanners out into the field. We showed them to the people who load the mail, and we did an evaluation based on which scanner the loaders thought they could use most effectively. That was probably the largest deciding factor."

Two other factors swayed Beery's team toward Intermec: the capacity for quick, effective software development, and the company's responsiveness.

Intermec brought in Wavelink Corp., one of its Honors Partners. Wavelink offered a rapid-application development product called Studio EDGE.

"Studio EDGE is for customers looking to write Java-based applications that can be delivered on mobile platforms across a variety of networks. In this case, a wide-area AT&T network," said Eric Hermelee, vice president of marketing for Wavelink.

Early on, Beery saw the advantages of buying a software platform that his in-house developers could easily manipulate. "It was important to us to own the software, because we are confident that this product will have other applications within our system," Beery said. "One example would be to start scanning our freight. If we own the software, we can make changes and modifications much more cost effectively and we could do it much faster."

With Intermec and Wavelink on board, the next step was getting the hardware and software on-site as quickly as possible.

"From the first day, Intermec was very responsive to our requests about how quickly we could get hardware and how flexible it was," Beery said. "When we finally decided to use the 760 mobile computer, Intermec really jumped through hoops in manufacturing to make sure we got the number of devices we needed on time. That was huge for us."

With a customized application on the mobile computers, America West next had to train its mail loaders across the country to use the new system. The Phoenix hub became the first training ground. Then the rest of the Intermec 760s got flown out nationwide in what Beery called a shotgun start, and the system was officially deployed.

"The training wasn't long and involved, because the application is simple and intuitive," Beery said. "We're one of the more successful deployments for a tracking system, because we really tried to focus on keeping everything simple. We know that simple works better."

When the Postal Service makes a drop at any of America West's airport mail stations, an America West mail handler scans the identification tag on each bin with the integrated scanner on the Intermec 760 mobile computer.

Identification information is downloaded and sent in batches across AT&T's wireless network via the 760 mobile computer's internal wide-area wireless radio. From there the information travels to America West's data center in Phoenix, where it is compiled, formatted and sent directly to the Postal Service through a T1 line. Whenever the mail changes hands, its identification tag is scanned and its status updated.

Wavelink's software development tools allow the application to manage the radio component of the mobile computer so that it could be switched on and off, utilizing the handheld's battery to its fullest potential. This modification substantially extended the life expectancy of the battery. Workers could scan tags with the radio off, then either dock the mobile computer or simply turn on the radio to access the wireless network and transmit data.

"That was a big deal," Beery said. "Anytime you have a ramp worker who has to stop what he's doing and go get a new battery, you're interrupting the operation. We needed that feature to make the deployment successful."

Beery's pride shows when he talks about the teamwork that pushed this project through. "Our software development team is one of the best I've ever worked with," he said. "The fact that we've got two good partners in Intermec and Wavelink is going to give us even more capability as we move forward."

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