As bizjet operations rebuild, so does industry optimism

For the FBO business, 2013 may go down as the year the industry truly began its slow, tentative climb out of the trough. U.S. business jet activity, both domestic and international, rose over 2012, which in turn saw a modest gain over 2011. At almost 3.4 million operations, activity last year was considerably better than in 2009. While last year started out slowly, the FBO industry continues to build momentum.

In its annual review of business aircraft activity, Aviation Business expects the trend to be robust all this year. “That momentum has also turned up the heat on what we might call a breakthrough year,” said Aviation president and CEO Dan Bucaro. “You got a 20 percent increase in 2012 and then you had a good month and then you had a bad month, you had a good week and a bad week, so the only thing I would say is that the latter half of 2013 and the beginning of 2014 have been more stable.”

A forecast by FBO industry consultants Aviation Business Strategies Group (ABSG) predicts fuel sales for this year will remain relatively static. In a report released at this year’s NASAA Scheldear and Deputies annual conference in January, company principal John Enticknap said that results of his company’s annual FBO industry survey indicate the entire market has yet to catch the upturn in business during 2013. “The company predicted that any provider that achieved a 6 percent top three, the latter half of 2013 and the beginning of 2014 have been more stable.”

Although there is increased optimism this year, nearly half the FBOs surveyed did not see an increase in fuel sales in the financial market or a geopolitical climate in business during 2013, he said. Last year, the company predicted that any provider that achieved a 6 percent increase in fuel sales would be among the top industry providers, yet more than 20 percent of those surveyed this year reached at least or surpassed that target in 2013. “For 2014, we’re raising the bar to 8 percent.”

The company said that its annual FBO industry survey indicates that the latter half of 2013 and the beginning of 2014 have been more stable.

AirFit – Long Beach Airport (KLGB), Long Beach, Calif. 9.6

AirFit is evidence that you don’t need a brand-new facility to achieve high recognition by customers. The Southern California FBO this year garnered the highest overall score in the history of the ANF survey.

Top 4 FBOs

AirFit – Long Beach Airport (KLGB), Long Beach, Calif. 9.6

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With an overall score of 9.5 for two years in a row, and top-place finishes in two of the last four annual AIN surveys, J.A. Air Center embraces the concept of consistency. The FBO serves not only the Chicago area, but also its own growing economic hub west of the city. “A lot of people don’t realize that the city of Aurora is actually the second largest city in Illinois after Chicago,” said Randy Fank, the FBO’s general manager, adding that the FBO sees plenty of business from the surrounding communities such as Oak Brook and Naperville. While it may be farther from Chicago than some other area airports, Aurora has direct highway access, and within four minutes of leaving the FBO, customers are on I-88 heading toward the Windy City.

Over the past year, the Phillips 66-branded FBO, home to 17 business jets, saw its fuel sales increase by 15 percent over 2012, as the airport continues to establish itself in the region. Currently its 70,000-sq-ft hangar is approaching capacity, and the company’s lease provides right of first refusal on the remaining developable land at Aurora in support of any future expansion plans.

One popular feature of the CAA-approved FBO is the 18,000-sq-ft aircraft canopy that provides shelter from weather and can accommodate aircraft the height of a G650. For those customers who don’t wish to be driven directly to the aircraft, a smaller streetside canopy allows for protected drop-offs and pick-ups at the terminal’s front door.

Over the past year, J.A. Air Center added Type IV de-icing capability, a wise investment given the frigid weather that gripped the region this winter. “It has really improved the business,” said Fank. “Before, a lot of people were hesitant because we didn’t have Type IV, but since we added it we’ve brought in a lot more traffic.”
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The facility, which is six years into its 40-year lease, requires little in the way of upgrades, according to AIN readers, as its 12,000-sq-ft terminal shared top honors for facilities in this year’s survey. Flight crews particularly like the spacious 1,800-sq-ft crew lounge, which includes a theater-style TV viewing area, attached workout room with bathroom and shower, computer work stations, a pair of snooze rooms and separate video gaming room. J.A. also operates a Part 145 repair station, parts department, an interiors completion shop, an aircraft detailing business that serves many surrounding airports, and one of the country’s largest avionics shops (the FBO draws its initials from Joliet Avionics), as well as a flight school and an aircraft charter/management division.

Tampa International Jet Center
Tampa International Airport (KTPA), Tampa, Fla.

9.5

In operation since 2005, Tampa International Jet Center (TIJC) has spent most of its existence in the upper echelons of AIN’s annual FBO Survey, and according to company president Phillip Botana, the explanation for that success is simple. “There’s no rocket science to what we do in the FBO industry, but I think it’s the execution, over time proving to customers and flight departments that the same things they like will happen each time they arrive.” That consistency was noted by our readers, who awarded TIJC the highest rating of 9.7 in the category of customer service representatives—a new category in the survey—and reflects the company’s philosophy of providing the same level of attention to all customers, from the smallest piston-powered airplane to the largest business jet.

“You never know who is in that airplane,” noted Botana. “If we treat everybody the same all of the time, we’ll never regret an opportunity to expand our business.” Part of that successful equation is the retention of employees, several of whom have been with the company since its inception. “We have a small staff who’ve all been here for a long time, and they are invested in how well they do their jobs every day,” Botana told AIN. “I’ve had hundreds of pilots say it’s so reassuring to walk in the place and see the same faces behind the counter as they did the last few times they were here and know they can count on them.” TIJC, which claims a market share of 60 percent at the airport, saw a modest fuel volume gain last year over 2012, which actually translated to more of a statistical increase, as Tampa hosted the Republican National Convention in 2012 and the FBO saw an 80,000-gallon boost in jet-A sales as a result.

The facility has nearly 110,000 sq ft of occupied hangar space and is home to 50 turbine-powered aircraft, ranging from several King Air 200s to a Global Express. Encouraged by a recent increase in tenant requests, TIJC is in negotiations to add a 33,000-sq-ft hangar. Also slated is an interior refresh for the terminal. “Now that we’re nine years old, we’re getting a

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Fort Lauderdale, Fla. Airport (KFXE), Banyan Air Service at the steps,” said Stewart. “They meet each arriving aircraft on the ramp. Night or day, a flight-support concierge anticipates their needs on their next visit. We try to give them as much information as they can about customers in their absence, and return to find their aircraft roosting in its 250,000 sq ft craft roosting in its 250,000 sq ft hangars and a new clubhouse/terminal.

Business Jet Center (BJC) at Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport (DFW), Texas

In 2009, BJC, which prides itself on exemplary “7 star” service, posted a record operating margin of 15 percent in the peak year of 2009, according to vice president of operations Todd Molton. The BJC facility was designed to accommodate the growing number of international flights. The FBO received its high score in amenities, which is “to provide exceptional aviation services to our customers through dedication to quality, safety and efficiency while maintaining a commitment to growth and the development of the team.”

Business Jet Center Dallas Love Field Airport (KDAL), Dallas, Texas

Business was good for the Fargo Jet Center (FJC), which has posted a hard-earned rating of 9.1, and a place among the top 10%

Fargo Jet Center (KFXE), Fargo, N.D.

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Hangar Ten  
*(Now Atlantic Aviation)*  
Charles B. Wheeler  
Downtown Airport (KMKC), Kansas City, Mo.

Purchased at the end of the year by Atlantic Aviation, this location is no stranger to AIN’s FBO survey, having raised the bar at MKC when its newly built facility opened in 2010. This past year, the location saw a 30-percent gain in business over 2012, according to general manager Kyle Eiserer. To accommodate that growth, the company extended its parking lot last spring.

In this year’s survey, the FBO saw its highest rating in the facility category, and among its favorite attractions is a well equipped exercise room, located prominently rather than shunted to a remote corner of the building. “Since most crewmembers spend at least a few hours at an FBO, the fitness facility provides an outlet for folks to exercise and stay healthy, which we feel is important,” noted Eiserer. The pilot area also features locker rooms and sleep rooms where crewmembers can spend the night.

The location’s 28,500-sq-ft hangar is currently home to 10 turbine aircraft, the largest a Challenger 300. It can accommodate aircraft the size of a G650. Another 7,000-sq-ft hangar is under construction.

Given that Kansas City renowned for its barbeque, the FBO has been known to favor crewmembers and passengers with bottles of BBQ rub so can they take the KC flavor home with them.

**Monterey Jet Center**  
Monterey Regional Airport (KMRY), Monterey, Calif.

With more than 200,000 sq ft of hangars spread over 16 acres, Monterey Jet Center has the largest complex on dual-use
Monterey Regional Airport, dwarfing even the airline terminal. Home to approximately a dozen turbine aircraft, including a Global Express, the location’s hangars are occupied each year by aircraft heading to major events such as the annual Pro-Am golf tournament and the Concours d’Elegance, one of the crown jewels in the automobile collecting circuit, at nearby Pebble Beach.

Offering discounted fuel for Hawaii-bound aircraft, the Avfuel-branded location suits operators seeking quick turns with no congestion. Despite its name, the FBO treats all customers equally, according to operations manager Michael Heilpern. “Just because somebody comes in in a small single-engine airplane does not make them any less important than the guy who rolls up in a Gulfstream,” he said.

The location earned its highest score in the customer service representative category. “Great customer service is not only about executing the requested services, it is also about fulfilling the unspoken needs of our customers as well,” said customer service manager Kawai Lopez. “By taking the time to really talk to our customers, we are able to develop these relationships, thus allowing us to take our service to another level.”

National Jets
Fort Lauderdale/Hollywood International Airport (KFLL), Fort Lauderdale, Fla.

While its overall score increased by only 0.4 from last year, that was enough to catapult Fort Lauderdale-based National Jets from the top 30 percent in AIN’s 2013 FBO
Survey to the top 10 percent this year. The family-owned and -run company received excellent scores for both its line and customer service. “Outside safety, customer service is our number-one priority,” noted general manager Russ Boy Jr.

In operation for 46 years at KFLL, the company traces its aviation lineage back to the mid-1940s, and in addition to FBO services the provider also operates a Part 135 aircraft charter/management business, a Part 145 maintenance station, an avionics shop and even its own air ambulance service using four company-owned

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LeJaret 35As. While National Jets relies largely on transient aircraft business, the facility has 17 based turbine aircraft ranging from the LeJaret 35s all the way up to a BBJ. They are sheltered in 35,000 sq ft of newly renovated hangar space, and the company is planning to add more capacity. Its 40 acres includes property that it leases to Federal Express, and the blacktop on its 10-acre ramp was redone last year. In the terminal, recent upgrades include a new flight-planning room, more offices and the addition of a coffee bar. Over the past year, the Phillips 66-branded dealer saw both its fuel flowage and traffic rise by 12 percent over 2012.

Pentastar Aviation
Oakland County International Airport (KPTK), Pontiac, Mich.

While some might consider it an accomplishment to be the highest-rated service provider at an airport with six FBOs, Pentastar Aviation at Detroit-area PTK regularly ranks among the top FBOs in the country, according to AIN readers. The company, which celebrates its 50th anniversary this year, began as Chrysler’s flight department and has grown over the years to include five hangars providing 130,000 sq ft of space, a Part 145 Class IV repair station, an aircraft charter management department, aircraft brokerage and the in-house “Five-star Gourmet” catering kitchen. The FBO specializes in handling large charter aircraft such as those bringing professional sports teams to town to challenge the local Tigers, Lions, Pistons and Red Wings. Such flights are processed through the “Star Gate,” a recently refurbished smaller private terminal with its own jetway, a remnant of Chrysler days.

The company has 26 based turbine aircraft from a Premier to a private MD-83, and while traffic and fuel volumes at PTK have fallen slightly over the past year, Pentastar logged a 5-percent increase in fuel sales as well as an increase in market share. “Our mission is to exceed our customers’ expectations by adhering to the highest standards of safety and quality,” said company president and CEO Greg Schmidt.

Signature Flight Support
St. Paul Downtown Airport/ Holman Field (KSTP), St. Paul, Minn.

It’s rare for one of the locations from a large chain to land amid the top performers in the AIN FBO Survey, but this year Signature Flight Support’s facility at St. Paul Downtown Airport earned that honor. The location well represents the “safe, personalized and consistent customer service” that the company’s Signature Service Promise focuses on delivering, with scores of 9.5 for line service and 9.6 for its customer service representatives. “The group at STP has developed a safety and service culture that has resulted in exemplary performance and customer satisfaction for several years,” said general manager Clint Kummer. “As a group they are proactive and focused on safety and the needs of our customers.”

The location occupies 38 acres at the airport, with 12 of them devoted to ramp space and 200,000 sq ft of hangars that shelter some 20 aircraft, from a King Air to a G550. According to Kummer, the location has seen business grow over the past year as the economy shows signs of recovery.

Infrastructure improvements over the past year include installation of LED lighting in all hangars, and the roof on one of them will be replaced soon. With this year’s Major League Baseball All-Star Game slated for the twin city of Minneapolis, the location expects to see a boost in traffic for the Mid-Summer Classic.

Stuart Jet Center
Witham Field Airport (KSUA) Stuart, Fla.

This family-owned and -operated business, which has been at the airport for the past 34 years, made a jump from a top-30-percentage finish in last year’s survey to the top 10 percent this year, attributable in part to its survey-leading 9.6 score for line service. The company is a firm believer in NATA’s Safety 1st Professional Line Service Training program, with each of its line technicians conducting annual recurrent training.

The FBO’s leasehold occupies 53 acres at Witham Field, including more than 15 acres of lighted ramp space and 250,000 sq ft of hangars (a new 24,000-sq-ft hangar opened over the past year), which are home to more than 20 turbine-powered business jets ranging from Eclipse 500 to G550. Its 5,000-sq-ft terminal offers a pilot lounge with sleep room and showers, a 16-seat AV-equipped conference room, crew cars and on-site car rental.

In the past, SJC has sent its customer service staff for Ritz-Carlton training, a factor that might have contributed to the FBO’s 9.5 score in the CSR category. Manager Jeff Capen told AIN that the company, located in the heart of baseball’s spring training “Grapefruit League” towns, tasks its CSR’s with anticipating the needs of its customers, to under-promise and over-deliver, and to “become familiar with our customers with the same professional, friendly faces year after year.”

**Gift Card Winners**

As an incentive to participate in the 2013 FBO Survey, we offered to select 13 respondents randomly and award each a $200 Amazon gift card. Below are the winners:

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<tr>
<th>Person</th>
<th>FBO</th>
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<tr>
<td>Betsy Wines</td>
<td>Meridan</td>
<td>KTEB</td>
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<td>Beverly Patton</td>
<td>Sheltair</td>
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<td>Bayyan Air Service</td>
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<td>Henning Schymik</td>
<td>Xjet</td>
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<td>Holly Hopkins</td>
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<td>John Tary</td>
<td>AirFtite Aviation Services</td>
<td>KFLB</td>
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For the second year, AIN’s FBO Survey asked respondents to identify specific FBO employees or teams who routinely go above and beyond when it comes to customer service. We received almost 800 responses to this question. Below we have highlighted 14 people who were repeatedly recognized but we encourage you to view the full list at www.ainonline.com/above-and-beyond-fbo-2014.

**Above & Beyond**