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Virgin Group to launch charter flight 'eBay'

The UK's Virgin Group has entered the online charter flight arena and launched a new offering, Virgin Charter (booth 1228), a virtual marketplace that brings together private air travel buyers and operators.

Virgin's charter program puts buyers in touch with sellers and members are selected on an invitation-only basis. Members can post trip requests or submit quotes, and provide feedback on each other eBay style.

To buy a trip, members log on, locate available aircraft, negotiate pricing, and manage their entire trip online. Charter operators can make their inventory available to a large international customer base without changing the way they now do business.

Virgin is the latest entrant to a sector kicked off at last year's NBAA by Manchester, New Hampshire-based OneSky Jets (8536), and which has subsequently swollen to include Sentient Jets (booth 6833), Blue Star Jets and Jets International. Each has a different pricing model.

Virgin favors the volume auction style, charging sellers a percentage of the sale price and allowing free registration for buyers.

OneSky purchases flights at a discount and sells them on to buyers at a profit using brokers. According to Jeffrey Hodes, OneSky's public relations manager, other companies ask buyers for sums ranging from \$50,000 to \$100,000 to sign up to their programs.

Virgin says it did not approach any other companies to acquire existing technology. Chief executive and founder Scott Duffy says: "We built our platform from scratch and our team includes people from Google, Yahoo and Expedia."

The company has invited at least 100 of the industry's top charter operators to join, which it says it will name in the next few days, although San Carlos, California-based XOJet is tipped to be in the named list, as well as key professional buyers of private.

OneSky chief executive Greg Johnson has said he welcomes the entry of a company the size of Virgin into the charter market to give online services more credibility.

OneSky expects revenues of more than \$20 million this year, and has 350 suppliers, more than a third of the 950 private-jet operators in the USA.

However, Virgin is likely to become a dominant player in the market, with UK billionaire Sir Richard Branson's backing and copious amounts of marketing and research dollars behind it.

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