In the cockpit avionics sector Garmin takes top honors for how it looks after its customers. Among suppliers of cabin electronics, AirCell leads the pack.

by Matt Thurber

AIN’s readers who responded to the annual Product Support Survey once again chose Garmin as their favorite for the top provider of cockpit avionics customer service. Garmin’s rating jumped this year to 8.35, up from last year’s 8.07, making it again the sole cockpit avionics manufacturer with a rating above the 8.0 level. In second place again this year was Universal Avionics, with 7.85, down slightly from last year’s 7.92. After Garmin, the top contenders are all within a fairly narrow range, with third place going to L-3 Avionics Systems at 7.76, up from last year’s 7.58 and vaulting L-3 ahead of fourth-place finisher Rockwell Collins (7.69, down from last year’s third-place 7.78). Avidyne’s score of 7.50 put it in fifth place, ahead of Honeywell (7.36) and Honeywell’s Bendix/King division (7.11). Outlining the cockpit avionics manufacturers were Sandel at 6.69 and Thales at 6.03.

On the cabin electronics side, which includes telecommunications and entertainment equipment, Aircell leads the pack with a jump to an overall average of 7.90, up from 7.54 last year, besting Heads-Up Technologies, which took second place with 7.81. Rosen Aviation moves to third place with 7.74, up from last year’s 7.17. In fourth place is Flight Display Systems at 7.60, down from last year’s 7.95. Rockwell Collins took fifth place at 7.39, pushing Honeywell down to sixth at 7.35. Thrane & Thrane scored 7.09, followed by MagnaStar at 6.31, down from 6.84 last year.

COCKPIT SYSTEMS

Garmin

Perennially popular Garmin garnered nearly unanimous praise for its products in comments from survey participants. This bodes well for Garmin as it accelerates into larger aircraft with new integrated avionics systems.

During the past year, Garmin has added field service engineers around the world, the company reported, “as well as investing in various tools to provide world-class avionics support. Garmin recognizes the high demands of the turbine aircraft market and is focused on exceeding the specific needs of that customer base.” More recently, Garmin announced the FliteLevel Select extended warranty program for the G500, G600, GTN touchscreen, traffic systems and other products.

Comments like this one underscore operators’ passion for the company’s products: “Garmin is a fantastic company. I have had dual G350s for nearly a decade and they have performed flawlessly. Not one problem with either unit. Garmin made the Waas upgrade promptly and affordable. Garmin is now the gold standard in avionics.”

Another reader wrote: “We installed the G1000 system in the aircraft in June 2010. We have been totally pleased with its performance and ease of use. We feel it far overshadows the Pro Line 21 system in this application at a much more realistic price.”

Universal Avionics

Universal, inventor of the flight management system, now makes much more equipment than just FMSes, such as flight displays, Vision1 synthetic vision, TAWS traffic display, radio control units, attitude heading reference systems, UniLink datalink system and data/voice recorders.

Most of the user comments about Universal equipment are positive, although some did complain about the cost of Waas upgrades and battery problems with FMS units. This comment summarized those feelings: “I really have not had any issues with my UNS-1K other than replacing my battery. I would like a less expensive upgrade to Waas but so would everyone else.” And this commenter expressed admiration for Universal’s products: “Old, heavy and as reliable as the sunrise. They get the job done.”

Universal continues to develop new products while supporting the many thousands of units in the field, including more than 20,000 FMSes.

L-3 Avionics

L-3 Avionics boosted its overall average to 7.76 from last year’s 7.58, putting it in third place. The primary L-3 products used in business aviation are the company’s backup flight instruments, such as the Trilogy electronic standby instrument and electronic HSI and GH-3000 standby instrument. Cessna recently selected the GH-3900 electronic standby instrument system as standard equipment on the Citation Ten. But L-3 makes many more products and is home to the classic Stormscope lightning detection system, Skywatch collision avoidance system, Iris infrared camera and Landmark standalone Class B TAWS.

Comments about L-3’s products were mostly positive, such as, “Never had a failure of these avionics.” and “Flawless operation with back-up airspeed and altitude [referring to a Trilogy unit].” Yet one reader experienced problems: “The GH-3000 is a horrible product that should not be counted on as an emergency device.”

Rockwell Collins*

It is interesting to see Rockwell Collins entering the touchscreen control arena, following an announcement at last month’s EAA AirVenture show (see story page 52). Rockwell Collins moved down one place to fourth this year with a 7.69 overall average. As a long-time manufacturer of full-line integrated avionics suites, Rockwell Collins has a lot of equipment in the field and has to serve many operators flying a huge variety of avionics products made over many years.

The comments varied significantly over the company’s product range. Those flying modern Pro Line 21 systems are happy with the product and the support provided by Rockwell Collins, although one commenter complained about the slowness of database updates. Owners of older Pro Line 4 systems are worried about reliability and upgrade options, although Rockwell Collins has developed upgrades and continues to work on upgrade options for these operators.

Two different readers wrote that their Rockwell Collins avionics are bullet-proof, and one noted, “Pro Line 21 is an extremely reliable system. I am amazed at how Collins has accomplished this feat.”

On the cockpit avionics side, Rockwell Collins has focused on improving support worldwide with faster response times to inquiries, quicker turn times on repairs and adding inventory in Europe, Asia and Australia. The acquisition of the former Air Routing flight and trip planning company to form the Ascend product line added flight management support to Rockwell Collins’s stable, including automated avionics data uploads. Avionics maintenance and repair costs are managed through the Corporate Aircraft Service Program (CASIP), which offers fixed costs and priority response.

Avidyne

Avidyne has grown into a full-line avionics manufacturer and now makes an integrated suite, the Entegra Release 9, including displays with dual air data attitude and heading reference systems, dual FMS900w units with qwerty keyboard, 16-watt, 8.33-MHz radios and dual Waas/RNP-capable GPS receivers. Avidyne also manufactures autopilots, traffic advisory systems, weather datalink receivers and weather detection systems; the company recently announced a new mode-S/A/T-D-S-B transponder as well as the touchscreen IFDS540 FMS/GMS/navcom, which fits into the slot vacated by a Garmin GNS530 (see story page 68).

In eighth place last year, Avidyne moved up a few places to fifth this year with an overall average of 7.50, up almost a full point from 6.51 last year. According to the company, it has made significant investments in product support during the past 18 to 24 months, including investing more than $1 million to upgrade the exchange pool; adding call center staff to improve response time to five minutes per open item (from two hours); adding live tech chat on the website; introducing new advanced and platinum exchange programs; providing Web-based online RMA requests for dealers; offering online troubleshooting trees for dealers; and adding facilities outside the U.S. as in-country exchange depots.

Comments about Avidyne were mixed, reflected by this reader: “Pretty

Garmin G600

 universal products: “Old, heavy and as reliable as the sunrise. They get the job done.”
Avionics have been very solid and reliable.” Another reader wrote: “They are the best, hands down the best. Some of the upgrades are slow to come about; however, the suite itself is excellent.”

Bendix/King avionics are fans of their avionics and indicated high levels of satisfaction, even with old avionics: “My original equipment from King, Crown coms and navs have been extremely reliable even though they were manufactured in 1975. The Bendix M4D autopilot does a good job and has also been reliable.”

To meet customer needs, Honeywell has expanded its regional support efforts and added stocking locations in Brazil and India and increased stock in all locations, with the goal of having parts available within the customer’s region. The authorized service center network is also growing, and the Web portal myaerospace.com has a new simplified user interface.

A Gulfstream operator praised Honeywell avionics, writing, “Our Epic PlaneView Heads Up Technologies

The few comments about Heads Up Technologies products, which include XM WX receivers, cabin lighting, voice checklists and now a full integrated cabin management system, were all positive. Heads Up ranked second this year with a rating of 7.81.

Comments liked Heads Up products: “Never a problem with this unit, once it was installed.” And: “Once a passenger briefer system unit is installed it is good almost forever. Works very well with little to correct on them.”

Rosen Aviation

Display and cabin information system provider Rosen leaped up the chart this year, from last year’s seventh place (7.17) to third with a rating of 7.74. Surprisingly, the comments on Rosen weren’t all positive, although one rated the company as “very good.” An operator complained, “We have some legacy seven-inch individual passenger view screens which are no longer supported.” And another wrote: “We sometimes have to manually ‘connect’ the screens to pull up the map...”

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display. We have never been able to find a solution to this problem. Most of the time they display properly when we turn on the power.” Given Rosen’s high rating and its dedication to customer service, one can’t help wondering if these operators have communicated with their Rosen customer service representatives.

According to Rosen, the company offers a full four-year warranty on all products, maintains a large loaner pool and guarantees a two-day turn-time on repairs. AOG support is available 24/7.

Flight Display Systems

With a 7.60 rating, Flight Display Systems moved down from last year’s first place to fourth. Flight Display has grown from a small manufacturer of cabin displays to a provider of full cabin management systems and other cabin products such as Blu-ray players, iPhone and iPad mounts and chargers.

According to Flight Display, the company has boosted its CMS support 200 percent compared with 2010 levels and trained technicians to support specific products like the Flight Display moving map and HD Blu-ray player. New developments in product support include quick-turn returned merchandise support for no additional charge. “This gives customers a 24-hour turn-time on all in-shop repairs,” according to the company. Warranty times have been extended 100 percent.

Comments about Flight Display’s products were mostly positive, although one operator mentioned, “Lot of software problems,” while another wrote: “We have a continuous and unsolved problem with the cabin display installed in the PC-12.”

Rockwell Collins*

Rockwell Collins’s cabin products moved down one place to fifth this year, with a rating of 7.39, down from 7.60 and fourth place last year. Like the company’s cockpit avionics, the cabin systems also benefit from the focus on improving response times and repair turn times and the growing spare inventories around the world. Cabin systems such as Airshow cabin management and entertainment products can also be covered under the flat-rate pricing in the CASP fixed maintenance cost program.

Some of the comments suggest Rockwell Collins still has some issues to address with cabin products. Wrote one operator: “The cabin control from Collins in the [Challenger] 605 is still being debugged, years after it should have been working right. When oh when will they get this to where it does not lock up?” A Global operator wrote: “The CES [cabin entertainment system] is the weakest link in the Global Express XRS. System reliability and stability are less than desirable.” One operator submitted this hopeful comment: “CES products are more reliable; but still have much work to do.”

Honeywell*

Honeywell’s cabin systems moved down one place to sixth, with an overall average of 7.35. There weren’t too many comments referring specifically to the cabin systems. One operator reported: “Fortunately the cabin management system is relatively reliable because it is very difficult to maintain when it does fail.”

Honeywell reported that it has increased its stock worldwide to handle customer support issues and added flight-critical mechanical LRUs to its Spex pools.

The latest Honeywell CMS is the Ovation system, which allows passengers to control the cabin environment using icon-based touchscreen controls or wireless handheld devices.

Some of the comments suggest Honeywell products are more reliable; but still have much work to do.

MagnaStar

The MagnaStar air-to-ground telephone system, which is supported by Teledyne Controls, remains in last place at 6.31, where it was last year with a 6.84 rating. Most commenters were positive about their MagnaStar units, but one operator noted, “Units are not well supported by Teledyne, costly to repair, long lead times, can’t wait to replace this equipment in our aircraft.”

Thrane & Thrane

Thrane & Thrane offers a full range of Inmarsat SwiftBroadband satcom systems compatible with low- to high-gain antennas. During the past year, the company has enhanced its product support capabilities, including adding an online self-service center, fixed priced for repairs and exchanges, flexible warranties and local support teams. New product support capabilities coming this year will be online training and expanded regional service partners.

While some commenters were happy with Thrane & Thrane, two expressed specific complaints: “It fails way too often,” wrote one, and the other wrote: “Phone is very intermittent. Hard to get anyone who can help.”

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The results will run in next month’s issue.