

# Avionics & Software: How Often Should They Be Updated?

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One of the challenges of running an avionics shop is motivating customers to buy something. After all, you can stock your shelves with all the latest and greatest avionics and gizmos in the world, but if a customer is happy with what they have and is on a cash-tight budget, there is little chance to make a sale and move them into new equipment.

The same can be said of software — both in the form of computer programs, which help customers manage their aircraft more efficiently, and the software that goes into their avionics in the form of data cards and revisions.

Avionics and software do need to be changed at some point. Unlike products such as soft drinks, bread and even beer that have “best-used-by” dates, avionics and software contain no such provisions or promises of freshness or better taste. With that in mind, it is up to skilled avionics sales professionals to make the case for new products and help customers understand why their current equipment may be somewhat “stale.”

## The Database Connection

One of the stronger arguments to be made concerning the need to update is in the area of software. Whether it is the database in a hand-held GPS receiver that comes in with a plane for a static check, or the database in the flight-planning software you sold your customer in the past, having current data onboard is critical.

Many folks apparently have flown without charts and were not on the right

frequency for the airports they were seeking because they had changed and their databases were out of date. While some pilots believe such events and errors cause little more than embarrassment, there are situations in which a pilot may not be able to access vital information because of the age of his database.

For example, if a pilot is inbound to a new airport and needs to hear the local weather, having the frequency for the new airborne weather observation system that was installed at the field could be vital in helping him land safely.

Similarly, if the flight-planning software is more than a year old, it is likely the airport restaurant now could

weather data or new available data may not be received, and the pilot may not have the information he needs to make a go/no-go decision on a flight.

## Managing Software Updates

The amount of outdated software being used by pilots in the field is staggering. Many are running flight-planning software containing data on airports that have been closed for years. In asking pilots why they allow this, many respond they aren't sure how to get the updates, or they say it is too much of a bother to get them.

With this in mind, the savvy avionics shop manager can add to the shop's bottom line by providing an easy outlet for software updates. Obtaining and

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be closed or the rental car agency no longer is open 24 hours. This can be a significant inconvenience for both pilots and for the people they are planning to meet.

Even the contact information for the DUAT system can change from time to time. These changes, while subtle and sometimes not apparent to the end-user, can cause interface glitches resulting in changes in the way their current software operates. While some of these changes will be handled, in other cases, critical

installing a new data card during your current customers' inspection intervals (such as an annual inspection or a static check) is a way to leverage new sales and help your customers as well.

Likewise, maintaining a database of the software you sell gives you a chance to send customers a postcard announcing upgrades to the software when available. This mode of suggestive sales helps your shop and helps customers by keeping them abreast of the latest changes in avionics and flight-planning software — and at a

price that can be quite reasonable.

In the “instant gratification” environment prevailing in the business world, not having the materials can mean not making the sale. Trending your sales in this area is critical to ensuring you have the right software on hand. For example, if you have five pilots who want software upgraded each year, you’ll need to either have the stock on-hand or be able to pick it up quickly to make the sale.

Once established in using this approach, you can “wean off” pilots who are unresponsive or who indicate they have their own updates set up with the original equipment manufacturer. Using this approach, you can reduce mail bills and keep your profits where you need them. E-mailing such notices also can be effective and essentially free.

### **Bringing Attention to Updates**

Skilled avionics personnel know software and hardware upgrades for avionics systems are made on a sporadic basis. The key is knowing what your customers have in their planes so you can bring these upgrade opportunities to their attention and make the sale.

Start with a database of the avionics flying in your customers’ airplanes. This database can be as simple as binders with the aircraft identification and contact information for the owner, or as complicated as an Access database with the same information but which offers the ability to instantly sort and print envelopes for customers who need upgrades.

Once you have this apparatus or a similar system in place that works for your shop, do what you already do: monitor the market for changes from the avionics manufacturers. Even if your shop did not install the avionics in a customer’s airplane, by making the customer aware of new mandatory service bulletins or software

updates — especially those available for only a limited time at no cost or a reduced cost — can result in bringing customers to your shop and, more importantly, building customer loyalty in the process.

Another approach is to offer a free hardware revision check along with maintenance or the static check process. This carries two benefits. First, it allows your shop to gather the intelligence needed to build an effective and detailed database. Secondly, it builds goodwill with your customer base because they get something for free.

While you have a customer’s attention, you also can ask if he uses some of the more popular flight-planning software and which brand he uses. This data mining allows you to flesh out the prospective market and keep the right updates on-hand to serve your customers’ needs. It also provides you with a list of people to make suggestive sales to in the future when they arrive for other business or repairs.

“Sam, in looking at your history, I see you own a copy of Super Flight Planner software,” you say to the customer who brought in his plane for repairs as you look over his contact sheet in the database while working up his ticket. “That company has just released a new version, and it has some great features you can pick up at a discounted price. Would you be interested in that?”

If the customer isn’t immediately interested, bring out the latest sales flier for the software, which the customer can read while waiting for work to be completed or take home. In general, you should expect a 20 to 40 percent return rate on such brochure handouts, with higher return rates and sales if there is a discount of some sort for the upgrades.

Granted, not all customers want to update their existing GPS systems to the new WAAS standard. However,

even if two or three people do, your shop and their aircraft will be better off for the effort.

In thinking about the various service bulletins and updates offered over the past few years, it is easy to see how this can help keep your shop personnel busy, even in the quieter fall and winter months when the market typically softens.

### **How Often Is Enough?**

The key question in this entire exercise relates to how often customers need to update their software and hardware.

For hardware, the dynamics are driven by the desire to improve equipment or keep equipment reliable at the best cost. Apart from changing from an analog stack to a digital stack, this point is hard to drive home to a customer who is happy flying VORs and ADFs. However, for the owner of one of the latest state-of-the-art GPS MFDs, the need to make a service bulletin change to keep his nav/com working will resonate.

Software, on the other hand, comes with some specific updates needing to be kept somewhat up-to-date. For the flight-planning crowd, the best approach is to suggest yearly updates at the least. This is enough to ensure customers get the latest frequency changes and airport information on a routine basis.

If you have someone who is flying at a frequency of at least bi-weekly or more for business, they probably need to move toward picking up every update because their risks of running into bad data are higher.

Likewise, your customers who are flying their aircraft in hard IFR conditions on a routine basis should have their panel-mount GPS database updated on the standard cycle. If they are not, they are missing out on vital data to ensure safety of flight.

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While it will not add to your bottom line the same way periodic sales of updated data and software will, suggesting your customer move to one of the data-loader options for these panel-mount GPS systems typically is the best approach.

Then again, there will be those hardcore customers who insist what they have is “good enough.” It is hard to win over such customers. Try focusing your energies on the excellent features of the new product and helping your customers to see why they need to upgrade their software.

### **Working the Market**

If you think implementing these suggestions will take some time and effort, you are correct. After all, if avionics and software sold themselves, we wouldn't need sales personnel in the avionics shops — the customer would walk in, tell us what he wants, leave the plane, and wait for the installation to be completed.

Since that isn't how the world works, much as we do with selling new gear, we have to instruct and inform customers of why they need to update their software and even their avionics.

By making this effort, avionics professionals will improve the customer's safety of flight and safety of flight in general, as well as improve the bottom line of the shop. □