

A close-up, profile shot of a man's face. He has a well-groomed, light-colored beard and mustache. He is wearing a dark grey or black flight suit and a black communication headset with a microphone. He is looking slightly downwards and to his right. In the background, the circular frame of an airplane window is visible, showing a bright, overexposed sky.

A Fireside Chat with Joey Meier, Chief Pilot

As Chief Pilot for champion NASCAR driver Brad Keselowski, Joey Meier is used to life in the fast lane. That's why his team upgraded their Lear 45 to AVANCE L5.

We sat down with Joey to get his unfiltered take on flying with - and without – Wi-Fi. Read on for Joey's perspective on how onboard connectivity changes the game for him, his team and his passengers.

Thanks for spending some time with Gogo, Joey. Let's talk onboard Wi-Fi.

Happy to be here. Let's back up several years ago. We had no connectivity on the plane until we installed the ATG 5000. That was essentially a 3G connected system. With this system, we went from no connectivity to being able to fully communicate with the ground. We recently upgraded to the new AVANCE L5 system and now everything works in the airplane the way it would if you weren't in an airplane, and that's what's really cool.

Sounds like the AVANCE L5 system has made quite a difference.

You bet. With the L5 there's no apologizing - "Sorry guys, I know it's slow, better than nothing, right?" Instead, whatever app you're using works just like it does when you're at home and hardwired to your house.

You pick up your phone, your tablet, and there are no limitations to it. Everything just works the way it's supposed to. We use iPads in the airplane and they just work, whether it's animating your radar picture or messaging somebody back home. You don't have to explain to your passengers that they can talk but it's going to be slower. Or, you can send a message or email, but don't download too many attachments. With AVANCE L5, you are connected as if you had a hard wire going to the tail of the airplane that you're flying around.

What are your favorite things about having Wi-Fi onboard?

I'm a huge lover of Gogo Text & Talk. On every departure, our director of maintenance waits to hear from me. That used to be an ACARS message, but we don't use that anymore. Now I text him after takeoff, "Everything looks great. You can head home." It eliminates him hanging around the airport longer than necessary. Now he gets mad if I take off and forget to text him – he's like, "Hey, is everything okay? I was getting worried!"

The AVANCE L5 system also supports streaming – how has that changed the inflight Wi-Fi experience?

Streaming is a nice feature to have on our plane. While I don't use streaming in the cockpit, I've definitely seen the advantage for Brad when he flies after a race. He does a lot of Facebook Live with fans and FaceTime with friends and family. Both of those, two-way audio/video, are very data heavy and a big burden on the system. He was very limited when we had the ATG 5000.

Now, with the L5 system's streaming capabilities, he can be on Facebook Live pretty quickly after a race. He can see his videos rack up 80,000, 100,000 views over the course of a flight. He's completely enamored with how much more he's able to do these days on the plane.



So inflight Wi-Fi has improved the passenger experience as well?

Absolutely. I'll start with a story. Recently I was taking Brad to Detroit City, DET. We have a car service waiting for us there, we're all lined up. About halfway there, we get a call on the regular radio. Detroit is shut down. They don't know why, they don't know for how long. With the Wi-Fi, we call the FBO, sounds like it's going to be a while.

So we're back on the phone to our home base to let them know the airport is shut down and we're redirecting to DTW, which is Detroit Metro. We ask them to get the car service over there, not a problem. So we're landing in Detroit Metro and Brad wakes up. He's been sleeping the entire time. He's like, "Hey, we're at the wrong airport." And I said, "No we're not, just a change of plans." And he shrugged and got in the car service and all was well. For him, everything worked the way it was supposed to work.

That right there is really the crux of what makes onboard Wi-Fi so incredible. Everything works the way it's supposed to work. From a technical perspective, from a passenger perspective - it all just works.

Do you ever pilot aircraft without Wi-Fi these days?

I do, and it's frustrating to be honest with you. It's terrible. I despise it because if we don't download our information before we take off, once we get in the air we don't have anything.

The best analogy I can give is that flying without Wi-Fi feels like leaving your house without your cell phone. It's that panicky adrenaline feeling you get when you realize you've forgotten your cell phone on the counter or left it behind

somewhere. Or you drive out of your driveway, you check your phone, and it's not there. You have your device on you, but it's a brick. It's worthless. And you're just handcuffed because you're so used to having it.

What happens when you don't have it is that you rely on your buddies that do. I fly for a company with a bunch of 145s that aren't connected. So if I'm in Brad's Lear with Wi-Fi and the 145s are up in the air too, they rely on me. "Hey Joey, can you find out where 87 is? We're trying to coordinate who's going to land in front." And I just jump on the FlightAware to find their location. Or they'll call for weather across the country because they only have their Stratuses and can't see that far out. Of course, if I'm in the 145, I have to do the calling, whether it's calling someone in a connected airplane or calling flight service to find out the weather ahead of you. It's so archaic. You just feel like you've really stepped back into the Middle Ages.

"As a pilot, you're always making educated guesses. Wi-Fi makes you more educated. You're still going to make decisions based on your flight knowledge and flying experience. But, because I have more real-time information, I'm a smarter pilot."

- *Joey Meier, chief pilot for Brad Keselowski*

Any last thoughts on in-flight Wi-Fi?

What is really comes down to is that the Wi-Fi helps me make better decisions as a pilot. It helps me do my job better and keep my passengers safer. Wi-Fi doesn't tell you what to do, but it informs you about circumstances in real time so you can make better decisions using better information than you had in the past.