



# Big-Sky Thinker

## Alumnus Greg Johnson

By Lydia Hinshaw

Greg Johnson's childhood dream came true, but it drove him crazy.

"After I graduated I flew for a short while as a corporate pilot," he says. "The time I spent on the ground waiting for people to come back just drove me nuts. I watched more movies and read more books in more fixed-base operations than I ever wanted to."

Johnson, 37, received his Embry-Riddle degree in professional aeronautics in 1993. His entrepreneurial instincts, problem-solving ability, and craving for challenges have taken him far beyond the comparatively simple joys of flying.

### Not the e-ticket for everyone

Today, he is president and CEO of OneSky Network, a Manchester, N.H.,

firm that functions as a broker between air charter companies and clients. It's unique in that it offers online booking, in the same way that Orbitz and Travelocity book commercial flights.

A client can go to its website ([www.onesky.com](http://www.onesky.com)), type in particulars of origin, destination, date, and number of passengers; select an aircraft from OneSky's list of planes (238 as of early August), get a price quote, and pay for the trip with a credit card. All that's left is to show up at the airport.

This is not the e-ticket for everyone. Johnson's target client has a net worth of at least \$5 million, and is likely to be someone whose name you know from the movie screen, the financial pages, or ESPN.

"Airline travel really has hurt productivity for a lot of business folks," Johnson says. "That makes it a lot easier for them to justify taking this kind of trip."

OneSky, which launched in May 2004, currently has six employees, and Johnson says it has had a positive response both from charter companies and clients. Positive cash flow, however, may take another year or so.

### Needed a bigger idea

He got the idea for the business while becoming bored as a partner in a charter company that owned a mere six planes.

"I'd been in the business for about six months before I went to him (partner Henry Laughlin) and said this

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isn't going to be a big enough thing to keep me excited," Johnson said. "I really felt that we needed a membership-based network to grow and compete. That led me to the vision of OneSky, which is sort of a United Van Lines or Mayflower Van Lines in terms of a business model."

Laughlin, whose family has been in the aviation business over a period of 50 years, liked the idea enough to back it financially. OneSky was born and Johnson was presented with enough challenges to keep him engaged.

The biggest, he says, was acquiring accurate descriptions of all the planes available for charter.

"Getting the right amount of data on each airplane required us to actually travel to our charter customers and go on site and help them collect it," he said. "Initially we thought we would be able to get them to fill out a form or talk to us over the phone."

This job was finally completed, and now OneSky's website provides details, including pictures, of each plane. If a client must have six seats, telephone, DVD player, and blue upholstery, he can click on planes until he finds the right one, or he can call a personal flight consultant to help with the search.

## College on the 7-year plan

Johnson has been interested in aviation since he can remember, but he didn't have the opportunity to pursue it formally until college.

The son of a Yarmouth, Maine, family doctor who still makes house calls and has been known to take payment in lobsters, young Greg was the first "aviation nut" in a family that was not wealthy.

So in spite of his youthful yearning to fly, he needed a great deal of patience and initiative in the early pursuit of his goals.

After graduating from high school, he postponed his enrollment at Embry-Riddle for a year to earn money for college as a 17-year-old assistant manager at a Radio Shack.

This was a pattern that would continue during the seven calendar years it took him to spend four years in school.

"Before I finished my degree, I had already gone off and managed an FBO with another gentleman," he says. "I got all the student loans I could get, too. I had a work-study job where I would troubleshoot problems with the administration's computers and help them install computers."

## A campus tour, then the proposal

Although he doesn't get back to Daytona Beach often, he did take his wife Elise on a campus tour there the day before he proposed, about four years ago.

"The thing I liked best about Embry-Riddle was that everybody who was there loved aviation," he says. "That's what I will always cherish, that there's nobody there who doesn't love the same thing that you do."

When Johnson needed help manning his booth at a recent National Business Aviation Association convention in Orlando, he hired Embry-Riddle student Erik Pelton, a senior and aspiring corporate pilot who has had the opportunity to learn about OneSky's operation first-hand. "Greg's got an amazing handle on aviation," Pelton says. "He knows something about every facet of the industry. With OneSky, he's taken all the problems he had managing a charter company and fixed them."

After his brief and unhappy

career as a corporate pilot, Johnson ran a ground-handling operation, which brought him into regular contact with FedEx.

He soon went to work for the delivery giant and spent seven years there as a regional engineering manager, responsible for improving airport operations and package delivery in an area from New York City north to the tip of Maine.

## High-energy off the job

"It was really a fun job because it was sort of a nothing-is-sacred, what can you do to make the system better," he says. "It did run the full range, from today's problems to the problems we expect to have in 10 years, all kinds of ways to move packages and save money."

Delivery problems, for example, became critical in the New York area in the days after 9-11.

"We can't get through the Lincoln Tunnel, and I'm out on a boat doing time trials to see if we could use a high-speed ferry to get packages from Newark to downtown Manhattan," he recalls.

Johnson is as energetic away from work as he is when solving problems for his company. He runs and bikes and he's part of a group of friends who can boast that they've skied every month of the year.

"I'm a definite ski nut," he says. "When this business gets successful, one of the first things I'm going to do is helicopter skiing."

Sooner or later, Johnson knows, OneSky may start to feel like one more lounge at one more FBO, and then he'll know it's time to move on.

"It's exciting and fun and a lot of hard work," he says. "As long as I'm not bored and I'm learning new things, I'll keep doing it." ✈