

AVIATION FUELLING SERVICES – THE SKY'S THE LIMIT



With some of aviation's biggest names in its portfolio, Hamburg-based Skytanking is delivering aviation fuelling at its best. "We offer solutions tailored to specific needs – on a global scale," said Skytanking's General Manager for Into-Plane Development, Peter Mihm. Colin Chinery reports.

Every 30 seconds, somewhere in the world, Skytanking is fuelling an aircraft. In the past 12 months the Hamburg-based into-plane fuelling services operator has delivered 23 million cbm of aviation fuel into two million aircraft at 83 airports in 14 countries across Europe, Asia and Africa.

"We provide into-plane services to oil companies wanting to outsource their in-house fuelling operations or enter a new airport without the burden of setting up a new fuelling operation," said General Manager Peter Mihm.

With the largest global oil companies, airport groups and airlines such as Air France-KLM, Lufthansa Group and American Airlines among its clients, the Skytanking portfolio is impressive.

Tailored solutions

"We offer solutions tailored to specific needs – on a global scale," stated Mr Mihm. "Knowledge paired with experience makes us a very strong partner."

With a fleet of more than 600 fuelling vehicles, Skytanking provides a full range of aviation fuelling services including

into-plane fuelling (with a tank truck or via a hydrant system using a dispenser), aviation fuel storage and hydrant management, engineering, and investment in aviation fuel facilities at airports.

Founded in 1999 as part of a wider group operating at Munich Airport, Skytanking in its present set-up was formed in 2001. Skytanking is a subsidiary of Marquard & Bahls AG, an agile, independent holding company in the energy and chemical sector based in Hamburg. Skytanking's growth has accelerated from a 2015 turnover of €140 million to most recently €190 million.

2019 saw Skytanking entering Spain and returning to the US – from where it had exited five years earlier.

"Over the last two or three years, we have grown our position in the Mediterranean, building a joint venture in Turkey two years ago, and now entering Spain with four airports, three of them in the Spanish top five measured by size and passenger numbers," said Mr Mihm.

The US re-entry is a telling endorsement of Skytanking's outstanding offering and reputation.

"We went back at the request of various huge US-based airline groups who no longer felt comfortable with the level of service they were receiving from their incumbent suppliers," said Mr Mihm.

US calling

"Having looked at the size of the market and the feedback from potential customers, we decided that we must return to the US, still the largest aviation market in the world. We want to be there because of its size,

and customers wanting us to return and deliver our immaculate service."

It is Skytanking's commitment to service quality, said the General Manager, based on a simple precept.

"Whether the customer is an oil company, an airline or an airport, we aim to fulfil their requirements. It's about what the customer wants, and how we can best achieve that request."

In a market he described as "highly competitive," independence is a major differentiator, with Skytanking focusing solely on fuelling, and non-involvement in the segment of selling jet fuel.

"We have global competitors, and in addition in every market where we are active, also regional and local competition. But whereas most of our competitors are ground handling companies who also do baggage handling, ramp handling and maybe catering, we focus only on aviation fuel. And in doing so, we have built up a huge expertise in this field, that probably no one else has."

With into-plane service also provided in many markets by oil companies or joint venture companies, the jet fuel brand issue is another separator.

Mr Mihm continued: "These operators want to lock their dominant market position as such and say, 'we can sell the jet fuel, but we also want to deliver the service.' This means that if an airport issues one or two licences for the into-plane service, new suppliers would be unable to access the market because the into-plane company would not give them any competitive rates."

The independence factor

In contrast, as an independent company, Skytanking promotes an open access model, giving clients the opportunity to have a direct say in the price and quality of into-plane fuelling services.

"Since we do not sell jet fuel, we allow all our customers to compete only on their strengths – which is the sale of jet fuel itself." ▀

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In an operational focus that includes efficiency and cost-effectiveness, safety has always had Skytanking's highest priority.

"There's the famous saying that there is no hard shoulder in the sky," recited Mr Mihm. "Putting fuel into aircraft tanks in a safe manner is crucial, and we have a very proactive approach to safety."

"We operate to the industry's highest international standards issued by the Joint Inspection Group, a group of oil companies with 150 members worldwide - and along with them we have actively contributed to develop the highest possible safety standards for our industry."

"We constantly and relentlessly monitor these, share best practice for our 83 locations, and continually train our staff of over 2,000, most of whom are operators working on the apron and re-fuelling aircraft."

Innovation is another Skytanking signature, with the company being the first



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into-plane service provider to bring fuel matching the strict Euro 6 diesel model to the Spanish market for example.

Electric re-fuelling

Mr Mihm revealed Skytanking is also looking at options for electric re-fuelling vehicles at airports. The company is at the forefront of digitalising the refuelling process, reducing both complexity, and manual labour, which is always prone to error.

Already working at 83 airports in 14 countries across Europe, Asia and Africa, Skytanking's growth strategy includes increasing its North American footprint.

"A company operating as we do is much needed in the US, and offering our service levels is why we could immediately gain customer bases at two big airports, Atlanta and Philadelphia," revealed Mr Mihm. "We also feel we have a relatively hot spot in Asia Pacific, the region with

probably the largest growth potential in aviation, and one where we want to be an active participant."

But with the aviation industry continually under cost pressures, Mr Mihm stressed the fine line between delivery quality and market rate realities.

"Richard Branson once said, if you want to be a millionaire you start as a billionaire and invest in an airline," he smiled. "If you ask an oil company how much money they make with aviation compared with any upstream activity or lubricants for that matter, they will say it is very minor."

"We are part of this, and always have to find the perfect balance between cost efficiency and reliability. That's a huge challenge."

Another challenge is the relatively unchanging nature of the sector.

"The aviation fuel industry is not one that comes up with fantastic innovations or dis-

ruptions on a regular basis; there is no Google or Amazon. We are different because we are independent, and it has taken us some 20 years to get where we are now."

He added: "The adversity to huge changes is probably what blocks us. There are potential customers in all parts of the world who say, 'Yes we would love to work with Skytanking but perhaps not if we have to change something.' And that's the point where it gets challenging."

The vision that drives

Undaunted, Skytanking is confident its philosophy of independence, sound and safe business practices and reliability is the foundation for long-term success.

Mr Mihm concluded: "By focussing on our customers' needs and providing high-quality products and services, our vision is to be the most admired and successful aviation fuelling company in the world. And it is this vision that drives us." ■