

TRAVEL AND HOSPITALITY

## Urban air mobility is simultaneously time saver, status symbol: Blade exec

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*Blade caters to both business and leisure travelers. Image credit: Blade*

By SARAH JONES

NEW YORK Beyond choosing to fly locally to avoid traffic, affluent consumers are opting to travel in the air in part due to the perk of bragging rights.

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In a fireside chat at Luxury FirstLook 2020, an executive from short distance aviation firm Blade Urban Air Mobility explained how the company is leaning into the Instagrammability of its services, seeking to meet the social media generation's appetite for awareness. Aside from playing into the experiential aspects of air travel, Blade is betting on the future of transportation by developing infrastructure that is designed to power the up-and-coming innovations in the sector.

"I think the changing of cities and city 2.0 is the way we think about the future of not only consumer behavior but also the way that the infrastructure in our cities is changing," said Patrick Albano, chief revenue officer of **Blade**. "One of our big heliports and the HQ for Blade is right outside of Hudson Yards, which is a good example of a next generation city. It just sort of popped up out of the ground. If you've been to Dubai, it has that same feeling."

"And within those cities, and within New York City as a whole, there's a changing way in how we get around. You're seeing it with the rise of scooters and electric skateboards, you're seeing it with bikes," he said. "Having helicopter travel, while it seems like something most people haven't done, it's actually part of that evolution, revolution."

*Luxury FirstLook 2020 was produced by Luxury Daily, with venue sponsor UBS*

Up in the air

Blade was founded on the idea of more easily connecting consumers to chartered private planes and helicopters. The company's founder and CEO previously worked at a corporation overseeing its aircraft, and he realized that the jets and helicopters would often spend a significant amount of time sitting in a hangar rather than being in use.

Seeing an opening for an easier booking process, Blade created a platform that enables consumers to reserve single seats on planes and helicopters.

More recently, Blade has launched non-stop service to and from New York area airports from the city. Catering to

both the affluent business and leisure traveler, Blade operates services to key jet-set destinations including Miami, Aspen, Los Angeles and the Hamptons.

Regardless of price point, consumers start and end their Blade journey at one of its lounges. These spaces enable fliers to mingle, and some of Blade's partner brands use the opportunity to engage the firm's clients while they are in a relaxed environment.

For experience-hungry travelers, Blade has developed services that aim to get affluents to local destinations faster. For instance, this past summer the firm operated helicopter flights to the TWA Hotel at JFK Airport, allowing New Yorkers to more easily spend a day brunching and swimming in the property's pool.

As experiences become status symbols, Blade is also playing into this desire for broadcasting. One of the touches Blade has added is offering its clients slap bracelets so they can broadcast their experience to others on their wrists.

[View this post on Instagram](#)

Long weekend #flyblade

A post shared by BLADE (@flyblade) on Jul 5, 2019 at 7:31am PDT

### *Instagram post from Blade*

"We all want to get noticed right now, and it's kind of part of the Instagram generation," Mr. Albano said. "So that's a really common thing we see with Blade, is that people are flying not just for the obvious reason, which is that it saves me two hours getting to the airport, but it's also this thing where I feel better when I do it, I get to post about it. I arrive at the airport and I get to tell people I was on a Blade."

Looking ahead, Mr. Albano discussed the development of electric vertical takeoff and landing (EVTAL) vehicles. More eco-friendly than their gas-powered alternatives, these vehicles could change the future of urban air travel by enabling aircraft to take off and land in more locations throughout cities. Currently, New York only allows helipads on the edges of Manhattan.

In the coming years, UAM is projected to take off, but today it is still in its infancy in most markets.

One of the challenges that Blade has faced is consumers' unfamiliarity with smaller aircraft. Seven in 10 of its clients have never flown on a helicopter before trying Blade.

#### Taking off

Luxury automakers are going beyond ground transportation in an effort to better meet future customer demand for urban air mobility in an elevated fashion.

Aston Martin and Porsche have both launched partnerships centered on the creation of consumer-manned or concept aircraft, extending their sports car driving experience to flying. As automakers adjust to changing mobility needs, air travel is poised to be the next frontier for competition among high-end marques ([see story](#)).

Blade teamed with high-fashion rental service Armarium to give customers both a flight and a style makeover as they headed to music festivals around the country.

The partnership was geared up around the Coachella Valley Music & Arts Festival in Indio, CA and other similar music events. The two companies hoped to give consumers an answer to the two most common questions when it comes to outdoor music festivals: how to get there and what to wear ([see story](#)).

Similarly to how the on-demand economy has led to companies such as Uber and Postmates, Mr. Albano sees the potential for consumers to book larger services in this fashion.

"In a lot of ways, we're setting up the infrastructure," Mr. Albano said. "Our CEO talks about the example of how you all probably used to get DVDs in the mail from Netflix for a long time. At that time, that was the only way to distribute, but they were really playing towards what we have today, which is a full streaming world.

"So we've built the infrastructure to allow people to travel around cities by current technology of helicopters, but we're preparing for the 2025 or maybe earlier when electric helicopters are used," he said.