

Virgin Plans to Broker Flights on Private Jets

By Don Clark

Sir Richard Branson is getting into the private-aviation game.

The British billionaire later this year plans to launch Virgin Charter, an online marketplace for matching travelers with companies that charter private jets or airplanes.

“They are taking a really advanced approach,” said Nick Solinger, chief marketing officer of **XOJet** Inc., a private jet operator in San Carlos, Calif., that hopes to get passenger referrals through the new service. “We think it will make our team more efficient.”

The new effort, which is being announced today, follows a successful effort by Sir Richard's **Virgin Group** Ltd. to win government approval to operate a new low-cost airline in the U.S.

Virgin Charter, of Santa Monica, Calif., is targeting a different clientele people willing to pay thousands of dollars more than airline tickets for the speed and convenience of private jets. Its site will allow travelers to search for aircraft to fly between particular destinations (as long as flights originate in the U.S.), view results from buyer ratings and safety audits of

Others in the field include Web sites operated by **OneSky Jets**, **Jets International** and **CharterX** Corp., which plan to collaborate with Virgin Charter.

Demand for private jets has been rising lately, fueled by factors that include long security delays at airports. Hours flown by general-aviation and air-taxi jet aircraft in the U.S., a group that includes private jets, rose about 41% to an estimated 3.9 million hours last year from 2002, according to the Federal Aviation Administration. It is a fragmented field, with an estimated 2,500 U.S. charter operators.