

# The woman flying high in the private jets arena

**Rebecca Smith** takes to the skies with top aviation entrepreneur Gabriella Somerville

**F**ROM bouts of turbulence to nightmare passengers, air stewardesses have to cope with their fair share of challenges on a daily basis. "You learn to keep a smile on your face," says Gabriella Somerville as we climb to 12,000 feet above the capital.

The founder of private aviation firm Connectjets – which manages private jet and helicopter purchases through outright and fractional ownership, a lease or jet sharing – spent seven years as a member of the cabin crew at Virgin Atlantic in 1988.

She then moved moving on to British Airways and later had a stint at Bombardier Skyjet International, the private jet charter division of the business manufacturer.

City A.M. joined Somerville for a demo flight of the Piaggio Aerospace Avanti EVO, the new aircraft she's selling, for its first visit to the UK at London City Airport.

She launched Connectjets in 2009 with her own seed capital. "I went in quite foolhardy in one way, completely on my own into what is quite a tough market, and it was in 2009 when it was a downturn so lots of people thought I was quite mad," she admits. But she saw opportunities and went in with an "aggressive strategy that won us favour in the end".

Connectjets is on course to turn over £2m this year and the business model has shifted quite a bit since the early days.



City A.M. was aboard a demo flight of the Piaggio Aerospace Avanti EVO

"When I started it was fundamentally charter and we were also leasing which was a good market at the time," Somerville says.

"In one sense the model developed around what was happening in the marketplace; in the last three or four years it moved again with a shift into aircraft sales. Predominantly you have your charter client who's flying with you, it's a turnkey that he then might lease or go and buy fractionally so you're creating that product chain for him to move up into."

Her newest gig marked a significant step: she secured a contract with Italy's Piaggio Aerospace to be the firm's exclusive sales agent for their Avanti EVO

turboprop in the UK and in the process became the first businesswoman to be appointed sales agent for the firm.

"When you go into business aviation it is a male-dominated arena and obviously in aircraft sales it becomes even more so," she says.

"My aim is to see more and more women take those key roles, director roles and run their own companies. It's still a tiny percentage in what's becoming a big market."

An important part of her role is establishing relationships with clients and she pitches away while we fly over the Millennium Dome. She says the Avanti EVO's eco credentials are particularly impressive. The aircraft that retails at just under \$7.8m is more fuel efficient and quieter than competitors. Her clients are some corporations, some individuals. Somerville thinks there has been a shift within business aviation regarding its carbon footprint "in a very positive way", and her efforts to win clients over with the Avanti EVO "sit quite perfectly at this time for the market".

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