CUSTOMER SATISFACTION MEASUREMENT IN AIRLINE SERVICES: AN EMPIRICAL STUDY OF NEED –GAP ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Present study aims timely capturing of customers complaints and emphasizes quick resolution. The Need-Gap analysis determines deviations between actual and expected quality and taking corrective action. Analysis indicates presence of multi-dimensional aspects regarding complaining behavior. Critical analysis of results helps to evolve service strategies in response to customer needs.

Keywords: *Customer's complaints, service strategies, service delivery, enhancing customer satisfaction.*

INTRODUCTION

Customer complaint is very important factor for any airline. In service industry human behavior plays a very important role to minimize customer complaint. There are two types of complaints viz controlled and uncontrolled. There are many factors that affect passengers such as, flight delays, misbehaviour by staff, etc. and they result in a complaining behaviour. Whereas, there are so many situations wherein situations can't be controlled such as, weather problems, technical fault, etc. Although these situations are not in control but can reduce the complaining behavior which depends on "how situation is handled by airline staff". If a staff is not trained to handle situation then it is not acceptable because it is airline fault. If staff misbehaves with the

passenger or due to lack of staff knowledge, wrong information has passed to the passenger. Such are the complaints which can be minimized and controlled. However, genuine customers' complaint can enhance service quality of airlines. Some airlines have customer feedback form for rating of the services rendered by them and feedback helps the airline industry in identifying its strengths and weaknesses.

Customer complaint behavior

It is the tendency of every human that whatever is promised, it must be given to them if there is any deviation in the services, will attract complaint. Whenever a passenger book ticket for any airline and at the time of booking he/she is informed about the services which will be rendered to him/her, thereon. Whatsoever is the reason for not providing the services, passengers are not concerned but they want services which were promised to them at the time of booking. This will lead to the customer complaint. Some customers are followers to others, however, they don't want to make complain but they follow the others. There can be two categories of customer complaint.

1) Controlled customer complaints
2) Uncontrolled customer complaints

Controlled customer complaints: These complaints are attracted by staff error or staff behavior which is very important in service industry. These things are in the hands of airline people. We are explaining some common customer complaints.

- **Flight related problems**: Such problems lead to customer complaint when there is planned delay or cancellation of flights and passengers are not informed in advance. It is dissatisfying if change is planned or unplanned and the passengers are not informed. Even if passengers are informed about schedule change but it is complaining for customers who were having onward flights for different destinations but alternative arrangements were not made.
- **Fare related problems**: When there is any discrepancy in fare related issues, such as incorrect fare information, extra charges, wrong availability status etc.

- **Boarding discrepancies**: At the time of boarding if there is any discrepancy such as, duplicate seat numbers, wrong boarding pass to passengers, other flight passenger etc.
- **DNB/DNG* due to over sale:** Over sale in the flights is a common practice of airlines. Due to this, passengers who are having confirmed ticket for the flight are denied to board the flight. Likewise, if passenger is having higher class ticket but due to over sale in higher class, passenger is permitted in lower class.
- **Reservation/Ticketing:** Any mistake at the time of ticketing by travel agents or airline staff in terms of date of travel, name mismatch etc. leads to waiting in queue for a long time for obtaining tickets.
- **Baggage mishandling:** If any baggage is missing or damaged on arrival due to wrong offloading of baggage. Claim settlement is not done properly for missing or damage baggage. Also if arrival baggage comes late on arrival belt.
- **Refunds of tickets:** If ticket is unused partially or fully and refund is not processed. Problems in airline procedure for obtaining refund for unused tickets.
- **Excess Baggage charge:** If excess baggage charged wrongly due to non updation of current procedure, staff error whereas passenger was allowed to carry that much weight.
- **Staff attitude:** Staff attitude plays very important role in complaint as well as compliment. If staff attitude is positive that can convert a complaint into compliment and vice versa.
- **Advertising:** If any airline do wrong advertising for their services, will directly lead to complaint.

- **In flight services:** If services are rendered in flight not up to the standard and behavior of cabin crew is also rude and unhelpful will lead to complaint.
- **Cargo:** If a person books urgent cargo with the airline and it is misplaced and not delivered on time due to staff error.
- **Tour operation:** Now a days, so many airlines operates tours (Air tickets, hotel reservations, sight seen, taxi etc.) even if there is no problem with air travel nevertheless it attracts complain if there is any problem in full tour package because it was sold by airline.

- **Airline Security:** Generally, airline security people are not trained in customer handling therefore they behave in ordinary way with the passengers or unnecessarily tease passengers which attract complaint.

  Uncontrolled customer complaints: There are so many problems which can't be controlled by the airline, they can try to minimize by proper handling of customers. We are explaining some common problems.
- **Flight related problems**: When there is unplanned delay or cancellation of flights and passengers are not informed in advance due to weather problems, such as fog, rain, thunderstorm etc. If there is any schedule change due to technical grounding of the aircraft and aircraft is to be changed. Flight is delayed due to any vvip/govt.official movement.
- **Fare related problems**: When there is any discrepancy in fare related issues due to misconception of passenger, such as heard wrong information from unauthorized persons.
- **Excess Baggage charge:** Passenger is allowed to carry check-in baggage, as per free baggage allowance mentioned in his ticket, if he carries more that then excess baggage will be charged thereafter if passenger makes a complain regarding excess baggage.
- **Airline Security:** If airline security people frisks any passenger more than one time and check his baggage thoroughly therefore passenger makes complain but whenever security personnel has doubt then they will not allow that person to go unless they are satisfied.
- **Cargo:** If a person books urgent cargo with the airline and it is misplaced due to wrong address of consignee which is given by the consignor.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Need –Gap Analysis is a gap between current performance and expected performance (Rummler, 1987). There are different ways to determine the need gap. There are various methods like interviews, documents, surveys, observations, or focus groups (Wexley & Latham, 1981). Analyzing and identifying the gap that may exist between what the airlines is supposed to be doing and what it is doing points toward areas for complaint and scope of improvement. In this regard Quality function deployment (QFD) which is one of the structured methodologies that

translate customer needs into specific quality development, and it displays and achieves effectiveness (Chan & Wu, 2005). QFD bridges the gap between what the customer wants and how the airline can render ServQual to reduce customer complaint. It is a powerful analytical framework, called the 'House of Quality' (HOQ) matrix because of its shape, with various 'rooms' containing the results of research and analysis on customer groups and competitors (Walker, 2002). It has also been applied to service industries recently (Ermer & Kniper, 1998), and application in airline industry can largely reduce the customer complaint behavior where understanding customer needs to organize the strategy to develop service quality to achieve customer satisfaction is a very important goal.

The exploratory research consisted in a survey that was applied to 100 customers. Questionnaire method has been used for primary data collection. Responses from 100 customers were taken to study the complaining behavior of customers at the airport. Concerning sampling as it is intended to get data related to complaint issues, it was key to have responses from people who have had a bad experience, this means, they have been dissatisfied with the services. For the preparation of 5 point Likert scale, the studies of Cadotte and Turgeon (1988), Sue and Bowen (2001), Wildes and Seo (2001), Heung and Lam (2003), Lam and Tang (2003), De Franco et al. (2005), Sujithamrak and Lam (2005), Yang (2005), Yüksel et al. (2006) and Kim and Lynn (2007) have been useful. Pilot test stage of the questionnaire, which was the data gathering instrument, was tested on 20 airline customers. Cronbach alpha coefficient of the data analysis after the pilot test stage was calculated as 0.617. In the light of the results of the pilot test stage, the questionnaire was implemented. It was observed that out of all dissatisfied customers in sample 80 percent were complainers and 20 percent were non complainers. The data gathered have been analyzed with SPSS 17.0 for Windows program.

DATA ANALYSIS

The data from questionnaire and analysis clearly indicate the factors responsible for customer complaint. The pilot study and the Cronbach Alpha value also validates the same.

Table 1: Percentages of respondents for complaints

Column1	Column2	Strongly Agreed	Agreed	Average	Disagreed	Strongly disagreed
S.No.	Parameters					
1	On Time Performance	80	10	5	5	0
2	Cost Reduction	73	17	8	1	1
3	Security System	76	10	13	0	1
4	Booking/Ticketing	90	6	3	1	0
5	In-Flight Services	85	10	1	2	2
6	Air Traffic Control	81	12	2	4	1
7	Navigation	75	20	0	5	0
8	Check-In	96	3	1	0	0
9	Delay/Cancellation	94	5	1	0	0
10	Take-Off/Landing of Flight	79	8	8	5	0
11	Baggage Services	91	6	1	1	1
12	Meteorological system	70	20	8	1	1
13	Passenger facilities	97	3	0	0	0

For data analysis, to check validity and reliability Factor Analysis was done using Varimax Rotation. To check reliability of each factor Cronbach Alpha were calculated.

Table 2: KMO and Bartlett's Test

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin Measure of Sampling Adequacy.		.465
Bartlett's Test of Sphericity	Approx. Chi-Square	57.212
	Df	78
	Sig.	.963

Table 3: Correlation Matrix

	OnTimePerformance	Cost Reduction	Security system	Booking	InflightServices	AirtrafficControl	Navigation	Checkin	Delay	Takeoff Landing	Baggage	Meterological	Services

OnTimePerformance	1.000	.182	.016	-.108	-.068	-.035	.135	.012	.024	-.055	-.028	.131	-.078
CostReduction	.182	1.000	.000	-.053	-.163	-.097	.036	.051	.144	.101	.000	-.021	.062
Securitysystem	.016	.000	1.000	.077	.027	-.013	-.087	.098	-.122	-.040	.000	-.020	.134
Booking	-.108	-.053	.077	1.000	-.104	.184	-.145	-.058	-.003	-.117	-.044	-.012	.065
InflightServices	-.068	-.163	.027	-.104	1.000	.129	.089	-.066	-.082	.235	-.090	-.107	-.060
AirtrafficControl	-.035	-.097	-.013	.184	.129	1.000	-.091	-.078	.077	.038	-.107	.087	-.072
Navigation	.135	.036	-.087	-.145	.089	-.091	1.000	-.040	.026	.055	-.102	.071	-.085
Checkin	.012	.051	.098	-.058	-.066	-.078	-.040	1.000	-.046	-.044	-.050	.043	-.034
Delay	.024	.144	-.122	-.003	-.082	.077	.026	-.046	1.000	-.030	.117	-.045	-.042
TakeoffLanding	-.055	.101	-.040	-.117	.235	.038	.055	-.044	-.030	1.000	-.039	.097	-.082
Baggage	-.028	.000	.000	-.044	-.090	-.107	-.102	-.050	.117	-.039	1.000	-.033	.056
Meterological	.131	-.021	-.020	-.012	-.107	.087	.071	.043	-.045	.097	-.033	1.000	.131
Services	-.078	.062	.134	.065	-.060	-.072	-.085	-.034	-.042	-.082	.056	.131	1.000

Table 4: Communalities

	Initial	Extraction
OnTimePerformance	1.000	.481
CostReduction	1.000	.703
Securitysystem	1.000	.500
Booking	1.000	.546
InflightServices	1.000	.608
AirtrafficControl	1.000	.669
Navigation	1.000	.487
Checkin	1.000	.478

Delay	1.000	.578
TakeoffLanding	1.000	.714
Baggage	1.000	.526
Meterological	1.000	.707
Services	1.000	.622

Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis.

Figure 1: Screen Plot

Six Four factors resulted from factor analysis. The loading values of the scales items in their respective factor went from 0.48 to 0.70. Regarding reliability, Alfa Cronbachs were not very high ranging from 0.52 and 0.66. In relation to the total explained variance this was only 57 percent. Studies show that although complaints and complaint behaviours are studied in the same study, the studies investigating the relation between them are very limited. Complaint behaviours increase with the increase in customer complaint. The relation between complaint and complaint behaviours have been defined with Pearson correlation analysis. Hence the hypothesis of the study can be stated as:

H1: There is a positive correlation between customer complaints and complaint behaviours.

The values gathered from Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin and Bartlett's Test (KMO = 0.47; p = 0.000) show the adequacy of sampling and applicability of factor analysis. Cronbach's alpha coefficients relating to customer complaint and complaint behaviour scale factors have been calculated as over 0.60. Pearson correlation coefficients relating to factors between complaint and complaint behaviours have been given in Table 3. According to this, all the correlation coefficients between the factors of customer complaints and complaint behaviours have been found significant ($p < 0.001$). The inspection of correlation coefficients show that there is a positive correlation between all of the variables. It is seen that these findings support H1 the hypothesis of the study.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

When there are flight related problems then true information must be given to passengers as well as alternative arrangements should be made at least for onward connecting passengers. If there is planned cancelation or delay then passengers must be informed well in time so that they can report accordingly. Although, DNB and DNG are very common practices in airline industry to maximize revenue, notwithstanding these practices should be minimized and utmost care must be given to privilege members of airline. Airline must have their own employees instead of outsourcing, to facilitate their passengers in better way. Staff must be provided soft skill trainings to handle controlled as well as uncontrolled problems. Generally, baggage handling is done by the loaders and they are not educated properly therefore it must be monitored by airline staff, as well. Passengers must be educated for their free baggage allowance and security procedure to avoid unnecessary discussions. These corrective measures can be accepted to minimize the customer complaints.

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