

**RESEARCH ON STRATEGIC ANALYSIS & CUSTOMER SATISFICATION
TOWARDS SERVICE PROVIDED BY LOW-COST CARRIER AIRLINES IN INDIA**¹Achu Somasekharan,²Abhishek Sharma³Nirmal Acharya⁴Avijit Chowdhury⁵Chandani Joshi⁶Preeti Sharma¹ Edinburgh Napier University,² Swinburne University of Technology³ University of Newcastle, Australia.⁴ University of Southern Queensland⁵ IIPM, Mumbai⁶ Centre of Management Studies**ABSTRACT**

In this world of emerging opportunities, there has been a significance increase in the demand for the low cost carrier airlines in India customers. Customers are preferring to take up flight travels in India rather than the traditional modes of transport. This has only been possible due to launch of Low-cost carrier airlines. It has been able to promote itself very well in the Indian market. With an aim of “Everyone can fly”, Low-cost airlines have been successful over the years in allowing the customers from all the income levels to take an experience in the flights. Providing excellent services with a number of varieties in discounts and offers has allowed the customers to trust on Low-cost carrier airlines. From the Indian customer point of view, it has been able to produce travel with full value for money. This research discusses on the key aspects that are necessary for Low-cost carrier airlines to gain customer satisfaction within the minds of Indian customers. The project was conducted within a target audience of 50 respondents who have already travelled in Low-cost carrier airlines. The research project also reveals the key relationships that exists between the tangible and intangible assets with the satisfaction level of the customers. The research also makes some key findings on the various expectations of customers from Low-cost carrier airlines services. The research also provides necessary recommendations that will be helpful for Low-cost carrier airlines to gain a competitive advantage over its competitors in the coming years.

Keywords:

Strategic Analysis of Low-cost carrier airlines, Customer Satisfaction, Airline Industry

INTRODUCTION

The research project exhibits a strategic analysis on the current macro environment of Low-cost carrier airlines in the aviation industry. This study will also help in demonstrating the various business level strategies that will pay a crucial role in making Low-cost carrier airlines become one of the leading low cost carrier (LCC) in India. The research study also reflects an analysis on the service quality and customer satisfaction in Low-cost carrier airlines. It also criticizes on the key determinants that will make the company gain a competitive advantage in the industry. The research on this area will help the company to frame an efficient and effective marketing strategy. Air-Asia airlines is one of the leading low cost carrier that has been able to be sustainable in this competitive industry (Venkatesh, 2013). With the innovative solutions and excellent philosophy of “Now Everyone Can Fly” has brought a huge revolution in the preferences of people is opting to more flights as compared to previous years. The low pricing strategy attracts the customers from major income levels that has been helpful in maximizing the profits for the organization. Low cost-airlines focusses on giving a higher frequency services on short-haul and other point-to-point international and domestic routes. In a developing country like India, People find more options to travel with comfort at cheap rates and Low-cost carrier airlines has been able to fulfill the demands of the target customers. In the aviation industry, deriving strategies by analyzing the environmental challenges and threats still remains as one of the major issues for the organizations.

Quality of service is one of the important aspects that helps the organization to survive in the competitive environment. Customer satisfaction is linked with the analysis of the service quality being provided in tangible features and online services. Low-cost carrier airlines needs to understand these needs and expectations of consumers on the various services being provided to them while travelling. In the present business environment, Low cost carries have been very much competitive in their different services they provide so as to attract their customers. Customer service management is getting more important in the current business industry. The objectives of the research is given as follows:-

1. Critically investigate the macro environmental factors affecting Low-cost carrier airlines in India.
2. Critically analyze the different strategies being adopted by Low-cost carrier airlines to be competitive against its competitors.
3. Critically analyse the degree of tangible features that brings customer satisfaction in service quality of Low-cost carrier airlines.
4. To identify the quality of services being provided by Low-cost carrier airlines to gain customer satisfaction.

Review of Literature

The various theories and frameworks collected from different sources such as journals& books is demonstrated as follows:-

Customer Satisfaction

The aviation industry is one of the more intangible service industries (Clemes, 2008) and play a crucial role in the present global economy (Tiernan S, 2008). Customer satisfaction has gained a huge importance in the international business context to measure the performance of various product and services (Dennet, 2000). Customer satisfaction is regarded as the evaluation done by the customer's on their purchases and experiences with the expectations of their demands on their product and services (Chen, 2011; Helms, 2008). Gronroos (1984) stated in his research that satisfaction level of airline passengers can be extracted through the establishment of good relations with the employees of the organization. It shows that by providing good services to the customers will enable the airline companies to gain huge customer satisfaction.

Saha and Theingi (2009) pointed out the fact that the emergence of the low cost airlines has brought up the concern on how much the travelers feel satisfied with the various provided to them. In the case of Low-cost carrier airlines, there always remained an uncertainty among the travelers that lower cost structure would have a direct effect on the service quality of the organization (Amiruddin, 2013). Lower cost carriers (LCCs) are perceived to have their cost reduction by diminishing their services standards. In a comparative study between LCCs and Full Service Carriers (FSCs), it was found that failures in services such as flight cancellations, diversions and delays are more in numbers in case of LCCs than FSCs (Bamford, 2005). (Porter, 1980) argued that in order to gain a competitive advantage, organizations need to diversify their strategies such as cost leadership, differentiation, focused differentiation and focused low cost. Pricing is one of the key tools of marketing mix that helps in gaining profit for the firm (Franke, 2004; Doganis, 2002). Low cost business model helps the organization to implement a various pricing strategies that allows them to lubricate the prices of tickets according the demand curve. Apart from setting the prices, airlines have started offering incentive programs to the frequent flyers so as to gain the loyalty of the customers (Miller, 1993). Airline companies have attempted to diversify their services on the online platform to create customer loyalty across its distribution channels (Lee, 1996). Ostrowski (1993) stated in his research that when all airlines have an equal range of fare prices and flying programs, then the airline company with better perceived service quality is more likely to attract the customers.

Parasuraman (1988) stated in his research that conceptual definition of service quality has emerged due to comparison of the excellence of the service being provided to the customers. The various situations allows the customers to decide and evaluate the process quality being delivered to them. Leonard and Sasser (1982) stated in his research that the quality of services and goods have become one the key issues in marketing context. Customer satisfaction acts as a catalyst as it helps in retaining the old customers leading to repeated purchases of products (Rogerson, 1983; Anderson & Sullivan, 1993; Cardozo, 1965; Fornell, 1992; Halstead & Page, 1992). Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry (1988) also defined that service quality is being measured by the judgement of the consumers on their reviews about the overall excellence of the service provider. The outcome of the judgement is the difference between what are the expectations of customers from the product and the actual performance of the service or product. SERVQUAL instrument helps in measuring the service quality of

customers by comparing the expected service and the actual service delivered by the service provider (Fick, 1991; Sultan, 2000).

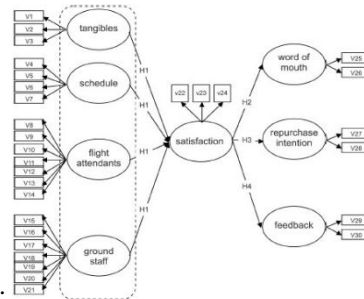


Fig 2.2 Source- (Saha GC, 2009) Theoretical Model of Customer Satisfaction in Airline Industry

Zeithaml et al (2002) explained in his research that SERVQUAL has five major dimensions under SERVQUAL model that are reliability, tangibility, assurance, responsive and empathy has an affect with the customer satisfaction of Low-cost carrier airlines. Other than SERVQUAL, many other research have been conducted on measuring the service quality by an (Rhoades, 2006). According to Pham (2011), improvement in the various service quality helps in gaining a competitive advantage over their rivals in the airlines industry. The theoretical model shows the various dimensions that helps in building the customer satisfaction for Low-cost carrier airlines. The variables play a key role in fulfilling the level of satisfaction of customers. The conceptual framework has been developed to research on the six independent determinants that will be helpful in gaining a good knowledge on the customer satisfaction.

Service Quality

Service quality has become an integral part for the airline companies to gain competitive advantage (Lewis, 1989). Service quality helps the organization to meet or exceeds the customer needs and expectations (Zahari, 2008; Dotchin, 1994; Lewis, 1990). Parasuran, Zeithaml and Berry (1994) concluded in their research that service quality and customer satisfaction were two distinct items that can interchange their role within themselves. Whereas Cronin and Taylor (1992) argued against Parasuram (1992) statements and mentioned that service quality is an antecedent of customer satisfaction. Brady and Cronin (2001) in their research assumed that service quality perceptions are multi-dimensional and adapted the major dimensions of their model from the findings of research by Rust and Oliver (1994). Both argued that service quality has three primarily dimensions that consists of interaction quality, outcome quality and environmental quality. There had been further debates on the service quality dimensions but still remains a complex concept, but it is still accepted that it is multi-dimensional and industry specific.

Structuring Hypothesis

Relation between Tangible features and Customer Satisfaction

Zeithaml, Berry and Parasuram (1990) described in their research that Tangible features (TF) consists of the various physical facilities that contributes highly towards the satisfaction level of customers. It is very much crucial that Airline operators provide an attractive, clean and comfortable environment for the customers (Bruna, 2008). Servicescape is one the important aspects that describes about the physical surrounding of the organization that includes working environment and the corporate culture (Wakefield, 1996). Based on the previous research done by Brady and Cronin (2001), Rust and Oliver (1994) the quality of working conditions is the one the key factors that helps in generating a good perceptions among the customers about the service quality. According to Ries and Fries (2000), customer's satisfaction level is also dependent on their perception regarding to the physical factors.

H0: There exists no relationship between the tangible features and customer satisfaction. **H1:** There exists a positive relationship between the tangible features and customer satisfaction.

Relationship between Schedule and Customer Satisfaction

Scheduling of flights is an important aspect that plays a pivotal role in uplifting the satisfaction level of customers. Flight delays generally occur due to whether problems or excessive traffic demand that results in reschedule of the flights. Flight delays mostly brings a bad image within the minds of the customers. Airlines industries should have a proper planning of the arrival of flights, departure of flights as well as should ensure that the information is well spread among its customers. Andrews (1999) stated in his research that occurrence of airspace crowding at terminals also has an effect on the satisfaction level of customer. Therefore, a proper

flight system should be planned and executed to ensure a smooth processing the organization. The organization should also focus on the improvements such as infrastructure and aircraft equipment (Bond, 2003). Moreover, the different departments of airlines should keep a tight eye on the arrival, departure and other technical aspects too (Adler, 2005).

H0: There exists no relationship between the scheduling and customer satisfaction. **H2:** There exists a positive relation between the scheduling and customer satisfaction.

Relation between service provided by ground staff and customer satisfaction

Ground staff duties are one of the key roles in the airlines industry. They have been given in the duty to be an interaction with the customers in different duties such as check-in, ticket and other information's, weight checking, customs checking and other boarding check-in (Sun, 2011). These staff should be well trained as they are in touch with the customers each and every seconds. From providing information till departing the customers with their luggage, all the staffs should have a good behaviour and ample of information's of the flight scheduling. This is the reason the employees in all the departments are trained at a very good platform on being highly customer-focused at their job (Bamford, 2005).

H0: There is no relationship between service provided by ground staff and customer satisfaction. **H3:** There exist a positive relationship between service provided by ground staff and customer satisfaction.

Relation between service provided by Flight attendants and Customer Satisfaction

Flight attendants and other officers also play a good role when it comes to customer satisfaction. The interaction level is very high in between flight attendants and customers. This is the reason all the attendants should have a good knowledge on managing their rationality and emotionality duality in the organization (Dougherty, 2006).

H0: There exist no relation between service provided by flight attendants and customer satisfaction. **H4:** There exist a positive relationship between the service provided by flight attendants and customer satisfaction.

Relationship between Online Services and Customer Satisfaction

Online services have now become one of the important sectors where most of the customers book the flights and check there further queries on bookings. Suhaiza, Fernando and Lee (2008) stated that most of the customers want to avoid the crowd and this is main reason they opt to prefer to book their tickets online. Online services has been able to store huge amount of data and analysis as well as gains a greater insights into customer satisfying behaviours. Other main reasons for shopping online are the attractive discount and prices offered, ease of comparing tickets with other airline companies and wider selection of products. This the reason the organizations needs to have attractive online website so as to be able to target it customers from all over the world.

H0: There exist no relationship between online services and customer satisfaction. **H1:** There exists a positive relationship between online services and customer satisfaction.

Relation between Food services and customer satisfaction

Lovelock and Wirtz (2003) stated in their research that food is one of the core attributes that helps in determining the quality. Good food services and physical environment allows helps in escalating the customer satisfaction level. These are some of key services that helps in retaining the customers in airline industry. **H0:** There is no relation between food services and customer satisfaction. **H1:** There exist a positive relationship between food services and customer satisfaction.

Services Branding and Dimensions

Bennett (1988) defined brand as name, symbol or sign that are being used to identify the goods and services provided by various organization. O' Cass and Grace (2003) explored the various dimensions that are perceived by customers to evaluate a brand. The various dimensions such as core services, word of mouth, feelings attached to product, price, publicity and advertising are found to be essential dimensions while evaluating a brand. Brand image is one of the important aspect that Low-cost carrier airlines has been able to build in the minds of Indian customers. Low-cost carrier airlines has made its image as a low cost carrier airline but still has a lot of improvements to be made in the services and customer service areas.

RESEARCH DESIGN

The research had its base platform of extracting results through quantitative research method. Quantitative research reflects the data and the results being extracted from the research observations in a numerical representation (H.Yoshikawa, 2008). Exploratory research is conducted to clarify the ambiguous situations and explore ideas that can arise from the potential business opportunities. The research has been designed to extract

the key elements or data that affect the customer satisfaction of people travelling in Low-cost carrier airlines. The research aims to collect its data from both primary and secondary sources so as to make a reliable research.

Primary data is one of the reliable and authentic sources of data that is being collected from the first-hand experience (Driscoll, 2011). A survey is being designed on the various aspects that are being related to measure the customer satisfaction towards the service quality of Low-cost carrier airlines. The survey is being promoted through website such as Survey money and social networking websites such as Gmail and Facebook to extract a quick information on the research area. Secondary data is also being referred so as to collect necessary and additional information's being researched by previous researchers and are easily available on internet (Shawn W. Nicholson, 2008). Emerald, Sage online publications, Science Direct and Harvard business review are being used most of the times to get easy access to data and save time. Besides this, reference books are being used to extract theories that are being used for the research study.

METHODOLOGY

There are a number of methods to measure customer satisfaction but the conceptual framework in this study is designed with the help of SERVQUAL model. The model helps in looking into the key dimensions that help in measuring the gap between the expectations and satisfaction level of customers. The conceptual framework depicted in Figure 1.2 is derived from the definition of satisfaction and helps in clearing the reasons behind the dissatisfaction of the customers. The research will adopt a quantitative research method to collect responses from people in India. It will collect its primary data by conducting a survey among 50 people in India on the positive aspects and improvements needed by Low-cost carrier airlines to capture the Indian market. The survey will measure the consumer's expectation by the help of introducing a 6-point Likert scale that would range from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". The survey will have different sections that will give an idea on the demographic profile, opinions and expectations of customers flying by Low-cost carrier airlines.

Responses from Online Surveys

The responses was collected from the platform of survey monkey and this data was further being analyzed to come up with the relations within various variables and customer satisfaction level. The survey will reflect their responses on the areas they want to see developments in the coming future years. The survey introduces itself with the demographic questions and later shifts itself to the tangible and intangible aspects that are related to customer satisfaction. Online survey was been taken up 68% male and 32% female respondents who have travelled by Low-cost carrier airlines.

The survey has been taken up by various age groups and this has been able to bring diverse range of ideas from the respondents. Majority of the respondents are from the age group of 31-40 years. Whereas 52% of the respondents are from the age group that lies between 18-30 years of age. This data shows that Low-cost carrier airlines has been popular among all the age groups and people are preferring to travel through this low cost airline rather than higher cost airlines. It was collected from the survey that 44% of travelers consisted of the students/youth age travelers. More often college students look for short travel trips and educational visits to other places but want to make the best deal with a cheaper price. Apart from the youth age students, 36% of employees also prefer to travel from Low-cost carrier airlines rather than other airline in India. Whereas a small sector of 20% that consists of retired employees and not working people also like to travel through Low-cost carrier airlines. In India, Low-cost carrier airlines has a very stiff competition from the other airlines such as Tiger Air, Indigo and Go Air. In order to be a top leader it has to provide the best services in the airlines industry as compared to its competitors. Bad services can open up the gate for the customers to move to other low cost airlines in India. The most important target for Low-cost carrier airlines should remain to tackle out the problems that customers are facing nowadays and provide them better services to gain their trust and faith.

Survey also found that, most of the travelers are opting to travel through the various low cost carrier airlines. Almost 92% of the respondents prefer to make their trip through low carrier cost airlines whereas rest 8% like to look for the best deal to make their future trips through any of the airlines. Majority of the customers are looking for a better customer services for the airline industries. The survey only focused on the Low-cost carrier airlines travelers who have travelled already in it. The people who answered "No" in the response in their experiences on travelling with Low-cost carrier airlines were not considered as quality data for the research. This was an eliminator question in the survey that deducts the respondents who have not yet taken a ride in Low-cost carrier airlines. The person who have travelled are the only ones who can provide suggestive measures that would be helpful for Low-cost carrier airlines future strategies. The survey reflected that 100% of the respondents have already travelled in Low-cost carrier airlines previously. The survey also helped in finding out that 88% of the

traveler's preferred to travel in domestic places rather than international destinations. In India, the railways are the most popular source being opted by the people to travel to sort or long destinations within India. Low-cost carrier airlines has tried to target both the customers who want to travel to both local and international destinations. This has been one of the positive aspects that has made people to prefer Low-cost carrier airlines over the other cheap cost airlines. Survey also asked the respondents on their frequency of travel in Low-cost carrier airlines in a year. A majority of 48% of respondents replied that they often take 1-5 times of travel to different destinations in a year. However, 38% of respondents reported that they travel around 6-10 times in a year. Apart from these seasonal travelers, 16% of the respondents in the survey consisted of mainly business executives and travelers. This shows the how much Low-cost carrier airlines has been popular over the years in the Indian travelers. There are a number of classes in Low-cost carrier airlines for the various classes of travelers that are boarding on the planes. There are broadly 3 major classes in a flights such as First class, Business class and Economy class. From the survey, it can be inferred that 76% of the travelers prefer to travel in the Economy class. In India, most of the customers are from the middle class economy and these are the people who prefer to travel with cheap cost airlines.

From the responses of the travelers, it can be seen that most of the people in India prefer to book their tickets from online platform provided by Low-cost carrier airlines. About 64% of the respondents book tickets via online services. Apart from these services, 16% of the respondents choose to book their flight tickets via travel agents. Apart from these the normal booking of the tickets at the counters is only done by 8% of the respondents.

The survey also gathered a lot of information on the tangible features being provided by Low-cost carrier airlines. These features consisted of airplane facilities, seating arrangement facilities, airport facilities and food quality being provided to the travelers. From the findings, it can be inferred that 44% of the people responded that Low-cost carrier airlines has been new planes as compared to the older models of planes. 66% of the people respondents reported in the survey that the seating and working conditions are not much satisfying. Due to low space in the seating arrangements, it becomes pretty difficult for the people to make themselves comfortable. This less space also makes the longer duration of the travel pretty difficult for the travelers as they are not able to make their body adjustment consistent for a longer time.

Whereas 54% of the travelers responded that the website did had clear information on the detailed pricing of the tickets. The travelers expect that website should provide the detailed information on the prices being charged to them in each and every aspect. Ad most of the options such as air insurance, food delivery are some of the options that are written in small letters in the website so as to make a larger number of profits. About 64% of these travelers also responded that the results taken a longer time to display on its website. Customer want to make their booking quick and fast. Moreover they expect that the website should produce a clear transparency on the data being related to pricing. About 54% of the travelers also reported that they facing problems in booking tickets during promotional offers being provided by Low-cost carrier airlines. Due to high number of users on the website, there is an occurrence of huge congestion in displaying and conforming the data. These customers are put into "Virtual Waiting Room" for some times that makes the booking of ticket a hectic work. This makes it pretty difficult to grab various offers that are being promoted over the time. Low-cost carrier airlines needs to improve a lot in its user interface and website so as to enable itself in providing quick and accurate results for the customers.

CONCLUSION & RECOMANDATION

The research study has been able to provide a number of useful data on the key areas that are needed for the improvement in the service quality of Low-cost carrier airlines. Consequently, by evaluation of the overall research study, there were some of the key inferences that are needed to be seen to improve the overall performance of Low-cost carrier airlines.

Improve in Tangible Assets and Capabilities

The study additionally gives a deep insight on the comfort services provided by low-cost airlines. Through the study, it is discovered that a great deal of travelers were not satisfied about seats in the plane in light of the fact that the seats are near every others, particularly when it comes to movement of the travelers on the seat which causes impediment both to the traveler itself and the neighboring travelers.

Improve in Online Booking Services

The findings also reflects that customers also face problems in booking their tickets from the low-cost carrier airlines website. Particularly for internet booking, it happens for the most part during the promotional or limited time offers the customers feel a lot of problems in booking their tickets. During this time of promotional offers

there occurs a lot of problems on the online services which prohibits the customers to make their bookings easily.

Improve on Customer Services

Low-cost carrier airlines should work harder on improving the services that are being provided the ground staffs and flight attendants. Optimal training and development programs for these group of attendants to improve in their knowledge of dealing with the customers, ability to assist people who have certain disabilities and give good hospitality skills to provide good service even in emergency situations.

Integrated Marketing Communication Strategy

Low-cost airlines ought to set up the right technique to secure its position in the business sector by differentiating itself on every single conceivable level and by utilizing the right marketing communication mix to draw in the biggest number of clients. As its major attention lies with the middle income families, low-cost airlines should adopt an attractive marketing communications which has the most elevated effect on low income families.

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