



Customer service in the aviation industry – An exploratory analysis of UAE airports



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Customer satisfaction is given top priority by all service-oriented industries. The civil aviation industry is no exception. The highly competitive global aviation arena causes various airlines to vie for the top position with lot of importance being given to the customer service. The aim of this study is to analyze the methods and tools used by the United Arab Emirates' (UAE's) federal government and the various local governments in the country to improve the customer satisfaction with regard to the aviation industry in the country. This paper develops a framework to assess customer service in the aviation sector in the UAE and uses the framework to analyze and compare the three main airports in the UAE based on the feedback of passengers.

This study used a multi-pronged approach to collect data. In all, 78 travelers were chosen at random and they were administered a structured and a semi-structured questionnaire. Responses to the former were used to perform Chi-square test and establish the differences between the three airports; the latter were used to gain deeper insight and gauge a more in-depth opinion of the respondents. Through the analysis of the data, this study was able to learn more about the public view with regard to the innovations and ideas implemented by the government of the UAE. A new customer service model has been developed to compare the three airports in UAE and gain more insights into opportunities for improvement.

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1. Introduction

Service quality leading to customer satisfaction is thought to be an attitude resulting from a comparison of actual performance of the product with built-in expectations of the user (Kien-Quoc and Simpson, 2006). Getting it right the first time is critical to the continued success of the organization. Organizations that avoid service failure fare lot better than organizations focusing on service recovery after failure (McCollough et al., 2000). To gain a higher level of service satisfaction, organizations need to understand a customer's journey – from the expectations they have before the experience begins to the assessments they are likely to make when it is over (Berry et al., 2002). Complete customer satisfaction is only possible when every influencing member of the organization has a complete understanding of customer needs and requirements (Asher, 1989). Customer service is a key aspect of any business and

eventually determines the overall profits and sales of an organization. Like any other sector, airports need to have an emphasis on service quality improvement. Airport infrastructure is the first and last point of tourists' contact in their trip to a country. Therefore, services have to be processed at an airport in an efficient way in order to minimize travel time and to allow leisure time in the commercial areas of the airport (Martín-Cejas, 2006). Gorst et al. (1998) found that customer satisfaction could be viewed as a cyclical process that can increase or decrease over time. Each cycle begins with what the customer thinks or expects. As the customer avails the service over time, the classification changes to being a 'past experience'. Two fundamental forces that drive the strategy in the aviation industry are safety and customer service (Appelbaum and Fewster, 2003).

There is immense competition between airports to attract business and get more airlines to choose them as their destination. The quality of customer service could be the determinant that attracts airlines to an airport. Issues such as handling of customer complaints and proactively putting in plans to avoid them are very important for the overall success of an organization (Bell and

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Luddington, 2006; Robbins and Miller, 2004). To understand customer satisfaction, Martin (1992) introduced seven areas of customer research including critical service factors, customer priorities, parameters of performance, current performance standards, competitive performance standards, benchmark suppliers and service opportunities.

This paper presents a model that has been developed by combining different customer service related models and compares customer service quality at three UAE airports. The model also helps in identifying opportunities for improvement at these airports. The paper is divided into five sections. The next section presents a review of literature around customer satisfaction in the aviation sector and different models that can be used for developing an assessment for UAE airports. Following the literature review section is the research methodology which establishes data collection process. The actual data collected from three UAE airports are analyzed in the results section and then the paper concludes, highlighting some implications that can be drawn from this research.

2. Literature review

There are several models that have been presented in the literature regarding service quality at the airports. Tsai et al. (2011) developed a multi-criteria evaluation model to perform gap analysis between the customer perception and airport service quality and to diagnose managerial strategies of gap reduction. To demonstrate the suitability and effectiveness of the model, the authors presented an empirical study of passenger services at an airport in Taiwan. Lubbe et al. (2011) concluded that opinions toward services offered at the airports differ between business and leisure travelers, and frequent and infrequent travelers. Chang et al. (2008) presented an empirical study on the ways the complaints are dealt with at the airports and the degree to which unsatisfactory experiences are reported and handled. They concluded the following: solving passengers' problems immediately leads to much higher customer satisfaction, passengers care a lot about the interactions and policy of the airlines and the airport, service quality influences customer satisfaction, and interactional and procedural justice directly affect the complaint intentions. Yeh and Kuo (2003) presented a fuzzy multi-attribute decision making approach for evaluating passenger service quality of 14 major Asia-Pacific international airports via surveys. The model provides a service performance index which can be used as a benchmarking and management tool for airports. Fodness and Murray (2007) developed a conceptual model of service quality in airports and concluded that the passengers' expectation of airport service quality is multidimensional and hierarchical which includes three key dimensions: function, interaction and diversion. Kuo and Liang (2011) proposed a new fuzzy multi criteria decision making method (combining concepts of VIKOR and grey relational analysis) to evaluate the service quality problems at international airports. The authors concluded that the approach presented is effective tool in solving problems involving subjective assessments of qualitative attributes in a fuzzy environment. Park and Jung (2011) used structural equation modeling to investigate transit passengers' perception of airport service quality and its influence on value, satisfaction, airport image, and passenger behavior. The research shows that airport service quality has direct impact on the level of transfer passengers' satisfaction, value perceptions, and airport image formation. Whyte (2004) discussed failure to create customer loyalty and trust being one of the major factors for airline and airport failure. Kien-Quoc and Simpson (2006) stressed on the need to please the aviation customers and presented a set of dimensions including reliability, assurance, tangibles, empathy,

responsiveness, etc. that an airline should strive for in order to satisfy the travelers. Chang and Chang (2010) investigated the relationships among service recovery, recovery satisfaction, overall customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty in airline services and concluded that both interactional and procedural justice have a significant effect on recovery satisfaction. Han et al. (2012) presented an empirical study regarding the passenger' perception of airline lounges and concluded that the food and beverage service is the most important factor influencing customer satisfaction and the use of the lounge again by the passenger. Liou et al. (2011) applied dominance-based rough set approach to an airport service survey in Taiwan and concluded that immigration, customers and quarantine (ICQ), and security are the most important factors that influence the image regarding the overall level of service at an airport.

The essence of all these models is to identify ways of achieving and sustaining 1) customer satisfaction and 2) customer loyalty. However, there is also an implicit acceptance that there is an influence of the geographical location and the model has to be contextualized for the country in which it is located. Therefore, it is important that prior to developing a model to assess service quality at UAE airports, the customer expectations and criteria be documented. Some of the important features that need to be considered about the UAE are: 1) Cultural diversity with more than 100 nationalities living there; 2) Highly mobile population that travels all over the world for trading and exposed to airport service quality from other international airports; and 3) With UAE trying to be the bridge between Europe and far east, and several airports within the middle-east trying to establish themselves as this bridge, it is important that they are innovative and proactive in order to compete.

Due to the various dynamics that exist in the aviation industry within the UAE today and based on the criteria identified for the research, a new customer service model was created as part of this study which is an amalgamation of the following three customer service models: intercultural model, pleasure model and Boomerang Model. The new model selected elements from each model and satisfied the five criteria described in the previous paragraph, two of which are generic and three of them are specific to the UAE.

2.1. Inter-cultural model

The model presented by Hopkins et al. (2005) provided a framework to better understand inter-cultural service encounters and provided insights about how customers respond or are likely to respond. This model can help assess the satisfaction across multiple cultures, and also assesses customer loyalty. The following factors including language, gestures in different cultures, specific cultural' needs and queries, word choice, no discrimination, and no stereotypes were taken from the model. Several other researchers such as Sharma et al. (2012), Hopkins et al. (2009) and Hulten (2009) have further applied this model in different contexts and have emphasized its utility. Given the previous successful applications of this intercultural model, it was selected to be included in the final model to be developed for this research.

2.2. Boomerang model

Partch (1996) developed a model that can help assess the proactivity of the service organizations and their employees. In this model instead of simply studying and monitoring the wants and demands of customers, staff are urged to take a step forward and offer what customers did not ask for 'yet'. The model requires and/or assesses whether the front-end staff are efficient in making

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