



Airline services marketing by domestic and foreign firms: differences from the customers' viewpoint

Safak Aksoy*, Eda Atilgan, Serkan Akinci

Department of Business Administration, Akdeniz University, Antalya, Turkey

Abstract

Based on a survey of 1014 passengers of five European airlines, this paper reveals differences between passengers on the Turkish domestic airline and those on four foreign airlines on the same flight destinations with respect to demographic profiles, behavioral characteristics, understanding of airline service dimensions, and satisfaction levels. Differences between the two passenger groups are highlighted in terms of age, sex, education, occupation, sector affiliation, location of domicile, travel purpose, travel frequency, service expectations, and satisfaction levels. It is concluded that the differences in consumer profiles and expectations are valuable clues for domestic and foreign airline firms in understanding their consumers and in designing their marketing strategies.

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1. Introduction

Understanding, creating, communicating, and delivering customer value and satisfaction are at the very heart of modern marketing practice. The customer, rather than marketing, is at the center of modern business philosophy, and customer service satisfaction is the primary aim. In service industries such as the airline industry, the distinctive features of services require that managers understand customer needs and expectations, and keep promises (Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000). However, most companies do not recognize the importance of this approach until driven to it by circumstances (Kotler, 2000).

The terrorists' attacks on New York of 11 September 2001 put immense pressure on airlines in an already tough market environment (Air Transport Association, 2003). Operational efficiency (Smit, 1997) and good marketing through an understanding of consumers (Driver, 1999) had already been identified as key factors in the survival and competitive success of air carriers, and the events of 11 September 2001 have emphasized the importance of these factors.

Passengers' expectations are among the factors influencing the service decisions of airlines. Empirical

evidence has indicated that success in customer-focused service development requires a deep understanding of customer needs, expectations, and preferences (Gustafsson et al., 1999) and that marketing strategies implemented by airlines to expand internationally must take into account the different expectations and perceptions of passengers (Sultan and Simpson, 2000).

Demographic characteristics also play a critical role in shaping customers' needs. Marketers take demographic characteristics as one of the major determinants of consumers' buying behavior and service expectations.

2. Research design and methodology

The focal points of study are consumer profiles, consumer expectations, and consumer satisfaction with the objectives of:

- noting and comparing the demographic and behavioral profiles of customers who prefer a domestic airline and those who prefer foreign airlines;
- understanding consumers' expectations of airline services and to relate this to their preferences for foreign or domestic airlines;
- identifying the fundamental service dimensions for consumers who prefer foreign airlines and those who prefer a domestic airline; and

*Corresponding author.

E-mail address: safak@akdeniz.edu.tr (S. Aksoy).

- comparing the average satisfaction levels of passengers flying with foreign airlines and those flying with a domestic airline, and to discriminate among the identified service dimensions with respect to their usefulness in predicting the satisfaction levels for each group.

The international terminal of the Istanbul Ataturk Airport was chosen as the main data-collection point. The airport is located at the crossroads of Europe and Asia and served more than 10 million passengers in 2001 (Tepe-Akfen-Vie Co., 2000). The domestic airline studied was Turkish Airlines while Air France, British Airways, Lufthansa, and KLM were the foreign carriers. London, Frankfurt, Amsterdam, and Paris were selected as the target routes for both the foreign airlines and the domestic airline because travel to these destinations takes approximately the same time—about 3 h from Istanbul—and, therefore, requires similar service levels. The target destinations and airlines were summarized in Table 1.

A self-completion questionnaire was designed to collect information from the passengers of each airline on their demographic, attitudinal, and behavioral patterns.¹ The survey forms were prepared in English, French, German, and Turkish to increase communication, convenience, and the response rate. The forms consisted of three sections. The first aimed to capture information on respondents' frequency and patterns of air travel. The second consisted of 39 statements covering the service expectations and satisfaction of airline passengers. The final section focused on passengers' demographic profiles—age, sex, occupation, location of domicile, and so on.

The questionnaires were handed to passengers waiting at the boarding gates and business lounges of the targeted airlines and flights. Upon completion, the forms were collected in the same manner. Overall, a total of 1350 questionnaires was distributed and 1014 usable responses were collected, producing a 75.1% response rate (Table 2).

3. Findings

3.1. Customer profiles

Respondents were classified according to their sex, age, education, occupation, sector, location of domicile, travel purpose, and travel frequency (Table 3). Differences between the proportions of the foreign and

¹For data collection within the terminal, permissions were obtained from the Istanbul Governorship, the Airport Police Authority, Tepe-Akfen-Vie Co. (as the international terminal operator), and the respective airlines.

Table 1
Selected flight destinations and airlines

Route	Foreign airlines	Domestic airline
Istanbul–London	British Airways	Turkish Airlines
Istanbul–Frankfurt	Lufthansa	Turkish Airlines
Istanbul–Amsterdam	KLM	Turkish Airlines
Istanbul–Paris	Air France	Turkish Airlines

Table 2
Number of respondents by flight destinations and airlines

Foreign airlines	<i>n</i>	Domestic airline	<i>n</i>
British Airways	129	Turkish Airlines	173
Lufthansa	150	Turkish Airlines	156
KLM	65	Turkish Airlines	90
Air France	125	Turkish Airlines	126
Total	469		545
Grand total			1014

domestic airline groups were then tested for each category. Significant differences ($p < 0.05$) are marked with an asterisk.

The data suggest that passengers traveling with foreign airlines were more likely to be male, older, and to have higher educational levels, as compared with passengers on the domestic airline. Foreign airlines were preferred by managers (28%), whereas self-employed people (14.5%), workers (12.4%), and students (11.4%) preferred the domestic airline. Passengers on foreign airlines used air transport largely for business purposes (55.2%), whereas domestic airline travelers were more likely to use air transport for visits (24.9%) and education (11.3%). Travelers on foreign airlines traveled more frequently than those on domestic airlines.

The data were further analyzed to explain the possible relationships between the demographic and behavioral characteristics in both groups. Chi-squared test results showed significant relationships between these variables for both groups (Tables 4 and 5). Female passengers were generally younger (45.9% for foreign airlines and 55.9% for domestic airline) and less-frequent flyers (21.7% and 11.7%, respectively) than male passengers. Females traveled largely for family, friend, or relative visits (61% and 30.3%, respectively).

Male flyers that preferred foreign airlines were largely traveling for business purposes (85%), although not necessarily on business class, whereas only 43.9% of male flyers who preferred the domestic airline were traveling for business reasons.

To analyze the direction and strength of the relationship between age and travel frequency, Kendall's tau-c test was used. The low value (−0.146) for the test

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