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Engaging passengers across digital channels: An international study of 100 airports

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ABSTRACT

The growth in digital channel adoption has allowed airports to gain competitive advantage through innovative offerings to passengers. This study aims understand the role of digital channel usage and airport ranking by exploring the one hundred (100) top-ranked airport's mission statements and digital channels. This study contributes to research by providing a bridge between these separate bodies of research, conceptually integrating company strategy to indicate appropriate digital channel usage. The findings suggest that airport technology usage does influence the overall service ranking. The results of this study also have several implications for both theories and industry by establishing a level of requirement for digital channels for airports and the development of the digital channel selection model. Providing information and recommendations on current digital channel use, thus enabling airports to benchmark their performance across digital channel platforms. The paper offers original insights into the growing phenomenon which is currently underreported in academic literature.

1. Introduction

Technology has advanced rapidly in recent years and now allows for flexible, cost-effective and simpler systems to connect with passengers. While there is increasing research on technology use in airports (Jarach, 2001; SITA, 2013) and satisfaction rating of passengers (Bogicevic et al., 2013; Eboli & Mazzulla, 2009; Drennen, 2011; Jones, 2014; Paternoster, 2008) very little is known about the crossover of these two areas. In particular the strategic use of technology to increase passenger satisfaction in airports. Focus on innovation and competitive advantage through the development of digital channels to enrich the passenger experience is slowly becoming sort after, due to the combination of airport business goals and passenger expectations changing. The number of airports investing in digital channels is also growing, with the determinants of an effective digital channel strategy becoming an essential consideration for airport management. However, there is a limited understanding of how airports are currently applying digital channels strategically, and the influence this has on overall satisfaction ratings.

Buhalis and Amaranggana (2015) explain that a "smart experience" focuses on technology-mediated tourism experiences and their enhancement through personalisation, context-awareness, and real-time monitoring. However, this research argues that an understanding of passenger needs and experiences can better equip airport management to utilise smart technology. Vargo and Lusch (2004) propose a new dominant logic for marketing that focuses on intangible resources and the co-creation of value and relationships, as opposed to tangible resources. Gretzel et al. (2015, p. 181) explain, "The smart tourism experience is efficient and rich in meaning," however, literature in this area is largely based on single case studies or discussing isolated technological developments, rather than laying the theoretical foundations. This study aims to overcome this limitation in literature but exploring the one hundred (100) top-ranked airport's mission statements and what digital channels they are currently using. Through an analysis of digital channels implemented in airports, the aim is to determine how digital channels can be implemented to understand passenger needs and to build a digital channel strategy. Specifically, this study will address:

1. Code the mission statements of the 100 top-ranked international airports.
2. Categorise digital channel touchpoints into typologies to understand if patterns of usage occur.

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3. Understand if there's a correlation between digital channel usage, airport ranking, and location.

The findings suggest that airport technology usage does influence the overall service ranking, highlighting airports which are using digital channels as a communication tool are higher ranked compared to those that currently do not utilise them to their full extent. This study provides a benchmarking tool for airports, by building upon existing research into the usage, purpose and content of digital channels. The paper offers empirical insight into the growing phenomenon that is underreported in academic literature. Provided a bridge between two unrelated bodies of research by conceptually integrating company strategy to indicate appropriate digital channel usage for airports.

2. Background

2.1. The digital evolution of airports

Airport passenger satisfaction and service quality have become the subject of considerable academic attention (Bogicevic et al., 2013; Drennen, 2011; Knox et al., 2008; Paternoster, 2008). Majority of studies conducted on airport passenger satisfaction have identified similar issues impacting on customer satisfaction, such as speed through the airport, cleanliness, gate experience, retail availability and staff interaction (Eboli & Mazzulla, 2009). Today, most travellers use mobile devices when they travel. Airports and retailers have tapped into this trend to make their customers' experience easier and more enjoyable, whether through practical information or initiatives. Like many other industries, airports have turned to digital channels to improve the customer experiences. Numerous airports have begun investing in digital solutions such as mobile applications, self-service check-in, and baggage drop, and wayfinding maps as a means to improve customer experience issues.

As the market of tech-savvy consumers continues to grow, today's airport passengers are demanding specific functionalities and self-service mobile solutions to simplify their airport experience. According to the SITA Airport IT Trends Survey (SITA, 2013) airports invested $6 billion on information technology in 2013 with priority being on investment in passenger processing technology, followed by improvements in passenger services and information. A survey conducted by SITA (2013) revealed that business travellers requested day-of-travel notifications pushed to their phones, and more than 70% want to receive alerts when their flight is boarding (SITA, 2013). The survey also found that a majority of business travellers are dissatisfied with airport Wi-Fi, and would prefer mobile boarding capabilities (SITA, 2013). In recognizing the importance of customer engagement, coupled with the maturation of mobile and information tools, airports today are investing in mobile and self-service technologies to improve passenger experiences. Recently, international airports have deployed airport mobile applications, which provide passengers information related to their flight, as well as notifications of changes in travel details. Dallas/Fort Worth International Airport has also implemented 70-inch and 40-inch digital touch-screens within airport terminals, allowing passengers to find restaurants and amenities within a five-minute walk. Dallas/Fort Worth aims to have these 'digital wayfinders' across the entire airport by 2018 (Jones, 2014).

Self-service processing is also trending in airport technology, with numerous airports adopting self-check-in kiosks and self-service scanners. Allowing passengers to check-in to, and board flights without the need for staff attendance, and ultimately replace manual boarding pass checks for passengers at airports. Recently, the International Air Transport Association (IATA) developed the 'Fast Travel Initiative' in response to customer demands for greater self-service options. Customers will soon have the ability to print boarding passes at home, print and attach a bag tag at a dedicated airport kiosk, drop off their bags at an unattended bag drop station, and board aircraft through an automated self-boarding gate. This technology has already been introduced to several European airports and is quickly trending in the airport technology arena (IATA, 2014; Jones, 2014).

The adoption of digital technologies in airports is a relatively recent trend and has resulted from a response to industry environmental conditions. It should be noted that airport digital channel strategy may not necessarily be a conscious, explicit approach to digital technology adoption, but may instead emerge over time as management decisions in digital technology implementation provide some form of a consistent pattern. Irrespective of the approach to digital strategy undertaken, the realization of an airport's digital strategy will lead to strategic investment decisions in digital technologies.

Digital channels such as Facebook and Twitter have revolutionized how individuals connect, exchange, and gather information. Digital technologies have impacted on almost every aspect of modern life. Business can now be completed more efficiently over greater distances through the use of lesser resources and capital. Additionally, the digital era has given way to new opportunities for businesses to connect and engage with their customers. Traditionally information technology has been adopted on functional and operational levels within organisations however, the data gathered from technology is now perceived as a strategic asset and digital technologies are used as strategic tools. Many organisations not only have a website presence but also dedicated social media pages, blogs, mobile apps and other digital technologies used to connect with customers. These technologies not only provide value to customers but also to gather strategic insights, ultimately allowing firms to gain a competitive advantage in an increasingly digital environment. These new communication channels labelled as 'digital channels,' they are routes of communication between an organisation and its' customers (Edelman, 2010; Straker, Wrigley, & Rosemann, 2015). Straker et al. (2015) define digital channels as technology-based platforms that use the Internet to:

- Connect with passengers via digital technology;
- Provide a range of different content and purposes; and
- Facilitate communication with a range of different interaction levels,

In their study thirty-four (34) digital touchpoints and four (4) digital channel typologies (Functional, Social, Community and Corporate) of digital channels were identified across sixteen (16) industries. Their research identifies what digital channels companies currently employ and explores the needs of industry, outlined in Table 1.

2.2. Creating an emotional connection

A mission statement describes a company's current business and purpose, the who, what and why the company exists and is primarily seen as the first step in the strategy process (Campbell & Yeung, 1991). However, many companies do not have an established mission or vision statement because managers do not believe that they have tangible benefits (Sidhu, 2003). Mission statements have been a frequent subject in business leadership and strategy literature since the 1980s (Levin, 2000). As emphasized by Paternoster (2008), to be considered among the best in the world, airport management must be continuously focused on defining and managing a unique brand, in addition to offering remarkable