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Customer complaints about airline service: a preliminary study of Turkish frequent flyers

Customer complaints about airline service

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to identify common complaints made by Turkish frequent flyers related to their program membership.

Design/methodology/approach – A questionnaire was administered via the internet for the research study reported here. The population consists of 15,000 passengers who are Elite members of the Frequent Flyer Program of Turkish Airlines (THY). For sampling purposes, 2,000 members were randomly selected from the Elite membership in February 2003. Following the survey, 608 usable questionnaires were included in the analysis stage, which represented a response rate of 30.4 per cent.

Findings – In the context of this study of the Elite members of the Miles&Miles program of THY, the common complaints of members fall into five categories. The main concerns are related to the availability of free tickets and upgrades of the flight class, the behaviour of personnel, card ownership issues (e.g. high number of miles needed to retain membership), level and type of priority services offered within the program and the lack of alliances with other airlines.

Research limitations/implications – The research is limited by the sample – THY is the only airline that provides a frequent flyer program in Turkey. Nevertheless, the findings provide a fresh perspective on the opinions of Turkish frequent flyers about the quality of their particular program.

Originality/value – Although customer complaints have become increasingly common in many industries, research on this aspect of marketing is not extensive. In particular, studies about the specific complaints of frequent flyers concerning their respective program are limited. This paper will be of interest to executives in Turkey, airline companies with operations in Turkey and researchers interested in international management and marketing practices generally.

Keywords Turkey, Airlines, Customers, Consumers, Complaints

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Many organizations (companies or firms) still regard customer complaints as not only an unpleasant fact of business life but also a waste of time and money in investigating these concerns. Frequently, barriers are placed in front of customers who decide to complain. Moreover, many frontline employees subtly imply to customers that complaining may not be appropriate in the circumstances. According to Tax and Brown (1998), perhaps only 10 per cent of dissatisfied customers actually lodge a formal complaint – and the majority here “are dissatisfied with the way companies resolve their complaints”. According to Gruberfirst (2004), many consumers “have more negative feelings about an organization after they go through the service-recovery process”. However, in the quest for progress and advancement, progressive service organizations worldwide place their customers first (Zairi, 2000).

The research reported here examines the Miles&Miles program of Turkish Airlines (THY). Within the context of Miles&Miles, THY have two different types membership levels, the Classic Card and the Elite Card. The Classic Card is a way to enter the program, while the Elite Card is the pinnacle of Miles&Miles membership. Card holders are rewarded with various privileges and advantages for their loyalty to THY.



Review of the literature

The services marketing and management literature generally acknowledges that retaining current customers and developing relationships with new ones is a key business strategy (Piercy, 1995). The literature dealing with customer (dis)satisfaction and the subsequent consumer complaint behaviour is substantial. Consumer complaint behaviour is described as the set of all behavioural and non-behavioural responses portrayed by consumers, which involve the communication of negative perceptions relating to a consumption episode that is triggered by dissatisfaction with that episode (Rogers and Williams, 1990). An extensive body of research examines the antecedents and consequences of dissatisfaction, the nature of service failure and strategies for service recovery.

One of the fundamental principles in marketing is that loyal customers enhance organizational performance. Consequently, organizations involved in the delivery of air transportation and air transportation-related services might reasonably be expected to have customer loyalty as a key target. In practice, not all customers will be loyal and few organizations can guarantee to deliver a “zero defects” service every time. Some service failures will unfortunately occur and customer dissatisfaction may be inevitable, particularly in air transportation (Schoefer and Ennew, 2004).

Generally, customers can and do respond to a service failure in a number of predictable ways. They can complain, engage in negative word-of-mouth tactics, communicate openly to management and switch service providers. However, effective service recovery can mitigate many of these adverse consequences of service failure. Smith and Bolton (1998) note that a consumer’s level of satisfaction with a service recovery episode will contribute positively to their cumulative satisfaction with the organization and their intentions to again give the organization in question their patronage. Smith and Bolton (1998) also present evidence to support the “service recovery paradox”. In some cases, excellent service recovery results in levels of cumulative satisfaction that are higher than those which existed prior to the failure. Sparks and McColl-Kennedy (2001) comment on the positive impact of strategic approaches to service recovery on the levels of post-failure satisfaction. However, they caution the reader that the relationship is quite complex. Both Kelley *et al.* (1993) and Blodgett *et al.* (1995) have also demonstrated the beneficial impact of effective service recovery on customer retention rates.

Effective service recovery has a positive impact on post-recovery word-of-mouth communication (cf. Schoefer and Ennew, 2004). Indeed, the beneficial effects of effective service recovery suggest that significant benefits can be gained by encouraging genuine complaints by customers about the quality of a product or service. Complaints of this type are perhaps the only responses that provide management with opportunities to recover effectively from a service failure. Given the risk that customers who experience a service failure may simply defect (a step to be avoided because of its revenue implications) combined with the potential for effective service recovery to increase customer loyalty, the benefits of creating an environment that encourages dissatisfied customers to complain are considerable (Schoefer and Ennew, 2004). Therefore, organizations must be fully cognizant of the sources of customer dissatisfaction with the services they offer – this is the prerequisite step to reversing customer dissatisfaction. Customer complaints not only influence the repurchasing intentions of existing customers but also reduce demand from new customers when complaints enter the public domain, either in the mass media or by word of mouth. For example, Behn and Riley (1999) found that the complaints of airline passengers are

negatively correlated with future revenues and profit margins. Srinivasan *et al.* (2002) identified the negative effect of some measures of service quality on satisfaction, including late arrivals, the number of mishandled baggage and the number of ticket over sales on a flight (cf. Januszewski, 2004). The managers of service organizations need to listen patiently and carefully to the complaints of customers and respond quickly to these concerns. Appropriate handling of the complaints of customers is a business development issue because the successful resolution of such problems has the potential to foster loyalty among customers as well as employees (see Bizhelp, 2007).

Service failures

The link between a satisfied customer, the level of customer retention and profitability is well established in the literature (see Heskett *et al.*, 1994). Long-term relationships just do not happen by chance – they are cultivated and grounded firmly in an organization's approach to service and value, which are enhanced by an effective service recovery system. Not only do satisfied customers conduct repeat business, they also act as advocates. Furthermore, such customers may even be less sensitive to the price of the service(s) being offered.

The principal law of a quality system is "Do it right the first time" (Lovelock *et al.*, 2001). Unfortunately, in complex business environments, things can and do go astray. Customer satisfaction is certainly linked to the fault-free delivery of a service as well as to what transpires when something goes wrong. According to Lovelock *et al.* (2001), when customers experience dissatisfaction, four basic courses of action are available to them, which include

- (1) Do nothing (but the service provider's reputation is diminished in the customer's eyes and the customer will consider defecting if it occurs again).
- (2) Complain in some form to the service organization.
- (3) Take some kind of overt action with a third party.
- (4) Defect and simply do not patronize the organization in the future (while telling others by engaging in a negative, word-of-mouth campaign (McCole, 2004)).

Service recovery

Service recovery is concerned with the process of addressing service failures. Specifically, this entails service recovery with the productive handling of complaints and includes all actions taken by a service provider in order to resolve a customer's problem (Grönroos, 1990). Without complaints, organizations may remain oblivious to significant problems – the chance of appeasing unhappy customers evaporates. Arguably, the greatest barrier to effective service recovery and the potential of organizational learning in this context is the fact that only between 5 and 10 per cent of dissatisfied customers actually complain formally following a service failure (Ennew and Schoefer, 2003; Tax and Brown, 1998). Nevertheless, what constitutes an effective service recovery is subject to debate. Bell and Zemke (1987), for example, propose five ingredients for recovery

- (1) An apology: A first person apology rather than a corporate level apology (and one that also acknowledges that a failure has occurred).
- (2) An urgent reinstatement: Speed of action coupled with a "gallant attempt" to put things right even if it is not possible to correct the situation.

- (3) Empathy: A sincere expression of feeling for the customer's plight and particular circumstances.
- (4) Symbolic atonement: A form of compensation that might include not charging for the service or offering future services free or discounted.
- (5) Follow-up activities: An after-recovery call to ascertain if the consumer is satisfied with the recovery process to date.

The benefits of addressing complaints and solving problems

Several studies demonstrate that it is possible to recover from service failure and quickly regain the confidence of customers (cf. Kelley *et al.*, 1993). Any successful recovery will have a positive influence on post-recovery satisfaction levels, future purchasing intention (Spreng *et al.*, 1995), customer perceptions of fairness (Goodwin and Ross, 1992; Smith *et al.*, 1999) and customer loyalty towards the organization (Levesque and McDougall, 2000; Webster and Sundaram, 1998). There is also evidence in the literature to suggest that the following simple and generic guidelines are highly effective in the successful resolution of complaints (cf. Lovelock *et al.*, 2001). Briefly, these guidelines include

- Acting expediently to resolve the issue.
- Acknowledging that mistakes were made without being defensive.
- Demonstrating that you understand the problem from the customer's point of view.
- Not arguing with customers.
- Acknowledging the feelings of customers.
- Giving customers the benefit of the doubt.
- Clarifying the steps need to solve the problem.
- Keeping customers informed of the process/progress.
- Considering the possibility of compensation.
- Persevering in order to regain the goodwill of customers (McCole, 2004).

Complaints in the airline industry

Although airlines have customer satisfaction as a major goal, not all airlines experiences are satisfactory from the consumer's perspective – service failures do occur in this industry. Air transportation may be particularly susceptible to the problem of service failure because of the number of different providers involved in delivering the service, the high number of passengers and the people-based nature of the service. If service failures are an unpleasant fact for airlines, then these organizations must develop clear strategies for responding to service failures as a way of minimizing the adverse affect of the complaints of their customers.

Frequent flyer programs, which develop customer loyalty, offer incentives to consumers based on cumulative purchases of a given product or service from an organization. Reward programs are now increasingly common in a range of industries and include rewards for frequent flyers, preferred hotel guests and frequent shoppers at a particular enterprise. The levels of customer complaints have significant implications for the profitability of airlines. Wirtz and Johnston (2003) highlight the

positive correlation between the profits and the service excellence of Singapore Airlines (SIA). Commenting on the competitive nature of the airline industry, one of the participants in the study states: "It is important to realize that they (customers) are not just comparing SIA with other airlines. They are comparing us against many industries and on many factors" (Wirtz and Johnston, 2003). In the airline industry, numerous studies are concerned with the complaints of consumers. The findings of one study of US airlines between 1995 and 2002 reveals the wide-ranging nature of the typical complaints by consumers. Aspects of these complaints are reproduced in Table I from a report on the website of the US Department of Transportation (2005).

The specific issues, which include complaints about frequent flyer programs, are set out in Table II. These are derived from information supplied by the Canadian Transportation Agency (2004) and indicate a wide range of concerns.

Even a cursory review of the information in the table above indicates that the quality of service is a significant issue. The main complaints by frequent flyers about the service they receive (Canadian Transportation Agency, 2004) revolves around:

- points redemption;
- reservations;
- space available.

Complaint category	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002
Total	4,629	5,782	6,394	7,994	17,381	20,564	16,508	9,471
Flight problems ^a	1,133	1,628	1,699	2,277	6,469	8,698	5,480	2,031
Customer service ^b	667	999	1,418	1,715	3,664	4,074	2,860	1,715
Baggage	628	882	826	1,108	2,353	2,753	2,490	1,421
Reservations/ticketing/boarding ^c	666	857	904	1,137	1,328	1,405	1,611	1,159
Refunds	576	521	531	602	940	803	1,347	1,106
Oversales ^d	263	353	414	388	673	759	638	454
Fares ^e	185	180	195	277	584	708	666	523
Disability ^e	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	526	612	508	477
Advertising	66	61	57	40	57	42	61	68
Tours	18	16	13	23	28	25	n.a.	n.a.
Smoking ^f	15	13	5	4	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Credit ^f	4	3	1	1	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
Other ^f	408	269	331	422	759	675	650	322
Animals ^g	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	0	1	6	0

Notes: Notes from the report indicate the following: ^aCancellations, delays and other deviations from schedule; ^bRude or unhelpful employees, inadequate meals or cabin service and treatment of delayed passengers; ^cEffective with the September 1999 report, "disability" complaints are listed as a separate category. Previously, disability complaints were included in the reservation/ticketing/boarding category; ^dAll bumping problems, whether or not airline complied with Department of Transport regulations; ^eIncorrect or incomplete information about fares, discount fare conditions and availability, overcharges, fare increases and level of fares in general; ^fComplaints about "smoking" and "credit", which were formerly separate categories, are now included in the other category; ^gEffective with the October 2000 report, animals was added as a new category

Source: Reproduced from the US Department of Transportation's website (12 January 2007)

Table I.
Consumer complaints
against top US airlines
by category

Table II.
Complaints by flyers
2003 to 2004

Complaint issues	January-June 2004		July-December 2003	
Quality of service	496	39.7%	515	41.9%
Disruptions to flights	244	19.6%	177	14.4%
Baggage handling	172	13.8%	145	11.8%
Ticketing matters	97	7.8%	150	12.2%
Safety issues	70	5.6%	35	2.8%
Reservations	60	4.8%	61	5.0%
Refusal to transport	35	2.8%	52	4.2%
Denied boarding	34	2.7%	37	3.0%
Frequent flyer programs	30	2.4%	28	2.3%
Fares	7	0.6%	7	0.6%
Unaccompanied minors	2	0.2%	9	0.7%
Other	1	0.1%	14	1.1%

Source: Canadian Transportation Agency (2004).

Research methodology

This study of a Turkish frequent flyer program is limited to the extent that THY is the only airline providing such a program in Turkey. Elite members were identified because these customers fly regularly and consequently possess an informed understanding about negotiating the program on a regular basis. Some 2,000 members were randomly selected from the Elite members and following the distribution of the survey, 608 usable questionnaires were included in the analysis phase. This represented a reasonable response rate of 30.4 per cent. Data were gathered using an internet survey. The questionnaire, with the essential explanations included, was sent to the email addresses of the THY Elite members by THY. A pilot study was also undertaken with 20 members to gather preliminary information about the ease of answering each question on the questionnaire. Accordingly, some modifications were made to the final survey. Microsoft Office Excel and SPSS 10.0 were used in the analysis of data. In terms of reliability, the coefficient of reliability is $\alpha = 0.8296$. Only a summary of the main findings of the study are included below.

The complaints of frequent flyers

Members were asked to indicate the main type of complaints they had concerning their program. Subsequently, they were asked to make recommendations about how these complaints might be addressed. The complaints can be grouped into five categories.

- (1) Lack of free tickets and upgrades of the flight class (93.75 per cent).
- (2) Behaviour of personnel (32.89 per cent).
- (3) Card ownership issues (e.g. high miles needed to retain membership) (65.79 per cent).
- (4) Nature and level of priority services offered within the program (56.74 per cent).
- (5) Lack of alliance with other airlines (46.88 per cent).

These complaints are discussed in more detail below.

Free tickets and upgrade of the flight class

Most members complained about free tickets and upgrading their flight class. The high amount of mileage required to qualify for free tickets is a factor here and this may have an adverse effect on the attractiveness of the program for both current and potential members. From the viewpoint of current members, the high mileage factor reduces the motivation of flyers and diverts them to other carriers that have programs, which offer similar rewards for fewer miles. The lack of flexibility in converting rewards is also a factor. One of the most common complaints by members suggests that they are unable to use their free tickets when they want. Moreover, some members reported that although they wanted to book a seat well in advance, airline personnel indicated that no seats were available on that flight. There was also a sense that some members use this right more often than others do. In this context, program members would welcome an increase in the quota of free tickets and the apportioning of these tickets in an equitable manner as very positive developments. Another element of the reward program is the ability to upgrade the flight class (e.g. from economy to business class). However, most members cannot take advantage of such upgrades at particular times even if seats were available. In this context, if THY increased the number of potential upgrades in the normal passenger periods, the attractiveness of the program would increase. Consequently, benefits would be delivered to THY through increased loyalty.

Personnel

Many members complained about the behaviour and demeanor of the airline personnel. The focal point of such complaints is as follows

- Personnel are uninformed about the frequent flyer program.
- Inappropriate training received by the cabin crew.
- Lack of the language proficiency of the cabin crew.
- Insensitive behaviour of the ground personnel.
- Rude and insensitive personnel at the check-in desk.
- Uninformed and insensitive “foreign” personnel.
- Personnel are not of a “cheerful” disposition.

The THY personnel, who interact directly with the frequent flyers, do not seem to possess adequate knowledge of the program. This is an issue of training and development (T&D) for THY management. Front-line personnel need to address the problems and concerns of frequent flyers in relatively short timeframe. In addition, because some THY personnel are seen to lack proficiency in foreign languages, THY could develop appropriate T&D programs to respond to this criticism. Because the services in the airline industry are provided face-to-face, all personnel require the appropriate service disposition – cheerful and sensitive personnel also bring out the best in customers.

Card ownership

Most members have complaints on the “ownership” aspects of the frequent flyer card, which include the high miles required to maintain Elite membership. Although some members have been Elite members for long periods, they may be relegated if they fail to achieve the required annual miles for remaining in that class. In this context, it may

be appropriate to reconsider the number of miles for retention or to include domestic flights in the calculations. In addition, the high number of new members of Miles&Miles can adversely affect the level of services given to the Elite members.

Another complaint concerning the frequent flyer program is related to the Elite Card application process. There is a long period between getting the right of Elite Card membership and actually having the card itself. If members receive their cards promptly, the number of the problems that arise through using the temporary card will decrease significantly. It is also extremely important to the success of the program that members be informed expediently about the program and its priorities – the internet will enhance this form of communication (e.g. priorities offered by the program, new program partners, discounted tickets, miles flown and the like). Personalized communications (for birthdays or anniversaries) also help promote loyalty.

Priority services offered within the program

Many members have complaints concerning the types of priority services offered within the program. The focal points of these complaints are

- Because there are many Elite members, some priorities are not available.
- No priority in the holding list.
- No priority in the reservations.
- No priority in check-in process.
- Inadequate VIP and similar lounges.
- Limited food and beverage choices.
- Inability to “win” miles from domestic flights.

Such complaints implicitly reflect a lack of confidence in the program and this level of mistrust will adversely affect the loyalty of other members. If THY considered a new card service for the 200 most frequent flyers, many current problems may be reduced.

Alliances with the other airlines

Some members complained about alliances with other airlines. In particular

- There is an inadequate level of co-operation with the other airlines.
- There are limited destinations.

Insufficient alliances with the other airlines and the limited number of flight destinations loom large in the mind of program members. A re-organizing of the destinations and associated schedules, combined with increasing the number of alliances with the other airlines, should be on the agenda of THY. Elite members certainly want greater network access, seamless travel, transferable priority status, extended lounge access and enhanced benefits for their frequent flyer program.

Generally, management will need to consider the resources associated with meeting the various requests of customers discussed above and make financially responsible decisions in this context. In a similar vein, many solutions to customer service problems involve the re-organization of human resources rather than an immediate injection of capital. Not all problems can be solved by financial strategies and effective human resource development programs are features of high performing organizations.

Conclusion

Organizations today concur that customers are the most important element in the business model. Consequently, organizations direct significant resources toward enriching customer-oriented activities. In this context, customer complaints come into prominence in customer-oriented organizations. The loyalty of the customers can only be gained by solving their problems efficiently, although some organizations need to improve their performance in this area. Handling the complaints of consumers efficiently and attending to customer loyalty are priorities in the airline industry. However, if complaints are not handled efficiently, problems remain unsolved and fester in the organization.

The members of the frequent flyer programs of THY target their complaints in areas related to free tickets and upgrades, the behaviour of airline personnel, card ownership, priority services offered and to a lesser extent the lack of alliances with the other airlines. THY could reap benefits by developing cost-effective strategies to address the concerns of their frequent flyers. Such strategies should be geared to fixing the immediate problems to prevent losing customer, developing and improving of priority services offered and developing a new service culture among personnel. Such measure will add value to the THY brand and strengthen customer loyalty. They may also be a form of competitive advantage in a highly competitive industry.

In conclusion, customer complaints are important for building competitive business practices. For this reason, the complaints of customers must be considered as rewards rather than problems. In the longer term, customer loyalty is a source of competitive advantage.

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