



A content analysis of airline mission statements: Changing trends and contemporary components

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ABSTRACT

Mission statements have an important bearing on business and in the airline industry such statements inform and connect international and heterogeneous stakeholders. While research was conducted on airline mission statements over a decade ago, the industry has since been transformed with the rise of new global carriers and changing consumer trends. The purpose of this study is to examine current airline mission statements to update findings from previous studies. The analysis evaluates the content of mission statements from 79 passenger airlines from around the world. The outcomes reveal products/services, customers, and location/markets as the three most prevalent components. Additionally, it appears mentions of safety in mission statements are increasingly apparent as airlines seek to ensure trust and confidence among consumers. The results and conclusions build on a framework of ten mission statement components and make comparisons between airlines and regions of the world.

1. Introduction

Mission statements have an important bearing on the airline industry, and are used to inform and connect stakeholders. Additionally, mission statements give meaning to an organization and emphasize company qualities and values to attract customers (David, 2012). Mission statements outline future goals, directions, existence, and responsibility (Eden & Hyndman, 2001), and scholars argue that mission statements are integral to a company's intentions to deliver service quality (King et al., 2014). Furthermore, businesses implement strategies and plans aligned with these statements to ensure consumers are aware of a company's intentions and business practices (David et al., 2014; Powers, 2012; Wang & Lin, 2011) so consumers can better measure the effectiveness business operations (Braun et al., 2012).

Previous studies on mission statements in the business and management literature have analyzed the content of company statements within given industries operating in different countries (Baetz & Bart, 1996; Verma, 2009; King et al., 2014; Bartkus et al., 2004; Wang & Lin, 2011). In this sense, the broader tourism industry differs little from other sectors. The hospitality industry uses such statements to reinforce a company's brand, clarify a business's values and provision of services, and to inform their guests and motivate staff (e.g., Nankervis & Debrah,

1995).

In the airline industry, mission statements can distinguish one company from its competitors although each airline offers a service of transporting passengers. Given this, the airline industry represents a unique industry for assessing mission statements because of (a) the similarity of the core service and (b) the different points of emphasis that airlines highlight in their mission statements. Equally, it has been claimed that from business, marketing and management perspectives, these mission statements have an important bearing on airline operations as they seek to connect international and heterogeneous stakeholders (Kemp & Dwyer, 2003). Moreover, mission statements help each airline to differentiate itself from competitors as a way to express unique corporate personalities (Kemp & Dwyer, 2003). Since 2003, the industry has rapidly transformed with the rise of new global carriers and changing consumer trends (for example with the emergence of high quality services from Emirates, Etihad and Qatar Airways, and Low cost carriers at the other end of the spectrum). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine recent airline mission statements to update past findings and to assess in what ways they have changed, and implicitly to evaluate broader trends, company strategies, immediate future plans and longer-term visions for growth inasmuch as these are revealed in these documents (Wang & Lin, 2011).

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This paper examines passenger airlines' statements and focuses on 79 carriers to understand how industry missions have changed in the past decade, building in part on the previous study conducted by Kemp and Dwyer (2003). The next section discusses the literature on the purpose and components of mission statements before assessing those specific to the airline industry. The research method (content analysis) will be outlined before indicating the results and a broader discussion of the findings. The concluding section summarizes the findings and offers some insight into managerial implications. Such research is vital to update give the aforementioned changes in the passenger airline industry. Today, companies are pressured to respond to changing consumer demands and safety standards and thus mission statements showcase how company responds to such pressures.

In undertaking such a study, one issue is the question of how contemporary are the statements, as airlines revise and amend such statements at different periods of time, and thus examining current statements often means that comparisons are bedeviled by the various rates of response to current conditions in the industry. Hence, for example, in examining conditions in 2017, airline A may post a statement in that year, while Airline B has retained a statement from two years previously. In trying to overcome this the researchers sought a period of stability when mission statements were not subject to any rapidity of change. From this perspective the period 2015–15 represented a generally favorable period in which to undertake such a comparison (European Commission, 2016; IATA, 2016). The industry was generally doing well, aviation fuel prices were low, passenger demand was growing and the majority of legacy placing orders for the new generation of aircraft. Consequently the mission statements relate to this period.

2. Mission statements and the airline industry

Research assessing mission statements has seen increased attention among businesses, corporations, and industries resulting in sustained interest among academics over several years (Baetz & Bart, 1996; Williams, 2008; King et al., 2014; Yozgat & Karatas, 2011; Rajasekar, 2013). To businesses, mission statements communicate a company's intentions to inform relevant stakeholders, such as customers, employees, suppliers, investors and community about the organization, what they offer, their goals and aspirations, the delivery of service quality and value, and how they meet consumer demands while additionally providing insight into the future plans and directions of the company (Ackoff, 1987; Bartkus et al., 2004; Eden & Hyndman, 2001; Genç, 2012; Jyoti & Sharma, 2012; King et al., 2014; Wang & Lin, 2011). Regardless of whether a mission statement is a short sentence or a long paragraph, it helps the organization to differentiate itself from competitors (Bart, 1997; Kemp & Dwyer, 2003). Moreover, the statement expresses the personality and corporate character of an organization (Chun & Davies, 2001). Kemp and Dwyer (2003, p. 636–637) further argued: “a mission statement needs to be specific enough to instill purpose in—but broad enough to effectively reconcile differences among—the organization's diverse stakeholders.” For instance, a non-profit organization will focus on public benefits in its mission statement in order to create social value (Wang & Lin, 2011). Regardless of the service delivered, management teams will refer to their mission statement when making decisions (Moin et al., 2012). Furthermore, mission statements help create a sense of belonging and promote company culture by inspiring employees to act in accordance with the organization's values (Lin, 2012). This has been an important component of corporate culture for decades (Klemme et al., 1991), and today there is more emphasis on both employee and customer satisfaction (David et al., 2014; Jyoti & Sharma, 2012).

Building on this overview of the purpose of mission statements, Kemp and Dwyer (2003, p. 636) state “a good mission statement describes an organization's purpose, products and services, markets, philosophy, and basic technology.” Likewise, David et al. (2014, p. 98)

state: “mission statements should be informative, inspiring, enduring, concise, clear, and conducive to both employees and customers forming an emotional bond with the firm.” Campbell and Yeung (1991a, 1991b) suggested four components that need to be included in mission statements: namely 1) purpose; 2) strategy; 3) behavior and 4) company values. Similarly, Pearce and David (1987) focused on how companies define mission statements by analyzing particular content based on eight pre-determined components; however, David (1989, 2007) has since modified this approach to suggest nine components. According to David (2007), the nine components are: 1) customers/clients; 2) products or services; 3) location; 4) technology; 5) concern for survival; 6) philosophy; 7) self-concept; 8) concern for public image; and 9) concern for employees. Relevant to this study, safety has also been perceived as an important component in airline mission statements because transport safety is at the forefront of airline management and company image, especially in the event of aircraft failure (Genç, 2012, Lin, 2012).

Bringing the above perspectives together, Kotler and Keller (2012) suggest a strong mission statement should have the following attributes: focus on specific company goals; stress major policies and company values; define major competitive dimensions of the company and its long-term vision. What is more, mission statements should be concise, meaningful and memorable (see Kotler & Keller 2012) to clearly identify a company's intention and commitments to their stakeholders (Bartkus et al., 2004). As noted by Ackoff (1987), and further emphasized by Bartkus et al. (2004), well-structured mission statements can help an organization meet the demands of the different stakeholders' groups: customers, employees, investors, suppliers, and communities. Moreover, as recommended by Chun and Davies (2001), mission statements allow stakeholders to know ‘who’ a company is by permitting it to express a corporate character or personality linked to business sense, identity, and strategy. Generally, a mission statement also includes information outlining how a company will better achieve and sustain growth and serve the interests of shareholders (Terrill & Middlebrooks, 2003; Wang & Lin, 2011).

Verma (2009) reinforces the above-mentioned points by suggesting that a well-crafted mission statement can influence how people perceive a company's intentions, thereby influencing people through the implementation of particular philosophical or ethical aspects. While numerous scholars have assessed mission statements, most are concerned with their content and how companies communicate business objectives and markets to consumers (Campbell & Yeung, 1991a; Chun & Davies, 2001; David, 1989; Leuthesser & Kohli, 1997; Lin, 2012; Terrill & Middlebrooks, 2003; Wang & Lin, 2011). For example, Castro and Lohmann (2014) discuss how mission statements offer a vision into current and future operations that can help emphasize a company's brand or corporate character (Chun & Davies, 2001).

In terms of general business insight, mission statements are also guidelines for non-routine decision-making and may be perceived as a control mechanism to ensure everything and everyone is on the right track and working towards shared objectives (Bartkus et al., 2004). Similarly, Lin (2012) places emphasis on creating a sense of belonging, or company culture, inspiring employees to contribute to the values of the company. Finally, Baetz and Bart (1996) noted that if stakeholders can provide input when companies prepare mission statements, such a process satisfies those other parties and reassures them that their concerns are key to the company's strategies.

The global aviation industry is extremely competitive given the rapid expansion of low cost carriers and the rise of Middle Eastern airlines that empathize quality as noted above (Detzen et al., 2012; Pels, 2009; Yetiskul & Kanafani, 2010). Therefore, it is crucial for each airline to create a strong impression about who they are, what they promise their customers and the benefits of flying with them. Additionally, the aviation industry inherently differs from many other service industries because passengers, employees, and investors are heterogeneous, and internationally, the sector transcends cultural business

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