



The impact of an aircraft's service environment on perceptions of in-flight food quality



Wolfgang Messner

Darla Moore School of Business, University of South Carolina, 1014 Greene Street, Columbia, SC 29208, USA

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 25 November 2015
Received in revised form
14 February 2016
Accepted 14 February 2016
Available online 3 March 2016

Keywords:

Airline catering
Airline industry
Cabin staff service
Customer satisfaction
In-flight food quality
Service environment

ABSTRACT

Airlines are currently striving to improve the quality and quantity of in-flight food, because research has shown that catering is a key attribute for a customer's satisfaction with airline service quality. But the role of an airline's service environment in forming customer perceptions about food quality has not yet been properly investigated. Using electronic word-of-mouth data from $N = 3996$ airline passengers, this study deploys a linear regression model at multiple levels to relate perceived in-flight food quality with both the overall service environment and its formative components. The results clearly unveil the importance of an aircraft's service environment on perceived in-flight catering quality; perceptions of food quality are primarily influenced by the quality of cabin staff service, followed by entertainment and seat quality. Instead of continuing with the current practice of signing up top chefs to improve menus, airlines may instead consider putting their management focus on service improvements.

© 2016 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

Airline food. These two words are guaranteed to bring out a heated debate among airline passengers (James, 2010). Price is not the only factor when it comes to choosing an airline. Some passengers pick their carrier because of the comfort of the seats, others prize high standards of service above all else. But there is evidence that, for an increasing number of customers, the quality of in-flight food served may be the deciding factor. Aware of their reputation of serving less than satisfactory food, airlines are reacting by signing up top chefs to reorganize menus (James, 2005), thereby following the example of the haute-cuisine restaurant business, where the Michelin guide star system operates as a signaling device to tell customers that they may trust in their decision-making process (Surlemont and Johnson, 2006, p. 577). However, according to the French food critic François Simon, this heavily stylized Michelin-cuisine is outmoded: "For me it is something from another century. It goes back to a time when everybody was obeying rules and the bourgeoisie. [...] Today people consider the table a place where they want to feel at ease [...] But not these very serious dishes and all those boring things" (Boxell, 2011). This study now questions for

the airline industry, if following the haute-cuisine approach is the most promising way for increasing passengers' satisfaction with in-flight food?

The airline industry is part of the international service sector and characterized by a small number of high-value customer transactions (Bejou and Palmer, 1998, p. 7). Growth in the tourism industry in general and in the airline industry in particular creates opportunities as well as challenges for businesses trying to understand their target groups (de Ruyter et al., 1998, p. 189). For formulating a service firm's marketing strategy, knowing a customer's evaluation of service quality and expression of satisfaction is a critical input (e.g., Ofir and Simonson, 2007, p. 164; Szymanski and Henard, 2001, p. 16; Zins, 2001, p. 271). Studies show an especially significant relationship between service quality and retained preference for services firms that operate in global markets (e.g., Ostrowski et al., 1993, p. 16; Park et al., 2004, p. 438). Given the intensive rivalry in the transport industry and its low switching barriers, a focus on customer satisfaction, loyalty, and recommendation intention is even more important (Akamavi et al., 2015, p. 528; Fornell, 1992): "Loyal passengers are essential to any successful airline" (Akamavi et al., 2015, p. 540).

This study scrutinizes feedback from $N = 3996$ airline passengers of Aeroflot, AirAsia, British Airways, Condor, China Southern, Emirates, Etihad, Germanwings, Indigo, Jet Airways, KLM, Lufthansa, Singapore Airlines, and WestJet. It relates perceived

E-mail addresses: wolfgang.messner@gmail.com, wolfgang.messner@globusresearch.com.

customer feedback on in-flight food quality to an airplane's service environment, which is made up of cabin staff service, entertainment, and seat quality. Both a pan-airline analysis on the entire dataset ($N = 3996$), as well as an ecological analysis at the aggregated inter-airline level and class of travel ($S = 23$) are conducted. In order to understand how airlines can best increase customer satisfaction and loyalty, we ask the question, "Should airlines rather improve the quality of their in-flight food offerings, or focus on improving the overall service environment? Which components of the service environment contribute the most to perceived food quality?"

After this introduction (Section 1), the remainder of the paper is organized as follows. It first looks at service quality in the airline industry (Section 2), and then explains the study's methodology in terms of research area, hypotheses, and data collection (Section 3). Next, the paper analyses the data, and presents the results (Section 4). It discusses the managerial implications of the findings (Section 5), highlights the study's limitations, and gives potential directions for further research (Section 6).

2. Airline service quality – concept and measurement

Successful companies closely measure, monitor, and manage the factors that drive profitability. The service-profit chain proposes that profit and growth are primarily fueled by customer loyalty, which is a direct consequence of customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction, in turn, is largely influenced by the value and quality of services provided to customers (Heskett et al., 1994, pp. 164–165; Sasser et al., 1997). Following the conceptualization by Zins (2001), customer satisfaction is understood as an "overall, post-consumption affective response by the airline customer" (p. 276). This response is formed in three stages (Zhang et al., 2008, pp. 212–213): (1) a-priori expectations, (2) subsequent evaluations, and (3) reaction to the service experience. Service expectations are pretrial beliefs that serve as standards or reference points against which the process of receiving a service is judged (Zeithaml & Parasuraman, 1993, p. 1; Niccolini and Salini, 2006, p. 581), confirming or disconfirming aspects of the service quality in a personal trade-off comparison.

Loyalty shows in retention, repeat business, or referral (Heskett et al., 1994, p. 166); it clearly affects profitability (Reichheld, 2003, p. 47). Highly satisfied customers can convert non-customers to a product or service by relating pleasant experiences, recommending to others, and conspicuously displaying branded material. On the other hand, unsatisfied customers are likely to "speak out against a poorly delivered service at every opportunity" (Heskett et al., 1994, p. 166), this includes product or service denigration, relating unpleasant experiences, rumor, and private complaining.

Throughout this paper, such positive or negative word-of-mouth (WOM) referrals denote informal communication between individuals relating to the travel experience with the airline (Dichter, 1966; Singh, 1988; Westbrook, 1987), rather than formal complaints to the airline and its personnel (Anderson, 1998, p. 6). Reviews and ratings are the popular medium by which electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM) is propagated; eWOM can function as a market signal, which influences decisions (Amblee and Bui, 2011). It has been used in the travel and hospitality industry for various different study contexts (e.g., Amblee, 2015; Casalo et al., 2015).

Airline service quality can be understood, in its simplest form, as passenger satisfaction (Bowen et al., 1992); perceived service quality influences the choice of airlines (Min and Min, 2015, p. 734). Unfortunately, there is no consensual agreed conceptualization of airline service quality in either the academic or commercial market research (Tiernan et al., 2008, pp. 214–216). Tsaor et al. (2002)

identify airline service quality as a composite of attributes; they find courtesy, safety, and comfort to be the most important ones. Saha and Theingi (2009) test the order of dimensions of service quality, resulting in flight schedules, flight attendants, tangibles, and ground staff. Park et al. (2004) find that service value (perceived price and value), passenger satisfaction, and airline image have a direct effect on a passenger's decision-making process. Wu and Cheng (2013) develop a hierarchical model consisting of interaction, physical environment, outcome, and access quality. Bowen et al. (1992) highlight, that, for assessing airline quality, both qualitative and quantitative factors are important. Bejou and Palmer (1998) and Edvardsson (1992) use the critical incident technique to understand the situations in the service delivery process where airlines fail, and how this affects passengers' relations with the airline. Aksoy et al. (2003, p. 346) highlight that customers of domestic and foreign airlines may have different expectations of service quality. Economy and business class passengers attach different levels of importance to different service quality factors (An and Noh, 2009, p. 293). Other authors like Chen and Chang (2005) and Oyewole (2001) examine the gap between passengers' service expectations and actual service received. While the critical role of the physical environment in comprehending customer behavior has been largely studied in various fields, there has been little previous research in the airline industry: "Empirical research on in-flight physical surroundings and their impact on passengers' buying behaviors is almost as rare for the low-cost airline industry as well as for the full-service airline industry" (Han, 2013, p. 126). This study aims to help close this gap by examining the impact of the service environment on passengers' perceptions of in-flight food quality.

3. Methodology of the study

3.1. Research area and hypotheses

Airline food was first introduced to calm fears of flying. Today, passengers look forward to breaking the monotony of flying with pre-meal drinks, followed by a multi-course menu (de Syon, 2008, p. 207). Airlines continue to announce that they have contracted famous chefs to redesign their in-flight meals (de Syon, 2008, p. 205; James, 2005); in addition, many create seasonal meals several times a year (McGinnis, 2015). This brings expectations as an attitude into the in-flight food situation. Following Cardello (1994), expectations can be defined as the belief that food will possess certain sensory attributes at certain intensities, and that the food will be liked/disliked to a certain degree. The acceptability of food is related to both its characteristics and to what passengers expect it to be. Food that is expected to be better is rated higher, and food that is expected to be worse, is rated lower (Meiselman, 2003, pp. 101–102).

Food anthropologists note that a good meal is judged as much by the surroundings where food is served as on what appears on the table (Gottdiener, 2001, pp. 103–104). Since the middle of the 20th century, consumers have gotten used to assessing product quality in its context or environment. Food quality and food acceptability are judged by factors surrounding the food itself, and factors surrounding the eater (Meiselman, 2003, p. 99). But enjoying a meal also means a special setting, an occasion, and the choice of dining companions (Warde and Martens, 1998). The following interrelationship is therefore proposed:

H1. Airline passengers' perception of food quality (FOOD) depends on the service environment (SERV) as a whole.

In an aircraft, the illusion of a proper meal does not end with an aircraft's technological restrictions; economic reasons further

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/1030680>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/1030680>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)