A Study to Determine the Effects of Customer Value

on Customer Loyalty in Airline Companies

Operating: Case of Turkish Air Travellers

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Abstract

Enhancing customer loyalty has become a popular topic for managers, consultants, and academics. The arguments in support of loyalty are simple to understand. Loyal customers are reported to have higher customer retention rates, commit a higher share of their category spending to the firm, and are more likely to recommend others to become customers of the firm. (Reichheld, Sasser, 1990; Zeithaml, 2000, "Keiningham, et al. 2007)

Traditionally, marketing activities have focused on success in the product marketplace by examining the physical aspects of products and services such as quantity, quality, functionality, availability, accessibility, delivery, price and customer support. More recently, marketing managers have shifted their emphasis to creating value for their customers (Clutterbuck, Goldsmith, 1998; McAlexander et al., 2002, Mascarenhas, et al. 2006). So there are very limited researches for customer value affect customer loyalty? Is customer value affecting customer loyalty? This research focused determine the effects of customer value, which is perceived by domestic line passengers based on the services offered by the airline company preferred, on the level of loyalty towards airline companies.

This study was carried out based on descriptive research model. Multiple regression analysis was employed in the study so that the extent to which the level of passenger satisfaction about each of the services offered by airline companies influences the level of passenger loyalty to airline companies can be determined. Also, logistic regression analysis was conducted to determine the services playing a role in meeting passenger expectations by airline companies.

Keywords: Customer loyalty, Customer value, Airlines, Turkish air travellers

1. Introduction

Recent years have shown a growing interest in customer loyalty. The globalization of competition, saturation of markets, and development of information technology have enhanced customer awareness and created a situation where long-term success is no longer achieved through optimized product price and qualities. Instead, companies build their success on a long-term customer relationship. According to lots of studies, it can cost as much as 6 times more to win a new customer than it does to keep an existing one. (Rosenberg *et al.* 1984) Depending on the particular industry, it is possible to increase profit by up to 60% after reducing potential migration by 5%. (Reichheld 1993, Kuusik, Varblane, 2009)

Customer loyalty is a buyer's overall attachment or deep commitment to a product, service, brand, or organization (Oliver 1999). The loyalty concept is similar in meaning to relationship commitment, which is described by the relationship marketing literature as an enduring desire to be in a valued relationship (Morgan and Hunt 1994). Customer loyalty manifests itself in a variety of behaviors, the more common ones being recommending a service provider to other customers and repeatedly patronizing the provider (Fornell, 1992)

Customer loyalty is a prime determinant of long-term financial performance of firms (Jones and Sasser, 1995). This is particularly true for service firms where increased loyalty can substantially increase profits (Reichheld, 1996). Service firms focus on achieving customer satisfaction and loyalty by delivering superior value, an underlying source of

competitive advantage (Woodruff, 1997). For service firms the challenge is identifying the critical factors that determine customer satisfaction and loyalty. (McDougall, Levesque, 2000)

Value in social science is understood in the human values such as the instrumental and terminal ones suggested by Rokeach (1973). In marketing, it is typically defined from the customer's perspective. As Zeithaml suggested, this is ''the customer's overall assessment of the utility of a product based on perception of what is received and what is given'' (1988). Meanwhile, others have proposed various definitions with a distinct emphasis (Anderson, Jain and Chintagunta 1993). They share some commonalities: customer value is linked through or inherent in the use of some products or services; it is perceived by customers instead of independently determined by the one who offers the products and services; and customer's perceptions typically involve a trade-off between what one receives and what he or she correspondingly sacrifices. The distinctions of these definitions exist in the different terms used (utility, worth, benefits, quality, etc.) and the different points of time when the perception of value is created: at the moment of making purchase decision or after use (Woodruff 1997, Feng, Morrison, 2007)

Perceived value has proven to be a difficult concept to define and measure (Woodruff, 1997, Zeithaml, 1988). Broadly defined, perceived value is the results or benefits customers receive in relation to total costs (which include the price paid plus other costs associated with the purchase). In simple terms, value is the difference between perceived benefits and costs. However, what constitutes value appears to be highly personal, idiosyncratic, and may vary widely from one customer to another. Research evidence suggests that customers who perceive that they received ``value for money'' are more satisfied than customers who do not perceive they received ``'value for money'' (Zeithaml, 1988). Also perceived value may be used by customers to ``bundle'' various aspects of the service relative to competitive offerings. (McDougall, Levesque, 2000)

The nature of customer value, how it determines customer loyalty and how this in turn leads to financial outcomes is the subject of considerable discussion amongst academics and consultants. As with the development of any new area, there is debate about the alternative ways concepts can be defined. Some authors focus just on the benefits of customer value. Others adopt a cost–benefit view, which assesses value on the basis of a "get for give" view. The benefits are what the customer gets, and costs are what the customer gives up (Whittaker et al., 2007; Brodie, et al. 2009)

2. Research Methodology

Objective of the Study: The aim of this study is to determine the effects of customer value, which is perceived by domestic line passengers based on the services offered by the airline company preferred, on the level of loyalty towards airline companies.

Limitations of the Research: The research is limited by the questionnaire answered between the 01–31 2007 of January, 2007 by 397 passengers. Data were collected from domestic passengers departing from Istanbul Atatürk airport, Istanbul Sabiha Gökçen airport, Izmir Adnan Menderes Airport, Malatya Erhaç airport and Antalya airport.

Research Method: Face-to-face interview is used for the research.

Research Medium: The research medium consists of 397 passengers. For sampling purposes, 397 was randomly selected from the domestic passengers between 1-31 of January and included in the questionnaire analysis.

Collection of the Research Data: A pilot work has been done with 21 passengers to learn about how good the questions in the questionnaire form serve for the objective of the research. According to answers to those questions, some modifications have been done in the questions. 397 usable questionnaires were gained in the research and Microsoft Office Excel and SPSS (Statistics Pack for Social Sciences) 13, 0 were used in the analysis.

Reliability Analysis of the Research: It is possible to say that the research is reliable as a whole, according to the coefficient of reliability α = 0,884

3. Research Findings

(Insert Table 1 Here)

As can be seen Table 1, 59, 4 % of male and 40, 5 % of them are female passengers. When the distribution of the subjects according to their age range is analyzed it can be seen that 15% of them are aged between 15-25, 54,5 % of them are aged between 26-35, 22,8 % of them are aged between 36-45, 5,9% of them are aged between 46-55 and %1,8 of them are aged 56 or more than it. Consequently it is seen that passenger intensify between "26-35".

When the distribution of the members related to their education background is examined, it can be seen that 57 % of the members are graduates, 19, 3% of them are master's degree graduates and 5.8 % of them are doctor's degree graduates. When the proportion of the members who are graduates and postgraduates is analyzed in terms of the general sum a high proportion has been occurred as 82, 1 %.

When the monthly incomes of the members are examined, it has been seen that 36,8 % of them have monthly income as 1000-1999, 36,2% of them have monthly income as 2000-2999, 9,6 % of them have monthly income as 3000-3999, 7,9 % of them have monthly income as 4000- more than it.

(Insert Table 2 Here)

As can be seen Table 2, Air passengers were asked if the services provided by a carrier met their expectations in terms of value for money for their travel cost or not, and 79, 8% of the passengers stated that their expectations were met while 20,2% of them gave negative response to this question. As can be seen in Table 1, the money spent by passengers meet their expectations to a great extent. On the other hand, the 20, 2-percent negative response points out that identifying passengers' wants and needs accurately and meeting them has become really important for carriers in domestic lines. Therefore, airline companies should increase communication channels with their customers and also become involved in studies aimed at measuring customer satisfaction and value by using techniques like questionnaires.

Apparently, customers attach a great deal of importance to fulfillment of their wants and needs. In this respect, carriers operating in domestic lines have to provide their customers with services designed to create higher values for their customers and to increase customer loyalty to airline companies. Thus, it seems obligatory for airline companies to provide various options in value-oriented services such as low-pricing, increasing domestic routes, stepping up direct flights, punctuality and baggage services. Furthermore, communication channels with customers should be increased so that customer wants and needs can be identified more accurately and services should be provided continuously through a strategy from which all customers in the market can benefit.

(Insert Table 3 Here)

As can be seen Table 3, passengers involved in the survey were asked if they had ever experienced any negative situation related to the airline company they preferred. The responses received indicate that 72, 0% of the passengers have hardly had an unpleasant experience concerning the carrier chosen. This result is indicative of the fact that airline firms operating in domestic lines provide services by creating value for their customers and maintain a high level of customer satisfaction. On the other hand, 26, 4% of the passengers stated that they had experienced a negative situation while 1, 5% stated they had experienced too many or continual negative situations. This highlights the significance of the fact that airline companies need to continue their actions designed to improve personnel training and to provide better service so that customer loyalty is improved.

(Insert Table 4 Here)

As can be seen Table 4, those passengers who had stated that they had had a negative experience concerning the airline firm chosen (n=281) were inquired about the extent to which they found carriers' attitude towards problems efficient. The responses indicate that 55, 5% of the passengers regard the airline firms' attitude towards the problems experienced as efficient. On the other hand, 25, 3% of them provided neither positive nor negative responses while 19, 2% of them stated that they found the airline firms' attitude towards the problems inefficient. This situation shows that the personnel of the carriers operating in domestic lines should receive more training and there should be more effort about the management of customer relations. Also, airline companies should ensure that their personnel have a feeling of satisfaction and contentment about their job. It is only natural that a member of staff with a complete training and a feeling of contentment about his or her job will adopt a more positive attitude towards customers. Furthermore, a well-qualified employee could help increasing customers' level of loyalty to airline firms by creating more customer value on behalf of firms.

(Insert Table 5 Here)

As can be seen Table 5, passengers participating in the survey were asked whether they thought their suggestions and complaints were conveyed to the relevant departments of airline companies or not. According to the results, 57, 1% of the air passengers stated that they thought their suggestions and complaints were conveyed to the concerning departments of airline companies. On the other hand, the percentages of those providing negative responses for this question and those giving neither positive or negative responses were 19, 1 % and 23, 7 % respectively. This situation points out that the units of airline carriers where suggestions and complaints are evaluated prove inefficient. Passengers may have the opinion that when their remark about a negative situation is conveyed to the relevant unit it is ignored. In this respect, it becomes critical that passengers' suggestions and complaints be evaluated by the relevant unit and immediate feedback is communicated to customers. Resolving an issue and providing feedback about that may lead to a change of negative opinions about airline companies even if customers have experienced a negative situation.

(Insert Table 6 Here)

As can be seen Table 6, in terms of services and criteria, the questions in the first and second parts of the study were aimed at the services provided before, during and after flight and factors affecting customer value such as brand image, network connection, pricing, costs and human resources management. It is considered that each of the services and criteria questioned is included simultaneously by one or more factors affecting customer value.

When the order of importance assigned by passengers to the services provided by the airline they prefer is examined, it can be seen that the services of "great importance" are, in a descending order," flight safety (O=4, 86) and security (O=4, 74) followed by baggage services (O=4, 54). Other services following them are on-time departures and arrivals (O=4, 49), cabin cleanliness (O=4, 46) and behavior and attitude of personnel (O=4,37). These are followed by "ticket fare"

(O=4,34), which indicates that low-pricing is not the only value perceived by customers but other service factors also may play a more significant role. The importance assigned by customers to ticket fare is followed by suitability of schedule (O=4, 33), brand image of airline (O=4, 27) and suitability of flight route (O=4, 19). While all other services are considered to be "important" by passengers, only paid catering services (O=3, 24) are regarded by passengers as "neither important nor unimportant".

When the factors satisfying customers about the services of the airline they choose are examined, it can be seen that air passengers are satisfied most by flight safety (O=4, 62) and security (O=4, 51) followed by brand image of airline (O=4, 13), cabin cleanliness (O=4, 11) and availability of on-line services (O=4, 08). The level of passenger satisfaction for ticket price is lower (O=3,68) than that for other service factors, which plainly reveals the fact that airline firms should become engaged in more actions to create more customer value in their low-pricing activities. On the other hand, passengers stated that they were satisfied with all other factors provided by airline company, while they stated that they found only paid catering services "neither satisfying nor dissatisfying" (O=3,44). This highlights the need for airlines offering service in domestic lines to improve catering services.

As Table 6 demonstrates, the satisfaction and importance levels assigned by passengers vary significantly for all the services of the airline preferred except for aircraft type, aircraft comfort and design, variety-speed-quality of catering services and availability of online services. The least satisfying factors based on level of importance are ticket fare (O$_Ö$=4,34; O$_T$=3,68), baggage services (O$_Ö$=4,54; O$_T$=3,93) and convenience of schedule (O$_Ö$=4,33; O$_T$=3,81). Apparently, air passengers express dissatisfaction with the airline company chosen particularly in terms of the satisfaction levels they expect from these services. In other words, it seems that their expectations are not met and the value created by airline company for customers cannot be perceived. The service for which satisfaction level is more significantly higher than importance level is paid catering services (O$_Ö$=3, 24; O$_T$=3, 44). This shows that in that service category, passengers receive service from the preferred airline at a level above their expectations.

(Insert Table 7 Here)

As can be seen Table 7, when air passengers were asked if they would think of not having a lifelong loyalty to the airline company they preferred or not, 36,8% of them stated that they would be loyal to the airline they preferred while 33,8% stated they wouldn't. On the other hand, the percentage of those passengers providing neither positive nor negative response for that question was 29, 5%.

As Table 7 clearly shows, the percentage of passengers thinking of being loyal to their airline (36, 8%) and the percentage of passengers not thinking this way (33, 8%) are very close. This situation demonstrates that customers may feel loyal to a particular airline in direct proportion to the service value offered to them by airline companies. As customers' value perceptions are formed in line with their relative decisions, any value component to be created by an airline company can be perceived in a different way by any customer. Customers form their preference criteria based on the comparisons among airlines offering the services which create value for them. Customers show preference to the airline which creates most value for them. However, this does not necessarily mean that a feeling of loyalty to the airline company preferred is created within customers because a customer may show different preferences among the airline companies creating most values for him or her. The percentage of those air passengers providing neither positive nor negative responses for this question (29, 5%) seems to support this suggestion. Habits deriving from previous experiences may be a strong determinant for passengers' airline choice. However, this habit for an airline company does not again mean loyalty to that airline.

The concept of loyalty to be formed for an airline company can be shaped by improving value oriented services and presenting them to customers continuously. Therefore, airlines operating in domestic lines should keep up with developing technology, improve the services creating most value for customers and provide these series continuously throughout a year except for certain intervals.

According to the results from the logistic regression analysis carried out to determine the services affecting meeting of expectations considered by passengers in creating loyalty to a particular airline, the level at which the satisfaction level for services explains airline's meeting of customer expectations seems to be 40%.

The services having a positive effect on an airline company's meeting of customer expectations are, in a descending order, cabin cleanliness (increases the probability of meeting expectations by 3, 45), ticket fare (increases the probability of meeting expectations by 2.83), airline's brand image (increases the probability of meeting expectations by 2, 39) and behavior and attitude of personnel (increases the probability of meeting expectations by 1, 73). On the other hand, the services having a negative effect on an airline company's meeting of customer expectations are, in a descending order, aircraft type (decreases the probability of meeting expectations by 0,81), availability of online services (decreases the probability of meeting expectations by 0,66) and convenience of flight route (decreases the probability of meeting expectations by 0,49).

(Insert Table 8 Here)

As can be seen in Table 8, cabin cleanliness, ticket price, brand image of airline company, behavior and attitude of personnel are among the services meeting expectations of passengers flying domestic lines. This situation shows that airlines providing service in domestic lines have realized customer value oriented activities. The height and continuity of the value perceived by a customer can positively affect the loyalty to be formed in that customer towards a particular airline. However, a careful examination of the relevant table clearly reveals the fact that aircraft type, availability of online services and convenience of flight route fail to precisely meet customer expectations. Naturally, it should be kept in mind that if the inefficiencies in these services happen to be continual, customers' feeling of loyalty could be affected in a negative way.

(Insert Table 9 Here)

According to the results from the logistic regression analysis carried out to determine the influence of customers' satisfaction level about airline's services on the level of loyalty to a particular airline company, the level of satisfaction felt for service explains 15% of the change in overall satisfaction level. The model demonstrates that variety, speed and quality of catering services (0,19), meeting of special requests in check-in and boarding procedures (0,19), on-time departures and arrivals (0,12) and safety services (0,13) have a positive influence on loyalty level. Accordingly, the increase in the satisfaction level for variety, speed and quality of catering services, meeting of special requests in check-in and boarding procedures, on-time departures and arrivals and safety services leads to an increase in loyalty level, too.

4. Conclusions

Today's airline companies have started to employ various marketing methods and strategies in an intensely competitive environment where product and service differentiation is becoming harder and harder, the number of rival companies is increasing and a new notion of customer whose wants and expectations are increasing day by day is emerging. In order for airline companies operating in domestic lines to determine methods and strategies appropriate for themselves, they have to identify accurately the characteristics of the market in which they provide service. They particularly have to ensure customer value, which is defined as providing products and services with qualities different from rival airlines and with most benefit and lowest price. It is clear that, in addition to ticket price, criteria such as schedule, convenience of schedule, convenience of flight route, aircraft type, aircraft comfort and design, services and criteria related to comfort such as catering services and behavior and attitude of personnel and other service features such as quick reservation and meeting special requests in check-in and boarding procedures are also influential in creating value for customers and ensuring customer loyalty.

In conclusion, in marketing strategies aimed at creating value for customers, airlines operating in domestic lines have to determine the services and criteria regarded important by customers accurately and in line with customer expectations. Thus, satisfaction level of customers about the services and criteria offered should continuously be measured. As well as creating a benefit for customers, the services and criteria satisfying customers and regarded important by them also create a value and loyalty for customer.

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Table 1. Demografics

Nationaly	Frequency	Percent
Turkish	397	100%
Other	0	0%
Sexual	Frequency	Percent
Man	236	59,4%
Women	161	40,5%
Age	Frequency	Percent
15-25	31	15.0%
26-35	113	54.5%
36-45	47	22.8%
46-55	12	5,9%
55- more	4	%1.8
Education	Frequency	Percent
Primary school	22	0.9%
High school	35	17.0%
University	118	57,0%
Master	40	19,3%
Doctorate	12	5,8%
Monthly income(TL)	Frequency	Percent
0-900	20	9,66%
1000-1999	76	36,8%
2000-2999	75	36,23%
3000-3999	20	9,66%
4000- more	15	7.9%
Total	207	100%

Table 2. Airline Companies' Meeting of Expectations

Airline Companies' Meeting of Expectations	Frequency	Percent
Yes	317	79,8
No	80	20,2
Total	397	100,0

Table 3. Experiencing Negative Situations

Experiencing Negative Situations	Frequency	Percent
Never experience	116	29,2
Rarely experience	170	42,8
Experience	105	26,4
Too much experience	4	1,0
Certainly experience	2	0,5
Total	397	100,0

Table 4. Efficiency of Airline Company's Attitude towards Negative Situations

Efficiency of Airline Company's Attitude towards Negative Situations	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	13	4,6
Agree	143	50,9
Neither agree nor disagree	71	25,3
Disagree	46	16,4
Strongly disagree	8	2,8
Total	281	100,0

Table 5. Communicating Suggestions and Complaints

Communicating Suggestions and Complaints	Frequency	Percent
Strongly agree	24	6,0
Agree	203	51,1
Neither agree nor disagree	94	23,7
Disagree	72	18,1
Strongly disagree	4	1,0
Total	397	100,0

Table 6. Determinants of Airline Choice and Satisfaction Level

Airline Choice and Satisfaction Level	**Importance**		**Satisfaction**		**Matched z Test**	
	O	SS	O	SS	z	p
Convenience of schedules	4,33	0,57	3,81	0,76	11,76	0,00[**]
Ticket fares	4,19	0,73	3,81	0,84	7,75	0,00[**]
Convenience of flight line	4,34	0,64	3,68	0,90	11,28	0,00[**]
Airline Images	4,27	0,73	4,13	0,62	3,61	0,00[**]
On time performance	4,49	0,62	4,04	0,74	10,43	0,00[**]
Aircraft type	3,80	0,94	3,89	0,71	-1,74	0,08
Aircraft comfort	4,01	0,80	3,96	0,67	1,22	0,23
of catering services	3,66	0,94	3,75	0,85	-1,62	0,11
Paid catering services	3,24	1,06	3,44	0,89	-3,36	0,00[**]
Behavior of the staff	4,37	0,69	4,03	0,77	7,23	0,00[**]
Security	4,74	0,44	4,51	0,63	6,87	0,00[**]
Baggage services	4,54	0,59	3,93	0,88	12,23	0,00[**]
Flight Safety	4,86	0,35	4,62	0,59	7,66	0,00[**]
Availability of online services	4,12	0,91	4,08	0,79	0,87	0,39
Cabin cleanliness	4,46	0,54	4,11	0,73	8,63	0,00[**]
Meeting special requests in check-in and boarding	4,10	0,85	3,95	0,74	3,22	0,00[**]

Table 7. Loyalty towards Airline

Loyalty towards Airline	**Frequency**	**Percent**
Strongly agree	30	7,6
Agree	116	29,2
Neither agree nor disagree	117	29,5
Disagree	100	25,2
Strongly disagree	34	8,6
Total	397	100,0

Table 8. Logistic Regression Analysis on the Services Affecting Meeting of Expectations

	Beta	St. Error	Wald statistic	p value	Odds ratio	
Convenience of schedules	0,39	0,24	2,53	0,11	1,47	
Ticket fares	-0,67	0,28	5,76	0,02	0,51	**
Convenience of flight line	1,04	0,22	22,65	0,00	2,83	**
Airline Images	0,87	0,35	6,35	0,01	2,39	**
On time performance	0,19	0,24	0,60	0,44	1,21	
Aircraft type	-1,65	0,38	18,55	0,00	0,19	**
Aircraft comfort	0,56	0,38	2,17	0,14	1,76	
catering services	0,04	0,30	0,01	0,90	1,04	
Paid catering services	-0,38	0,27	1,94	0,16	0,68	
Behavior of the staff	0,55	0,27	4,23	0,04	1,73	*
Security	0,20	0,28	0,48	0,49	1,22	
Baggage services	0,24	0,21	1,42	0,23	1,28	
Flight Safety	0,22	0,28	0,61	0,44	1,25	
Availability of online services	-1,08	0,26	17,02	0,00	0,34	**
Cabin cleanliness	1,24	0,32	15,42	0,00	3,45	**
Meeting special requests in check-in and boarding	-0,26	0,28	0,88	0,35	0,77	
(Stable)	-4,39	1,64	7,19	0,01	0,01	**
Model χ^2=116,08, p=0,00<0,01; Nagelkerke R^2=0,40						

Table 9. Regression Model on the Services Affecting Loyalty

	Beta	St.Error	St.Beta	t	p
(Stable)	1,02	0,54		1,87	0,06
Convenience of schedules	0,02	0,09	0,02	0,26	0,80
Ticket fares	0,02	0,08	0,02	0,29	0,77
Convenience of flight line	0,08	0,08	0,07	1,05	0,29
Airline Images	0,04	0,11	0,02	0,37	0,71
On time performance	0,17	0,08	0,12	2,10	0,04*
Aircraft type	0,09	0,10	0,06	0,85	0,40
Aircraft comfort	-0,11	0,13	-0,07	-0,83	0,41
catering services	0,24	0,09	0,19	2,54	0,01*
Paid catering services	-0,06	0,08	-0,05	-0,81	0,42
Behavior of the staff	0,07	0,10	0,05	0,75	0,45
Security	0,23	0,10	0,13	2,22	0,03*
Baggage services	0,15	0,07	0,12	2,00	0,05
Flight Safety	0,04	0,10	0,02	0,35	0,72
Availability of online services	-0,13	0,08	-0,09	-1,67	0,10
Cabin cleanliness	-0,12	0,10	-0,08	-1,21	0,23
Meeting special requests in check-in and boarding	0,28	0,09	0,19	3,05	0,00**
R=0,39; R^2=0,15; F=4,32, p=0,00<0,01					