Airline brand dissatisfaction: An overview

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Abstract: A number of brand positioning techniques may cause consumer confusion, often resulting in brand rejection; an evidence of brand dissatisfaction. This study contributes to the understanding of airline brand satisfaction, in relation to brand communications through evidence in literature, analysis of business archives and observation. Academic theory and industrial practice are used to identify factors that formulate consumer satisfaction culture. The author’s approach identifies problem areas in the process of successful message delivery between brands and their offering to their perceptual value towards satisfaction. Inappropriate communication media leave consumers with a sense of dissatisfaction towards brands and their products. The challenges identified are explored. The author proposes a framework in response to the need for integrated brand communications.

Keywords: branding, airline passenger dissatisfaction, brand associations

1. Introduction

1.1. Consumers

Postmodern consumers are increasingly sensitive and aware of their rights. They are more sceptical towards social, cultural, political, human rights, and environmental issues that affect them. Consumer purchases also depend on the manufacturer’s value of all the aforementioned. Consumers do not passively observe what companies chose to present. They often show preference to brands that embrace the same ethical values of their target audience [1]. Consumers like to be aware of what is happening behind the scenes of a company, particularly what is willingly made public and whether companies are true to their promises.

Consumers on the contrary, want to know more about the internal functioning of organisations and remain sceptical over their practices. Consumer awareness towards internal operations is attracting increasing attention [2]. The public interest goes
beyond its purchasing ability. Consumers are aware of their purchasing power and expect offering innovation [3]. As consumers follow marketers’ created desires, they become more knowledgeable and skilled over how companies use branding and promote their offerings [4].

Corporations often focus solely on internal needs, operations and benefits, rather than listening to consumer needs and wants [4]. Consumers own the brand and its meaning.

Understanding what consumers use as a basis for evaluating a brand and expressing feelings of satisfaction or dissatisfaction is highly desirable. The escalation of this brand conflict emphasizes the need of examining brand dissatisfaction causes. Trying to understand the challenges that lead consumers to make up their minds about a brand would be useful to both practitioners and academics.

When consumers are dissatisfied with a brand, the challenge is to identify its cause. Unsuccessful brand positioning or message delivery often result in consumer brand confusion, absence of real brand differentiation, and lack of brand reality. In addition a dysfunctional or faulty offering may hurt the brand, as well as inappropriate global branding techniques.

There are a limited number of methodologies that could successfully implement the relation between consumer understanding, offering and the brand [6].

Intense competition among brands, the complexity of modern-day products, the noise from various marketing media and the way that the consumers understand create an extraordinary market environment.

1.2. Terminology

The term consumer brand dissatisfaction refers to the dissatisfaction caused by brands. This may relate to the delivery of brand messages and how these relate to the offering. The word offering refers to the qualities and features of both product and service combined [5]. It best defines the complexity of what a modern-day product has become [3] particularly in the airline context [6].

2. Background

It is important to explore the relation between satisfaction, brand and brand associations. The consumption purpose as well as the time spent in the facility provides an interesting dimension of study.

2.1. Consumer Satisfaction, Brand and Tangible/Intangible Associations

Literature relating to consumer satisfaction may be distinguished between the study of pre-usage estimates and post-usage performance. According to the disconfirmation-of-expectations model of satisfaction [7], where an exploration of expectations towards satisfaction could be determined, consumers make a post-purchase comparison between pre-purchase expectations and post-purchase performance [8], [9], [10].

Consumers express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction over a series of conscious or unconscious factors. Pre-usage estimates [11], memory held from their previous use, or product attributes and brand names [12], [65]. Consumer satisfaction may relate to
meeting expectations that relate to product performance (e.g., [13], [9]). Consumer satisfaction plays a significant role in repeat business [14]. Satisfaction over a particular brand may have favourable results in future purchase intentions of that particular brand. Satisfied consumers are willing to provide recommendations of an offering, thus contribute to positive word-of-mouth advertising [15], [16], the tendency to say positive things and to remain loyal [17], [18]. This links purchase and word-of-mouth directly and affects viability and profitability of a firm [19].

The tangible and intangible physical environment plays an important role in generating excitement and therefore satisfaction. This is one of the reasons why consumers often get attracted by the intangible/tangible elements of brands.

According to environmental psychology, feelings of excitement, pleasure or relaxation may be experienced in properly designed physical environments [20]. Aesthetic aspects of the physical facilities are likely to influence customer perceptions and feelings, but may have been inadequately portrayed by previous service-quality research. After all, design language delivers the company’s promise, and is responsible for protecting the company’s corporate identity and image [21]. Exploring the importance of the tangible and intangible brand features, would help identify which are more important for the consumer and communicate the brand best. The use of key brand features would ensure offering uniqueness and support brand satisfaction.

The time that customers spend in service environments also plays a significant role in the formulation of customer attitudes (Figure 1). The longer time spent at the facility, the greater opportunity one has to evaluate an environment [22]. When a consumer spends lengthy periods of time at a point-of-service environment, it is likely to constantly observe the service provision [15]. Taking this to an airline context, this is partially the reason why the on-board service and interiors or transatlantic aircraft are carefully designed. This guarantees passenger comfort that aims at brand satisfaction. Maintaining a high standard of the on-board offering and interior design, is crucial in pleasing passengers; particularly during crowded lengthy flights.

Crowded physical environments make customers feel unease, displeased and encourage them to leave [23], [66]. The time that one spends interacting with an airline from the moment of reserving a ticket, to the flight itself and the arrival procedures makes it an interesting area of study.
2.2. The changing needs of airline passengers

Airlines aim in realising three goals: (a) fulfil passengers’ needs and wants; (b) follow the organisation’s objectives or in other words create profit satisfying the shareholders, and (c) maintain product and brand differentiation against competition [24].

Customer satisfaction is the ultimate goal in the airline industry. Among full-service airlines, many claim that Emirates, Etihad, Singapore Airlines, Virgin Atlantic Airlines and other have unmatched offering qualities that are difficult for competitors to match. Such increases the likelihood of satisfied passengers and encourages loyalty.

In the low-cost industry sector, with representative airlines such as Southwest, EasyJet and Ryanair a minimum possible offering is the standard. This keeps operation costs low and translates to lower airfares. Virgin America and JetBlue are among the exceptions where additional on-board service options are offered. Such carriers aim to combine high quality standards and customer value.

In the post 9/11 September 11 era, lengthy security checks and passenger screening at airports have become the norm [25]. These processes are known to increase passenger anxiety and discomfort [26]. Someone would expect that a distressed passenger would seek comfort once seated in the aircraft. Cabin seating should have a higher impact on the satisfaction factor it holds. Increased seating comfort is expected in premium classes and is not perceived as an added benefit but an element of standard service. A passenger that experiences a better service, is more likely to form greater future-service expectations [27]. Style and comfort interpreted into concrete product and brand features are what passengers want. This creates a differentiated brand experience that would meet the customer needs and expectations.
[3]. Ergonomically designed seating entail a kind of human information, e.g. comfort [27].

Despite the importance of ticket price elasticities and the arrival on time factor, comfort holds a major role in satisfaction [28]. Similarly cabin comfort [29] and seating play an important factor to airline passengers [30].

3. **Brand conflict**

The author investigated challenges that influence the relation between consumer satisfaction, brand and offering, during the brand communication phase.

3.1. **Understanding the offering-to-consumer challenges**

Offering and brand, may serve different needs [31], but in consumers’ minds they are interlinked and refer each other. Although the actual offering may serve basic consumer needs (i.e. soft-drink as an answer to thirst), the brand offers reassurance and added value.

In addition, the communication process that connects the offering to the brand is crucial to the successful message delivery and consumer understanding (Figure 2).

![Figure 2 Schematic perception of the brand conflict presence](image)

As an example, the way EVA Air of Taiwan have associated Hello Kitty® brand to the airline, offers the airline an advantageous position (Pictures 1 & 2). Passengers recognize this unique association and connect the Hello Kitty® brand to EVA Air.

![Picture 1](image)

![Picture 2](image)

Hello Kitty® and EVA Air co-branding examples
The way an offering is promoted and communicated through media is sometimes complex. As an examples, cultural sensitivities and language differences ought to be taken into perspective. This may result in the delivery of an unclear message that may misrepresent the offering and affect the brand. This is a case of brand conflict.

Brand message delivery through multiple communicating channels may change the way consumers are informed. The relation between the actual offering and the communicating media is complex and as a result a standard clear message often is not being delivered. The interaction may cause confusion and become a source of negative connotations that may lead to consumer dissatisfaction.

In an airline context, we have witnessed a growth in passenger service add-ons that give passengers the option to purchase offerings that the market does not provide. Such offerings are often business lounge access (Priority Pass, Lounge Club program, etc.), luggage-handling services (luggage forward, sendmybag.com, etc.), to representation and insurance through associations like the International Airline Passengers Association (IAPA). This is an example of the changing times in the industry and evidence of passenger needs that are not met by current airline offerings. This is an indication that carriers that may satisfy some of these passenger needs will be favourable [32].

Airline service is anthropocentric as it based on human interactions. It is a transitional process. Airline crew personify the brand image of the airline. The provided service and overall behaviour becomes part of the brand. Airlines with the most awards are these that invest in their people. Having new aircraft and equipment without the equivalent human element support will not provide customer satisfaction [33], [34]. Regardless the approach, there can still be problems that affect brand perception and satisfaction. The may relate to a mismatch between the airline’s business idea and image driver, that can create conflict and be the source of negative associations (Table 1). An example of this, are customer service complaints from Southwest Airlines passengers. Often some of these reach national and international news when Southwest Airlines’ employees get into disagreements with passengers.
3.2. Opportunities

Marketing agencies, as well as airlines are trying to reach the consumers’ psyche and understand how the complex decisions over distinguishing and choosing a brand are formed. Consumers are increasingly aware of the effect of marketing methods in trying to capture their attention. Such scepticisms among consumers have left room for brand polemics and anti-branding movements [36] and [37]. This movement of consumer resistance against marketers can extend to consumer boycotts – withholding purchase and consumption in achieving certain objectives of economic or marketing character [38].

The complex terms agencies use, the non-inclusion of consumers in product development have led to the development of a number of problem areas known as: brand confusion, brand over-information, brand differentiation absence, brand reality, brand-to-product dysfunction and global branding. These will be discussed further below (summarized in Table 2):

Table 1 Study map of airline brands and consumer dissatisfaction issues (Adopted by author from [35])

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Airline</th>
<th>Idea</th>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>Image Driver</th>
<th>Verdict</th>
<th>Conflict</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Southwest Airlines</td>
<td>Irreverence</td>
<td>US based low-cost Airline</td>
<td>Pioneer, Altruism</td>
<td>Has given Southwest a position no one else can grab</td>
<td>Employee-Passenger disagreements often cause bad press</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Virgin Atlantic Airways</td>
<td>Iconoclasm &amp; Innovation</td>
<td>UK based International Airline</td>
<td>Richard Branson</td>
<td>A youthful idea that continues to be irresistible to an ageing population</td>
<td>Virgin Group associations provide a less favourable image</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EasyJet Airline</td>
<td>Not-ordinary, Fight for your rights</td>
<td>European low-cost Airline</td>
<td>‘Easy’ orange</td>
<td>Changed the notion of affordable intra-European flying forever</td>
<td>Growth at the expense of losing personal-relevance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Singapore Airlines</td>
<td>Asian Classic yet Chic</td>
<td>Singapore based Scheduled International Airline</td>
<td>Singapore Girl</td>
<td>Always aiming high</td>
<td>Singapore Girl criticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>British Airways</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>UK based Scheduled International Airline</td>
<td>Traditional</td>
<td>How tradition may stop innovation</td>
<td>Slow adapting to passenger needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 2 Map of brand study opportunities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Authors</th>
<th>Addressed Opportunity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clancy and Trout, [39]; Kearney and Mitchell, [40]</td>
<td>Brand confusion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keller, [41]</td>
<td>Brand over-information</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Olins, [2]; Rutter and Agne, [42]</td>
<td>Brand differentiation absence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keller, [41]</td>
<td>Brand reality</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sack, [43]; and Normann, [44]</td>
<td>Brand dysfunction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aaker and Joachimsthaler, [45]</td>
<td>Global branding</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- **Brand confusion** [39], [40]. Similar offering companies are faced with brand confusion. This is more frequent between similar service providers, when one brand gets mistaken for another. This is a result of lack of brand differentiation that comes from the inability to communicate unique brand characteristics. Once there is a leader in that area, competing brands will try to copy them. When this happens, unique brand and product associations are lost. An example, when inflight entertainment (IFE) was introduced in all classes of service by Emirates in 1992 [24], the move was immediately copied by competitors. Similarly the first airline that offered Wi-Fi on-board had a unique proposition. Today most airlines offer this service to their passengers.

- **Brand over-information** relates to excessive level of information communicated to a brand’s audience. Often this information projects a greater amount of information than required to the public, providing no-added value to the communication processes of the brand. This has been studied in terms of brand relevance and continuity [41]. Brand information should be communicated without alienating the original source or projecting mixed messages. In many cases this can lead to consumer distress and possible brand rejection. A greater challenge occurs when the projected information tries to convenience consumers to change their mind or affect present behaviours and attitudes [46]. Technical details about aircraft performance, types of engines, flying speed or a funny inflight safety video provide little added benefit. This is because the passenger has no control over these factors. An over-informed passenger may perceive further information as noise and may get displeased.

- **Brand differentiation absence** occurs when the communicating processes of two or more brands are similar [2], [42]. Firms compete on brand differentiation issues by deploying new technologies. This is not sufficient any longer as a grounded approach that associates to the brand overall theory is required. In this challenge, elements of
commonality between two or more organisations can be found in their visual and verbal projected messages. In competition, companies may be able to copy a product, but they are not easily able to copy a brand personality [3], [67]. It is the power of sustainable differential advantage that makes consumers develop offering and brand preference. The more similar a company’s offering is a competitor’s, the greater the need to change something in the customers’ perception of the product, [47]. Considering the one most common colour used in aircraft cabin furnishings one can easily provide an example. Most cabin furnishings are navy blue and this offers little space for product differentiation.

Consumers show resistance to mass-produced products by purchasing novelty-innovative goods, had-crafted goods and personalised items. These choices extend the time that products maintain their uniqueness [48]. Custom-made, unique products give their users the feel of uniqueness they often desire. In an airline context this could translate into exclusive food and beverage on-board choices, custom amenity kits and new product introductions. This would certainly enhance passenger loyalty.

• Brand reality, refers to realistic brand communications. It has been studied in terms of consistency and appropriate positioning [41]. Brand reality goes beyond a company’s brand equity. It refers to the match between the clarity and consistency of the projected offering messages and the reality of the perceived messages [49]. It discusses the value of how these messages meet consumer expectations through use. Typically what a company projects is different from what the consumer perceives in terms of how real and feasible that is. Consumers prefer clarity in the projected organisational responses. An example can be provided by Singapore Airlines’ ‘Singapore Girl’ cabin crew image. Some have criticized this brand driver for not being realistic, considering the age scale of other senior airline employees or the employees of competing airlines (Table 1). In addition, marketing communications of low-cost airlines promote affordable ticket prices. In reality though only a percentage of these seats per flight are sold on that low-fare basis.

• Brand to product dysfunction and vice versa was highlighted in relation to offerings used on a daily basis [43], [44]. This refers to cases when a negatively perceived brand degrades the offering purely by association. The contrary is also possible when a poor offering reflects poorly on a brand. Many of us have pulled doors that meant to be pushed, turned a water tap that was meant to be pulled. Sometimes the blame for these ‘accidents’ is shared by the brand. Technological advance deployed in the company is not necessarily being reflected in the present branding communicating media. When the brand offering combination does not readily integrate with each other, supporting the projected messages, the impression is of impairment. An offering does not necessarily provide added value by itself, it depends on how it is packaged and promoted. When an airline advertises completely flat seats and the passenger does not receive this, it will reflect badly on the airline brand. If the airline advertises a premium on-board service and what the passenger receives is monitors that do not work, switches that do not switch, lights and IFE that do not work, then this affect negatively the brand perception.

• Global branding, describes unsuccessful brand approaches of brands that tried to employ global branding campaigns [45]. This is evident when companies utilize a single approach to all countries. This fails to observe local sensitivities or understand
It is common sense that failure to meet the different economic, social, cultural and perceptual boundaries of a country may result in brand rejection. Global branding campaigns require a lengthy process that does not necessarily result in the planned outcome and are often unrealistic [50]. A brand’s position may be affected by national characteristics on the basis of economic, cultural, and geographic similarities [51], [52], [53], [54], [55], [56].

4. **Brand perception**

In practice we find a number of individual voices that argue against the increasing complexity of organisations as seen by the marketing industry. They present statements of possible change towards a more simplistic and focused brand study direction. Corporations need clear methods for ensuring competitiveness, differentiation of services and consumer satisfaction in the complicated new situations arising.

Terms associated with brands and corporate identity are not sharp enough to describe the complexity of information associated with a company’s functions related to its image.

This is one reason that a number of branding consultancies have formed their own approach and unique terminology on the subject of brands. These terms are created and maintained in support of each company’s own functioning. Their large and increasing number also suggests the rise of greater complexity. These terminologies introduce internal theory and integrity. In the external audiences these are considered to be complex and static in the way they provide a link between the organisation and the outside world. Subsequently we have witnessed cases where these terms are often used mistakenly. This is a result of the complexity of the new terms and their original concept or reinterpretation referring to a relative term different from the original.

4.1. **Brand experience consumer focus**

There is a necessity to concentrate on the brand and verify the messages that are delivered and particularly how these are perceived, in order to crystallise the campaign that will target consumer satisfaction. This will provide us with an insight of the successful message transition through its lifecycle from projection until the time it is understood by the consumer. It will also support the realisation of the current positioning in relation to present brand environment.

Organisational strategies have been following one-sided approaches of technical advance and engineering advantage. The results we have been experiencing are offerings with excellence in technological advance and limited flexibility in brand embodiment [57].

Techniques such as increasing the price elasticity or new offers cannot sustain the brand’s positive image and provide a differential advantage over competition. This is because they come after the initial organisational message has been delivered and understood by the consumer. Dwight C. Minton, CEO of Church & Dwight, suggested [58] that insisting on an intense protection of a brand could result in the organisation admitting a problem area if one exists. This in turn could result in increased costs, unfavourable government actions and a higher cost of capital. Resolving any negative
associations to the brand is essential in sustaining a healthy brand reputation. We need to look back into the first stages process when the message is formulated.

Great importance lays between consumer and company trust [59], [60], [61], [62] and the meaning in consumers’ minds. The way consumers understand through the human senses and the unique key associations formed in relation to that product are crucial.

Brand image perception built on the consumer’s brand associations and attitude, has been considered an integral part of brand equity and has been widely employed in brand equity frameworks (e.g., [63], [64], [65], [66], [67], [68], [69], [70]).

Distinguishing these key associations is essential for addressing the differential advantage of the organisations offerings against competition. These key associations suggest a method of projecting the unique identifying elements of the company’s offerings, an answer to brand differentiation needs.

The identification and use of these unique key associations in a form of framework suitable for future reference in all company’s communicating processes needs to be formulated. This tool needs to focus on both theory and practice information reflecting customer care along with at least verbal and visual means of communication addressing respectively visual recall and verbal recognition means of the projected brand experience. This will support the maintenance and enforcement of those characteristics for the company identifying elements.

5. Summary

The overall mix of both tangible and intangible elements of a brand is equally important in delivering the appropriate company’s promise and satisfying the customer. These need to be able to address challenges of brand conflict described as brand confusion, brand over-information etc., as these puzzle consumers and are a source of negative connotations.

Firms employ risky branding techniques to create the feel of authenticity. These may generate feeling of distrust. The anti-branding movement makes available to the public eye, techniques of organisational branding. As a result, consumers are becoming increasingly sceptical.

Consumers are looking for companies that fit the model of the round-the-corner merchant or family-run-business store. How they treat customers, non-customers and their own staff. As companies grow in size, and are increasingly therefore understood as commercial entities, consumers will be able to see and judge a brand’s authenticity and its distance from the profit motive. How original or relevant this brand identity is to them may change.

There is no direct association between brand characteristics and consumer brand satisfaction. Consumer brand satisfaction is associated with a memorable pleasant experience that an airline offers. A strong association between an airline brand and comfort will provide added value, and satisfy passenger needs. A pleasant offering (e.g. on-board meal) becomes a positive reminder of that particular brand. This generates brand recognition and creates value by associating the offering with the brand.
6. Discussion

Brand confusion, brand over-information, brand differentiation absence, brand reality and brand dysfunction, have become parts of brand study. These alienate consumers’ understanding and could harm brands by generating brand conflict.

The research opportunity is in the areas between the communication channels of theory, practice and consumer understanding. It is exploited in subgroups of interactions of one another and the way these are interlinked.

Knowing the pitfalls we may encounter during the brand communicating process, we can conclude that going back to the brand basics, the point when the message is understood by the consumer, will help us go determine a healthy basis and outline a future direction. This depends on the projected organisational messages directed by the level of consumer perception. This explains the need for such research focus in the relation between consumer perceptive knowledge and the company’s brand message development and delivery.

To provide a customised and sustainable brand experience the research needs to follow the established brand basics developed at the stage where consumer perception starts to be formulated towards the brand. Consumer associative networks theory along with sources from theory, practice and information gathered by response of the human senses (free-recall, picture recognition) towards living a certain brand experience, may be able to addresses from a holistic perspective the increasing opportunities rising in the battlefield of brand conflict. This will highlight the opportunity to focus on the principles of the marketed messages and maintain an equal brand experience delivery between the core offering and the core brand image as projected and perceived by the consumers.

References


