

A Study of the Factors Influencing Customer Loyalty: A Case Study of Thai Airways

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Abstract

This paper presents a study of the factors influencing the customer loyalty in a case of Thai Airways. The customer loyalty is an essential element for a company to survive from the furious competition among its competitors. For a airline company such as Thai Airways, enhancing the customer loyalty is one the most efficient strategy to achieved success in airline industry. As the number of loyal customer increases, a company will achieve more benefits during the running of its business, in terms of market share, market position, and profit. There are many factors which impact the customer loyalty in a significant way. The author studied four factors in this paper, which were service quality, complaint handling, corporate image and customer satisfaction. The objectives of this paper were to investigate about the impact of service quality, complaint handling, corporate image and customer satisfaction on customer Loyalty; to investigate about the influence of service quality, complaint handling, and corporate image on customer satisfaction; and to confirm the previous studies about the customer loyalty within airline industry and the factors which have influence on it. This paper was a descriptive research. In this paper, the method applied to do the research was Sample Survey Technique which is known as questionnaire. 400 Thai Airways customers were chosen to do the questionnaire. The sampling procedure of this paper applied judgment sampling and convenience sampling. Pearson Correlation Coefficient was used to investigate the strength of association between dependent and independent variables. After data analysis, the all of the relationships in the hypotheses were confirmed and supported. The strongest relationship was found between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, which indicated that the customer satisfaction has significant impact on customer loyalty. These results supported the study of Yap et al.; Hallowell, Lam and Burton; Ball et al; Kim; and Bendall-Lyon and Powers, in which the great positive influence of customer satisfaction on customer loyalty was verified.

Keyword: Customer Loyalty, Service Quality, Complaint Handling, Corporate Image, Customer Satisfaction

Introduction

Economic developments have fostered the rise of airline industries. However, nowadays, competition within the airline service sector has been increasing rapidly worldwide. On the one hand, conventional airlines are particularly facing heavy stresses driven by the rise of low-cost carriers. On the other hand, Customers are expecting and demanding higher level of service from airline carriers (Chou, Liu, Huang, Yih, and Han, 2011) and the profit obtained from running an airline company is facing great challenges as well (Doganis, 2006). In addition, the operating restrictions from laws and regulations, and disadvantages provided by the cost structure such as extremely high fixed costs serves as a serious weakness and a threat to airline companies as well (Shaw, 2007). In Thailand,

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conventional airline companies such as Thai Airways have also been put in front of the furious competition. One of the most effective strategies to maintain customers is to enhance customer loyalty to the company and the brand. Service quality is a key factor which influences the customer loyalty in a positive way. The higher quality of the service, the higher customer loyalty will be produced. Another import factor influencing customer loyalty is complaint handling. Customer complaints are inevitable in the present business. Proper complaint handling method and procedure will increase the customers' favorability to a brand of service or product. Besides, corporate image influences the customers in a significant way as well. One of the widely used strategies for an airline company to attract more customers is to improve the company's image and reputation. Moreover, all of these three factors will impact customer loyalty via customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction is the individual's perception and attitude toward the performance of the service in relation to expectations (Qin, 2012). Many researchers studied that customer satisfaction has a vital positive correlation with customer loyalty.

Literature Review

Service Quality

Zeithamal et al. (2009) defined service quality as customers' evaluation to the overall features and levels of a product or a service. Carvajal et al. (2011) stated that service quality is customers' perception towards to product or service's excellence. This definition indicates that customers' judgment to the standard of service determines the quality. Service quality is also defined by Park et al. (2006) as a customer's perception of the efficiency of service and the firm who offers the service. Service quality has significantly influenced business operations and marketing. In addition, Yavas and Benkenstein (2007) stated that businesses have opportunities to be outstanding among their competitors by delivering high level of service quality. Further, Saha and Theingi (2009), Zeithamal, Berry and Prasuraman (1991), and Namukasa (2013) found that service quality played a significant role in determining customer satisfaction, and helping a company to achieve good position in the airlines industry. Then, company should pay more attention about building an adorable image to its customers.

Complaint Handling

Yap, Ramayah, and Shahidan (2012) defined complaint handling as a degree in which the company's complaints will be tackled. As Heskett, Sasser and Hart (1990) stated, complaint handling strategies are applied by firms to deal with the failure of the service or product for the purpose of rebuilding reliability to the company in the heart of the customers. Michel et al., (2009) defined complaint handling as the organization's capability to avoid potential problems, tackle conflicts, and figure solutions out publicly when problem arises. Complaint handling was a critical point in developing customer loyalty (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991). Phol (2002) also claimed that good complaint handling is a critical element of a service, and any company could save many unwanted costs by avoiding unfavorable policy, or chaotic information management. In addition, Metwally (2013) stated that as recognizing the value of keeping long period connection with customers, more and more organizations treat complaint handling as part of most companies' marketing strategies. Further, Metwally (2013) mentioned that handling the complaints of customers properly could help a company enhance customer satisfaction and retain customers. For airline industry, complaint handling also affects customer loyalty in a significant degree.

Corporate Image

Keller (1993) stated that corporate image is the kind of perceptions of an organization imbedded in consumers' mind. Nguyen (2006), Worcester (1997) and O'Loughlin and Coenders (2002) also argued corporate image as the things reflected in customers' mind when the company's name was mentioned to him or her. In addition, Andreassen and Lindestad (1998) stated that image is a term reflecting association and reputation of a company that customers generate through the product, brand and company. Bitner (1990) stated that corporate image is an important character applied to estimate the entire organization. Nguyen and Leblanc (2001) claimed that corporate image was associated to brand name, architecture, the variety of products or services, tradition, perspectives as well as the impression of quality conveyed by employees of the company who interacted with customers. According to Zins (2001), corporate image is integrated associated with customer satisfaction, as well as service quality. Thus, complaint handling produces a great impact on customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Customer Satisfaction

Oliver (1981) defined customer satisfaction as an individual's attitude of pleasure or disappointment gained through comparing the perceived quality of a service and the expected service quality. According to Hansemark and Albinsson (2004), customer satisfaction is defined as an overall psychological attitude upon a firm who supplied the service or product, or an emotional reaction to the distinction between customers' expectation and participation, regarding to the performance of certain target, want or requirement. In addition, Moon et al. (2011) argued that this kind of expectation was led by the past consuming experience of the product or similar products, marketing excitant, attitudes and confidence maintained in the consumers' mind. Kotler and Armstrong (2004) argued that customer satisfaction is an essential factor in marketing. It is quite significant to please the customers since, nowadays, customers are able to access immense information and the customers are adherent to the most modern trends in the society. The use of technology has become more demanding to the services and products. Customer satisfaction was closely related to service quality (Suhartanto and Noor, 2012). In the airline industry, customers would have a high level of customer satisfaction when they receive the quality of service which exceeded their expectation. On the contrary, low level satisfaction would be generated when customers perceived service which did not meet their requirement (Gale, 1994). Moreover, Fornell et al. (1996) declared that in many industries, as well as in the airline industry, having satisfied customers would help the organization to decrease the number of complaints, and as a result, the cost of complaint handling would be decreased as well. Further, Sousa and Voss (2009) found that customer satisfaction related to customer loyalty distinctly. Higher customer satisfaction leads to higher customer loyalty and lower customer satisfaction results in lower customer loyalty.

Customer Loyalty

Andreassen and Lindestad (1998) argued that customer loyalty is an item reflecting a potential and intentional behavior correlated to the service or the firm which is offered by the product or service. Dick and Basu (1994) stated that loyalty was the strength of the correlation between a person's relative perspective and attitude, their repeat patronage, and Ehigie (2006) defined customer loyalty as an attitude of commitment of customers to a brand, product, service, or an organization. This kind of commitment displayed by staying with the same organization is similar to the willingness to purchase the new product of this organization and recommending this organization or the service of this organization to others. In addition, Oliver (1997) added his definition of customer loyalty by explaining customer

loyalty as a customers' overall attachment or commitment in their deep heart toward a product, service, brand or organization. Yap, Ramayah and Shahidan (2012) argued that customer loyalty is a one of the dominant features which leads an organization to success. Lam and Burton (2006) studied that loyal customers are more likely to repurchase a service or a product that they are loyal to. Also, O'Loughlin and Coenders (2002) mentioned that satisfying the customers guaranteed the firm more sales in the future, reducing the potential of defection when the quality of product or service decreased. Further, it was stated that since the cost of obtaining a new customer is much more than the cost to maintain an existing customer, the company will save a lot of cost and gain more profit through keeping the loyal customers (McConnell, 1968; Russell-Bennett et al., 2007; and Uncles et al., 2003). Therefore enhancing the degree of customer loyalty is an essential strategy to gain market share and do long term business.

Research Objectives

This paper aimed to exam the association between service quality, complaint handling, corporate image customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. There were three main objectives which are listed as below:

1. To investigate about the impact of service quality, complaint handling, corporate image and customer satisfaction on customer Loyalty.
2. To investigate the influence of service quality, complaint handling, and corporate image on customer satisfaction.
3. To confirm the previous studies about the customer loyalty within airline industry and the factors which have influence on it.

Previous Studies

Service quality, customer satisfaction, and customer loyalty

Nadiri et al. (2008) conducted a study of an investigation on the service quality's impact on passengers' loyalty in the North Cyprus national airline. Further, Namukasa (2013) studied the effect of airline service quality on passenger satisfaction and loyalty: the case of Uganda airline industry. The aim of this study was, firstly, to determine service quality perceptions of airline passengers, and secondly, to link these perspectives to their satisfaction and customer loyalty. During the data statistical analysis, item-total correlations, reliability coefficients were computed for every variable. Aggregately, the level of Alpha coefficient was calculated equal to 0.92, and reliability coefficients ranged from 0.70 to 0.85 for the variables. Results showed that airline tangible service quality was the most significant affecting both customer satisfaction and repurchase intention. Also, customer satisfaction had a positive relationship with repurchase and customer loyalty. In addition, Jan et al. (2013) studied the antecedents of loyalty in the airline industry of Malaysia by examining the higher-order measurement model. In their study, specific dimensions for airlines developed by Park et al. (2006) through modifying and adding the model of SERVQUAL (Parasuraman et al., 1998) was used to measure the service quality. After, data analysis, the positive effects and relationships between the variables proposed in the conceptual framework were tested to be valid: customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, service quality and customer satisfaction, perceived value and customer satisfaction, perceived value and brand loyalty, airline image and customer satisfaction, airline image and brand loyalty.

Complaint handling, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty

Sudradjat et al. (2014) conducted a study of complaint handling and service recovery

analysis in low cost carrier airlines and its effects on customer satisfaction in Indonesia. In this study, the researcher analyzed the situation of complaint handling and service recovery of ten low cost airlines in Indonesia, and then analyzed the influence of these two factors on customer satisfaction. The result showed that 40% passengers of Air Asia airline customers feel satisfied with the complaint handling and service recovery, while another airline companies' complaint handling were satisfying to 40% of the passengers. The proper complaint handling and service recovery made an obvious difference on customer satisfaction. Metwally (2013) studied about the relationship between complaint handling and customer loyalty in Egypt. There were four variables in this research, which were complaint handling, customer satisfaction, corporate image and reputation, and customer loyalty. The objectives of this research were to understand the process of complaint handling in Egyptair, get idea about customer satisfaction with handling their complaints, and study the influence of complaint handling on customer satisfaction, corporate image, and customer loyalty. Metwally (2013) concluded in her study that handling customer complaints was a major determinant of customer satisfaction, and then complaint handling influenced company's reputation and image. It enhances customer loyalty via increased customer satisfaction.

Service quality, corporate image, customer satisfaction and customer loyalty

Suhartanto and Noor (2012) conducted a study of customer satisfaction in the airline industry. In addition, Zins (2001) did a research about the relationship among perceived quality, airline image, satisfaction and customer loyalty of different European airlines in the airline industry. The target population was the business travelers and passengers of business class of flights as well as intermediaries—for example, travel agents. Thirty-five travel agents were involved in this study. Questionnaires were distributed to 2,877 passengers and the response rate was 36%. The objective of this study is to test the relationship among these variables by comparing empirical and theoretical models of customer loyalty. Zins (2001) adopted the empirical model from Churchill (1982) and the theoretical model of customer loyalty from Dick and Basu (1994). The researchers used descriptive statistics to analyze the data collected from the passengers. After the analysis of data, the relationship between corporate image and future loyalty was confirmed. Satisfaction had been proven to have different functions in different situations of customer loyalty.

Therefore, based on the research conceptual framework, there were 7 hypotheses in this paper:

H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between service quality and customer loyalty.

H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction.

H3: There is a statistically significant relationship between complaint handling and customer satisfaction.

H4: There is a statistically significant relationship between complaint handling and customer loyalty.

H5: There is a statistically significant relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction.

H6: There is a statistically significant relationship between corporate image and customer loyalty.

H7: There is a statistically significant relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

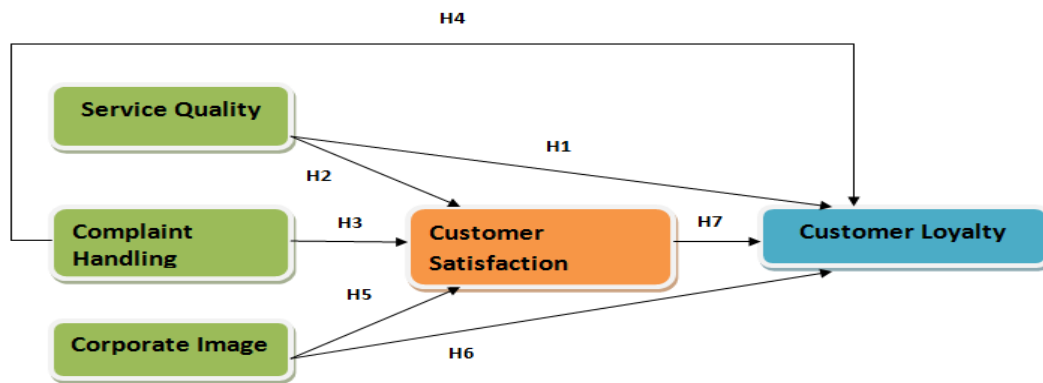


Fig. 1 The Research Conceptual Framework

Methodology

This research is a descriptive research. Descriptive research as suggested by Cooper and Schindler (2003). The researcher uses descriptive research in order to analyze the relationships between the variables presented in the conceptual frameworks. The researcher of this study applied survey technique method to collect data for this research. There were four parts in this survey technique. Part I was screening questions to get the proper respondents. Part II was questions for Independent Variables. Part III was questions for dependent variable. Part IV was questions about the demographic Information of the respondents, such as, gender, age, occupation, educational level. Inferential analysis was used to test and analyze the hypotheses. The target population of this research was the people who have taken the flights of Thai Airways five or more times of the service or product of Thai Airways. The target population who are Thai Airways passengers are approached in Suvarnabhumi International Airport, Bangkok, Thailand. Based on the study of Namukasa (2013), Archana and Subha (2012), Vashali and Rau (2010), and Suhartanto and Noor (2012), the sample size of this paper was set as 400. Judgment sampling and convenience sampling were applied when the researcher collected the data. In data analysis, Statistical Package for Social Science (Version 22) which is abbreviated as SPSS was used. Pearson Correlation Coefficient was applied to test the hypotheses.

Data analysis

The target population of this paper was the Thai Airways passengers who had used Thai Airways flights for 5 times or more. The sample size of this paper was 400. There were 186 male respondents and 214 female respondents. Females took the largest portion which accounted for a percentage of 53.5% and males accounted a percentage of 46.5%. 57% of respondents were at the age level of 21-40 years old, in terms of age level. In addition, 106 respondents were business owners which accounted 26.5%. In terms of salary level, 124 respondents gained a salary at the level of 20,001-25,000 Bath per month which obtained a percentage of 31.0%. 176 respondents are graduated level in the field of education which gained a percentage of 44.0%. 68.0% (272) of respondents were taking the Thai Airways flights less than 5 times per year.

Findings

In terms of hypotheses testing, all of the hypotheses were examined by using Pearson Correlation Coefficient. For hypothesis one, which indicated the relationship between service quality and customer loyalty, was accepted ($r = 0.675$, $t < .01$). For hypothesis two, which

predicted the relationship between service quality and customer satisfaction, was supported ($r = 0.720$, $t < .01$). For hypothesis three, which predicted the relationship between complaint handling and customer satisfaction, was accepted ($r = 0.705$, $t < .01$). In addition, for hypothesis four, which predicted the relationship between complaint handling and customer loyalty, was verified ($r = 0.688$, $t < .01$). Besides, hypothesis five, which indicated the relationship between corporate image and customer satisfaction, was supported ($r = 0.629$, $t < .01$). Furthermore, in terms of hypothesis six, which indicated the relationship between corporate image and customer loyalty, was verified ($r = 0.587$, $t < .01$). In addition, for hypothesis seven, which predicted the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, was supported ($r = 0.742$, $t < .01$). A medium positive relationship was found between service quality and customer loyalty; complaint handling and customer loyalty; corporate image and customer satisfaction; corporate image and customer loyalty. A high positive relationship was found between service quality and customer satisfaction; complaint handling and customer satisfaction; customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. In conclusion, there was a significant statistically relationship between all of the dependent variables and independent variables. The strongest relationship was customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. This consequence implied that when people are satisfied with a company's service quality, they would be more possible to stay with this company in a long term run.

Conclusion

These results of the hypotheses revealed that the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, service quality and customer satisfaction, complaint handling and customer satisfaction were close and high. The relationship between service quality and customer loyalty, corporate image and customer satisfaction, corporate image and customer loyalty were medium and moderate. In conclusion, all of these factors impacted the loyalty of Thai Airways customers. When Thai Airways has some change of their service quality and complaint handling, the loyalty of its customers will be closely and directly influenced by it. Customer loyalty is also influenced by the change of customer satisfaction in a high relative rate and customer loyalty is also impacted by corporate image, complaint handling and service quality directly at a moderate rate. The strongest relationship was customer satisfaction and customer loyalty with a p-value of 0.742, followed by service quality and customer satisfaction (0.720) which indicated that service quality is a critical element related to both customer satisfaction and customer loyalty. A higher level of Service quality generates a higher degree of customer satisfaction. Service quality also influences the customer loyalty via its impact on customer satisfaction. This finding implied that when people are satisfied with a company's service quality, they are more likely to stay with this company in the long term.

Recommendation

Based on the descriptive analysis, the majority of sample respondents were people at the age level of 21-40, with the occupation of business owners and private company employees. Thai Airways might be more focus on this kind of population, since they have the most possibility to travel with airlines and have the most opportunity to travel with a conventional airline company rather than low cost carriers. Thai airways might do the marketing expansion by attaching the views, landscape, and culture of Thailand in the publicity materials of the company, such as, TV shows, videos, brochures, magazines, and newspapers to attract foreign passengers to visit Thailand more frequently and native passengers to travel more. Another way to get more customers is to enhance the websites

tickets booking service to be more convenient for the passengers. Due to the slide of oil price globally, Thai airways can purchase a large volume of oil as storage to back its long term running. Thai Airways can also decrease the price of tickets in order to compete with prosperous low cost carriers. Based on H1, H2 and H7, Thai Airways should pay special attention to improve the service quality of its flights in terms of food, checking in, and luggage delivery. Based on H3, and H4, the influence of the complaint handling should be conducted more properly to improve the customer satisfaction and customer loyalty, such as, pay more attention to individual customer's need and response to their complaint as fast as possible. Based on H5, and H6, Thai Airways need to be more concerned about their corporate image to achieve more loyal customers, for example, building an adorable image is a good strategy to get closer to more customers.

Further Study

Firstly, the studies in the future may study more factors that influence customer loyalty, such as, perceived quality and customer expectation. Secondly, the relationship between service quality and corporate image, and the relationship between corporate image and complain handling can also be studies in the future. Thirdly, the low cost carriers are developing very fast in this world nowadays. A compare between differences might be made in the future study, in term of how service quality, complaint handling, corporate image and customer satisfaction which studied in this studies influence the customer loyalty, between conventional airlines and low cost carriers. Finally, for the future studies, the researcher can do more observation about the difference attitude towards the customer loyalty and customer satisfaction based on customers with different citizenship and cultures, for example, the difference between Thai customers and Chinese customer, Asian customers and European customers.

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