A STUDY OF FACTORS THAT AFFECTING SERVICE QUALITY OF PASSENGER SERVICE DEPARTMENT IN AIRLINES (AIRASIA, THAILAND)

Somchai Ratanakomut, Nitirote Kitcharoen*

Master of Business Administration in Management, School of Management, Shinawatra University, Bangkok, Thailand

ARTICLE INFO

Corresponding Author:
Nitirote Kitcharoen
Master of Business Administration in Management, School of Management, Shinawatra University, Bangkok, Thailand

ABSTRACT

Complaint from the service failure has a huge negative impact to the airlines, especially from front line area. Weak or badly managed service can take many years to revive it from the customers' perception. Moreover, the effects of negativity can remain over time, especially when it is widespread and left unchallenged. The rate of diffusion of negative information increases dramatically through mass media, Internet, and word of mouth. Consequently, the time and effort taken toward creating a successful brand can be diminished very quickly as negative information reaches a large number of customers in a short period of time, resulting in substantial financial and market loss. This study, the researcher examined whether and how factors affecting service quality of Passenger Service Department in airlines. In this case, AirAsia (Thailand) has been selected for the study. For the low cost airlines industry in Thailand, there are three main players, which are AirAsia, Thailand (subsidiary of AirAsia), Nok Air (subsidiary of Thai Airways International), and One-Two-Go Airlines (subsidiary of Orient Thai). The three low cost airlines have similar: cut off unnecessary costs to lower the ticket fare, online ticket sales, variety of payment channels and quality service. Since most of their strategies are almost the same, there is only one factor that they can compete each other is service quality. With the reasons above, however, there are some personal and operational factors that affect their service quality. Therefore, The questions for this study are; (1) what are the perceptions of AirAsia (Thailand) passengers towards the airlines ground services? (2) Have the personal and operational factors of Passenger Service Agent affected their service quality (SERVQUAL 5 Dimensions)? (3) What are the needs of Passenger Service Agent? While the objectives for this research are (1) to identify what are the top 5 areas that got high percentage that do not meet passengers' expectation regarding ground services. (2) to identify problems, obstacles or factors (root causes) affecting the quality of service of Passenger Service Agent of AirAsia, Thailand. The outcome of this research is to contribute to AirAsia (Thailand) so that it can be used for their service improvement in Passenger Service Department.

INTRODUCTION

Scope of Research
This research attempts to focus and understand what are the factors and root causes that affect to service quality (SERVQUAL 5 Dimensions) of Passenger Service Agent of AirAsia, Thailand. This research covers on AirAsia (Thailand) passengers who departing from/to Suvarnarnbhum Airport both of domestic and international flights and Passenger Service Agent of AirAsia (Thailand) who working at front line at all airports in Thailand.

Conceptual Frameworks
This research aims to find significant factors which effect to service quality of Passenger Service Agent of AirAsia (Thailand). The researcher has designed the conceptual framework as below.

Hypothesis
H1. Personal Factors of Passenger Service Agent of AirAsia (Thailand) has a relationship with their service quality (SERQUAL 5 Dimensions).
H2. Operational Factors of Passenger Service Agent of AirAsia (Thailand) has a relationship with their service quality (SERQUAL 5 Dimensions)

Literature Review
To support this research, this section reviews the concepts or theories and related research as following:

1. Concepts or Theories of Low Cost Airlines Business
A low cost airline or low cost carrier (LCC), or also known as a no-frills or discount airline/carrier, is an airline that offers generally low fares in exchange for eliminating many traditional passenger services. The concept originated in the United States before spreading to Europe in the early 1990s and subsequently too much of the rest of the world. The term originated within the airline industry referring to airlines with a lower operating cost structure than their competitors. While the term is often applied to any carrier with low ticket prices and limited services, regardless of their operating models, low-cost carriers should not be confused with regional airlines that operate short flights without service, or with full-service airlines offering some reduced fares (Cited by Realrangsumthar, 2007). Low cost airline while new for Thailand aviation is not new internationally. Because in many countries around the world, low cost airlines have been establish approximately 30 years ago all in Europe, United State of America and Asia. The first successful low-cost carrier was Southwest Airlines in the United States, which pioneered the concept when their first flight took place on May 6, 1949. And then spreading to other countries, such as, Ryanair in Ireland, EasyJet in United Kingdom, Virgin Blue in Australia, and etc.

The low-cost airline models; Typical low-cost carrier business model practices include: (1) A single passenger class, (2) A single type of aircraft (commonly the Airbus 320 or Boeing 737) reducing training and servicing costs, (3) A minimum set of optional equipment on the aircraft, often excluding modern conveniences such as Aircraft Communications Addressing and Reporting System (ACARS), further reducing costs of acquisition and maintenance, (4) A simple fare scheme, such as charging one-way tickets half that of round-trips (typically fares increase as the plane fills up, which rewards early reservations), (5) Unreserved seating (encouraging passengers to board the aircraft early and quickly), (6) Flying to cheaper, less congested secondary airports and flying early in the morning or late in the evening to avoid air traffic delays and take advantage of lower landing fees, (7) Fast turnaround times (allowing maximum utilization of aircraft), (8) Simplified routes, emphasizing point-to-point point instead of transfers at hubs (again enhancing aircraft utilization and eliminating disruption due to delayed passengers or luggage missing connecting flights), (9) Emphasis on direct sales of tickets, especially over the internet (avoiding fees and commissions paid to travel agents and computer reservations systems), (10) Encouraged used and issuance of the electronic ticket or ticket less travel, (11) Employees working in multiple roles, for instance flight attendants also cleaning the aircraft or working as gate agents (limiting personnel costs), (12) “Free” in-flight catering and other “complimentary” services are eliminated, and replaced by optional paid-for in-flight food, drink and merchandises (which represent an additional profit source for the airline), (13) Aggressive fuel hedging programs, (14) “Unbundling” of ancillary charges (showing airport fees, taxes as separate charges rather than as part of the advertised fare) to “headline fare” appears lower. However, not very low-cost carrier implements all of the above points (for example, some try to differentiate themselves with allocated seating, while others operate more than one aircraft type, still others will have relatively high operating costs but lower fares).

2. Concepts or Theories of Service Business and Service Quality
AirAsia (Thailand) is considered as a Service Business with a process of works. The airlines promise to carry passengers from point A (origin) to point B (destination) as per the schedule time when passenger purchase the ticket. The process of works may start from selling flight tickets, checking in, boarding gate, on-board services and arrival assistance. Lovelock and Wright, 2002 defined service as a process of works offering from one to others with or without products, the process could not be seen, untouchable and not able to possess. In additional, Parasuraman et.al, 1985 and 1988 defined Service Quality as ability to meet customers’ needs and expectations. Parasuraman has defined 5 dimensions about SERVQUAL as below.

SERQUAL 5 Dimensions:
1. Tangibles – Appearance of physical facilities, equipment, personnel, and communication materials, e.g. the appearance of check-in counters, sales office, airline staff uniforms, and advertising style. Most of the low cost airlines, their appearance looks so casual and more proactive. The check-in staff wearing polo shirt with jeans on weekend or when they have some new promotions.
2. Reliability – Ability to perform the promised service dependably and accurately, e.g. the On Time Performance of the airlines (on time departure of the origin and arrival of the destination).
3. Responsiveness – Willingness to help customers and provide prompt service, e.g. proactive staff at check in counters and boarding gates.
4. Assurance – Knowledge and courtesy of employees and their ability to convey trust and confidence (competence, courtesy, credibility and security of the service), e.g. being professional of the staff, performing their duties with confidence. 5. Empathy – Caring, individualized attention the company provides its
customers (access to organization’s representatives, communication and understanding the customer), e.g. the check-in staff provides the wheelchair service to sick passengers.

3. Concepts or Theories of Customer Satisfaction
When customer satisfied the service then the customer would be with us. Ability to deliver high quality service of the company will result in satisfied customers and it is the key to sustain the competitive advantage (Shemwell, D.J., Yavas, U. & Bilgin, Z. 1998). Muffato and Panizzolo (1995) also viewed that customer satisfaction is considered as one of the most important competitive factors for company’s future, and it is also the best indicator of a company’s profit ability. They further suggest that customer satisfaction will drive company to improve the their reputation and image, to reduce customer turnover, and to increase attention to customer needs. Such actions will help company create a fence to preventing their customer switching to other company, and improve business relationships with their customers.

Chain Reaction of Customer Satisfaction: Customer satisfaction can result in various benefits. For instance, satisfied customers tend to be less price sensitive, more willing to buy additional products, and less influenced by competitors (Hansemrak & Albinsson 2004). Therefore, rather than only focusing on maximizing customer satisfaction, it is also important to understand the chain reaction of customer satisfaction and to achieve maximizing the impact of the entire chain. Anderson and Mittal (2000) proposed the conceptual logic of relationships within the customer satisfaction chain: By improving product and service quality attributes, customer satisfaction should increase. The increase in customer satisfaction should lead to greater customer retention and loyalty. Then, the improvement in customer retention and loyalty will lead to greater profitability.

The Intertwine of Service Quality and Customer Satisfaction: Service quality and customer satisfaction are linked at the root of marketing theory and practice. According to Johnston (1995), at the beginning of work of the factor structure hypothesizes, which there are two types of determinants – instrumental (the performance of the physical product) and expressive (the psychological performance of the product) – and both aspects are to be addressed in order to satisfy the customer. The further step of the studies found that there are attributes related to dissatisfaction as well as satisfaction. Therefore, it has been proposed that determinants of service quality should be based on a three-factor theory instead of a two-factor theory as originally proposed (Johnston 1995, Anderson & Mittal 2000). The use of a three-factor structure for identifying determinants of service quality is supported by different research methods; however, it must be acknowledged that CIT (Critical Incident Technique) is one of the most widely used methods in many studies. By using CIT, Matzler and Sauerwein (2002) propose that determinants connected with dissatisfaction are significantly different from those that create satisfaction. The three-factor structure has uncovered the following observations: (1) Basic factors. They are minimum requirements that cause customer feel dissatisfied if it not fulfilled; however, they do not lead to customer satisfaction if fulfilled or exceeded. It is suggested that the fulfillment of basic factors is necessary and critical, but not sufficient to create satisfaction. (2) Important performance factors or performance factors. These factors can lead to satisfaction if fulfilled or exceeded; however, they can also lead to dissatisfaction if not. (3) Excitement factors. These factors can increase satisfaction if delivered; however, they do not cause dissatisfaction if they are not well delivered.

4. Personal Factors and Related studies
In this study, the researcher believes that these 5 personal factors are affecting to Service Quality of Passenger Service Department of the airlines.

1) Personality: In airline services, the personality of frontline staff is critical since they are the contact point of customers. Personality can be defined as enduring emotional, interpersonal, experiential, attitudinal and motivational style that explains individual’s behavior in different situations (McCrae & Costa, 1989). There are many studies discussed about personality and job performance such as Dalton & Wilson (2000), Caligiuri (2000a), Mol et al. (2005), and Shaffer et al. (2006). However, these results show a mixed finding on the relationship between dimensions of the Big Five personality and job performance. For instance, while Shubramaniam, Raduan, Naresh, Jegak (2010) examine how personality influences job performance both directly and indirectly. From their study, both the interaction and work adjustment found to partially mediates the relationship between personality and job performance. A review of the Industrial/Organizational psychology literature suggests that all personality characteristics can be categorized in five basic trait dimensions- extraversion, conscientiousness, agreeableness, openness to experience and neuroticism. These five trait dimensions subsequently labeled as the Big Five Personality (Hough, 1992; Digman, 1997). The first dimension, extraversion, has been related with heightened level of sociability. Individuals high in extraversion tend to like groups and gatherings, to be talkative and energetic and generally to be more active and assertive (Costa & McCrae, 1992). An extrovert person considered sociable and outgoing with others (Huang et al., 2005). Conscientiousness dimension described as a form of conformity to rules and standards, and linked to traits like responsibility, organization, hard work, impulse control and prudence (Barrick & Mount, 1991; Hogan & Ones, 1997). Individuals high on conscientiousness are also dependable and trustworthy (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The third dimension, agreeableness has been associated with conformity with others and friendliness in the interpersonal setting (Digman, 1990). Individuals high on agreeableness tend to be more helpful and sympathetic towards others, as well as more trusting of the intentions of other people (Costa & McCrae, 1992). The fourth dimension, openness to experience appears to be a personality trait that reflects individuals' habitual willingness to try new ideas, tolerate ambiguity and dissonance and generally be curious and eager to learn (Barrick & Mount, 1991). Individuals high on openness to experience tend to be open minded, original in thought, intelligent, imaginative, and non-judgmental. Finally, neuroticism personality is associated with lessened emotional control and stability (Mount & Barrick, 1995). Neurotic individuals tend to have relatively negative core self-evaluations, leading to emotional distress and associated behaviors (Rusting & Larsen, 1998). Neuroticism also related to a person's general tendency to experience negative effects such as fear, sadness, embarrassment, anger, guilt, and
disgust (Dalton & Wilson, 2000). Albeit limited, the available studies have linked personality factor with various expatriate outcomes such as adjustment (Shaffer et al., 2006), job performance (Mol et al., 2005) and premature return (e.g., Caligiuri, 2000a).

2) Language Proficiency: As airline is an international business, therefore English is a frequent choice of lingua franca because it facilitates the desirable entry into English-speaking markets and is spoken by over a billion people worldwide (Mackey, 2003). In airlines, English has been used by the staff for communication between staff and customers. A general theme in the few studies on the effects of setting a one-language policy such as English is that it can be challenging for non-native English-speaking employees who have to exercise it for their everyday work (Hildebrandt, 1973; Marschan et al., 1997; Marschan-Piekka, et al., 1999; Reeves & Wright, 1996). As the result of having to work in a language that is not their mother tongue, non-native English speakers tend to take more time to complete tasks, be dominated in meetings, and have less access to people, information and understand to their work. One of the early studies of English used as the lingua franca, Hildebrandt (1973) found that non-native speakers feverously rehearsed their oral presentations in English before public presenting and needed more time to prepare written materials, thus investing more time in communication preparation than native English speaker.

3) Attitude: Attitude is very vital factor that reflect people thought and perception towards something. Swarts, 2008 stated that psychologists have found it difficult to formulate an acceptable definition of an attitude, as it is not clear whether an attitude should be considered to be a sample or multiple phenomenons. The simple definition describes an attitude as a favorable or unfavorable feeling towards something. An example of the simple definition can be referred to Robbins and Judge (2007) who state that attitudes are evaluative statements or judgments-either favorable or unfavorable – concerning objects, people or events. Stock and Hoyer, 2005 views attitudes as a multiple phenomenon, consisting their components: cognition, affect and behavior. An example of a multiple definition can be found in Gibson et al. (2006) who indicates an attitude as “a positive or negative feeling or mental state of readiness, learned and organized through experience, that exerts specific influence on a person’s response to people, objects and situations”. The definition has the following (1) attitudes are learned; (2) attitudes define our predispositions towards given aspects of the world; (3) attitudes provide the emotional basis of our interpersonal relations and identification with others; and (4) attitudes are organized and are close to the core of personality (Gibson et al. 2006).

4) Health: Physical health is very critical in today’s work place. In today’s high-end technology world it is necessary to work smart and possess great skills. There are many important jobs that require good skills and significant amount of strength to be able to perform at the high level and long hour work. Physical health and work performance works hand in hand. Mental and physical health plays a very important role for an employee’s growth and productivity. It helps to improve the efficiency of the employee, leading to greater performance, which means good service quality (Ryan, 2010). Ryan also added the productivity and job performance can be increased by good physical health of the employees. Healthy work environment will help in improving employee’s productivity and performance.

5) Income & Benefits: Income includes monthly salary, over-time payment, and per diem. While the benefits come with something that aids or promotes well being of employees, e.g. free or discount tickets for employees in the airline. This factor is a need of person in maintaining their lives according to their social status. It can respond to personal basic needs and make persons satisfied with their job (Spector, 1997). Appropriate income makes employees satisfied in their work and make them work productively and effectively (Locke, 1976). Arik and Kato, 2010 said that inappropriate income causes staff dissatisfaction and lack of motivation.

5. Operational Factors and Related Studies

The researcher believes the other factors that affecting Service Quality of Passenger Service Agent of AirAsia (Thailand) are Operational Factors, which are the following:

1) Workload: Workload is amount of work, however in this study the research focuses on the amount of flights that operating each day, which Passenger Service Agent needs to handle. Morrison (1996) suggested that a company’s Human Resource Management (HRM) practices could create an environment that elicits more customer-oriented behavior from employees. In turn, the behavior that these employees perform will positively impact service quality. A long-term heavy workload can affect an employee’s physical or mental health, performance, or productivity including service quality. Consequently, heavy workloads have been shown to have a negative impact on turnover (Chen et al, 2010), certainly contribute to a state of stress and give rise to strain, accidents or illness. High employee turnover carries with it the problems of both a high labor cost and quality issues that hurt the performance and growth of a company (Davidson et al., 2006).

2) Working Environment: Several attributes of the work environment influence work effectiveness and organizational performance (Shortell S et al., 1989). The researcher adapted the Shortell model using in this study. The model identifies four domains of the work environment – leadership, communication/coordination, conflict management, and staff cohesion - as predictors of perceived work effectiveness. Facilities with more effective leadership, communication/coordination, and conflict management are expected to have greater staff collaboration and higher perceived work effectiveness. The literature indicates these domains as fundamental to fostering effective work environments.

3) Equipment & Machines: Man and machines are associations that work together to achieve a goal in many businesses. Proper equipment or technology is a one of the many components of a successful operations and it is a fact that technology is increasingly central to modern life. In more recent times, the fascination with and concern about technology has become more intense. This is due, in part, to the rate of emergence of new technologies and, in part, because the origins (inception and design) of new technology have become increasingly remote from everyday experience (Grint, K., Wooloar, S., 1997). Grint and Wooloar also indicated technology have a revolutionary impact upon work organizations. The development of automated machinery was associated with other industrial revolution too; the first one driven
by steam, the second by automated machinery. From the above study showing that proper machines, equipment or technology can help people to manage tasks in term of speed, time and effectiveness.

4) Training: Training is critical factor for all employee especially in operations. Since the employee needs knowledge and skills to perform their job. Therefore training is defined as the acquisition of skills, concepts, or attitudes that results in improved performance and productivity in an on-the-job environment (Irwin and Goldstein, 1986). Moreover, Pual Osterman (1995) found the strong evidence in his study (Skills, Training and Work Organization in America Establishments). The establishments that introduce so-called high performance work organizations provide more training than do other establishments. However this effect tends to decay over time.

5) Company Policy: The company policy is one of critical factors that can affect working performance or quality service. Sometimes, the customer expected too high for the products or services but the employee could not offer as much as customer want due to the employee forced to follow the company policy. Robert Horowitz (2011) discusses there are five guiding principles are adopted by public as well as private agencies delivering excellent customer service. Here are the give guiding policies. (1) Embrace change and persistently strive to improve (be a learning organization). (2) Continually ask the target customers what they want and then give it to them. (3) Empower, support, and reward frontline personnel. (4) Harness the power of information, and (5) establish an enabling infrastructure.

6) Quality Control: Quality is one of the key objectives of operation, while quality management is cross-functional in nature and involves the entire organization. Operation has a special responsibility to produce a quality product or service for the customer (Roger G. Schroeder et al., 2010). In the airline service the Passenger Service Department is considered as an operation in the organization who providing product and service to the customer. Therefore, this requires the cooperation of the entire organization and careful attention to the management and control of quality. ISO 9000 is quality standard approach, which is worldwide exercised. Rao et al. (1997) In their study, they empirically explore, in the international context, the relationship between ISO 9000 and the level of quality management practices and quality results. The findings indicate that ISO 9000 registered companies exhibit higher levels of quality leadership, information and analysis, strategic quality planning, human resource development, quality assurance, supplier relationships, customer orientation and quality results. Without a support and careful attention from the management and control of quality, it is difficult for operation to deliver a quality product or service.

Research Methodology

According to the conceptual framework, the study is divided into two parts: which are (1) A customer satisfaction survey of AirAsia's (Thailand) passengers, (2) Factors that affecting service quality of Passenger Service Agent at AirAsia (Thailand). The first part had investigated by quantitative method. The questionnaire survey had distributed to 450 respondents (409 sets of questionnaire considered as usable), applying the Taro Yamane (1967) formula, for measuring their satisfaction towards AirAsia ground services (Passenger Service Department), which are Airport Sales Counter (ticketing), airport Check-in Counter, Departure Gate and Arrival Gate. Likert (1972) scale has been used in the questionnaire with consists of 5 levels of meeting expectation and below expectation. The degree have been weighted from 1 to 5 scores representing from unacceptable to far exceeds expectation. The second part had been practiced by qualitative method. The focus group interview techniques had conducted among small groups with 5-8 staff each airport within Thailand for discussion and exchange ideas with structured questions, which related to conceptual framework. The airports are namely; Chiang Rai, Chiang Mai, Ubon Ratchathani, Udon Thani, Bangkok, Krabi, Phuket, Hat Yai, and Surat Thani.

RESULT AND CONCLUSION

Part 1: Customer Satisfaction Survey Summary

Here are top 5 issues of service areas that not meeting passengers' expectation (highest percentage of below expectation or not meeting the expectation. According to SPSS analysis, below is the top 5 out of 18 issues that not meeting passengers’ expectation (score 1 and 2) that the airlines should look in to it for corrective actions and improvement.

1. Baggage Waiting Time (31.6%), this contributes the highest percentage in all service areas and it represents that there were 31.6% of the respondents were not satisfied the airline service at arrival, this can be implied that passengers had to wait their checked-in baggage for long time at the baggage belt.

2. Queue Time at Check-In Counter (23.8%), there were 97 out of 409 respondents, which were not satisfied with the queue time at check-in counter. This can be implied that the airlines need to improve queue time at check-in counter by expedite the check in process.

3. Baggage Condition (18.7%), from the data analysis there were 76 out of 409 respondents claimed that their checked-in baggage condition was not meet their expectation. When customers retrieve their baggage at the destination, they found that their baggage were damaged such as, baggage’s wheel broken, handle broken, baggage torn.

4. Delay Handling (17.8%), 73 out of 409 respondents shown in the data analysis that the delay handling of passenger service agents were not meet their expectation when there were flight delays. This could be implied that some of the airline passengers were not satisfied the way that passenger service agent handling during the flight delays.

5. Hot Seat Priority (16.5%), the airline is offering a Hot Seat Service, five front rows and exit emergency rows (42 seats out of 180 seats: Aircraft Type A320), with the priority to board and disembark the aircraft. However, from the data analysis there were 67 out of 409 respondents claimed that the Hot Seat Priority Service was not meet their expectation. This can be implied that there is a poor management of priory boarding and disembarking.

Part 2: Focus Group Discussion

The researcher had conducted the focus group to test the hypothesis. Form the focus group discussion for Passenger Service Agent of AirAsia (Thailand) at Thai airports; all of the respondents have agreed that the personal and operational factors have a relationship with their service quality. And below are the summary findings.
Personal Factors:

1. Personality: Form the focus group interview, all respondent agreed that personality of staff has affected to their service quality. From their perspective, staff personality is the second priority factor out of the Personal Factors. They explained that some of staff are not present well when they preform their duties in their perspective areas, check-in counters, boarding gates, ticketing counters, lost and found counters for examples. Improper manners, poses and approaches could able creating unsatisfied customers. Some supervisors mentioned that Human Resources should have a personality test during recruitment process. The supervisors claimed that personality test would be conducted for few positions only such as pilots and flight attendants.

2. Language Competency: Since the airlines also operate for international routes, there are many foreigners traveling. Therefore language competency of the staff is quite important. However, the supervisor claimed that this factor is a third priority out of the Personal Factors since during the recruitment process, the candidates need to qualified 500 scores of TOEIC (Test Of English for International Communication). Nevertheless, the respondent agreed that language competency has a relationship with their service quality. English is used as an international language to communicate between airlines staff and customers. During focus group interview, some supervisor shared their experiences regarding language competency. Lack of language competency could lead misunderstanding between staff and the customer, which make the customer unsatisfied.

3. Attitude: During focus group discussion for supervisor level, all respondent raised that the attitude or mindset of their staff are a most critical factor that could affect their service quality. Most of the staff believes that being low cost airlines, they are not required to provide excellent services. Base on low fare ticket that airlines offer to the customer, the staff is just thinking that the customer is not suppose to expect the excellent services comparing other full service airlines, which their ticket fare is including all services. However, the supervisor shared that the attitude or mindset of their staff is a critical factor that has a major impact to their service quality since they believe that an attitude or mindset could lead to improper behavior and communication.

4. Health: During focus group interview, all of respondent agreed that staff’s health has a relationship with their service quality since all staff requires to work as a day shift and night shift. In some of situations, aircraft delay for an example, it requires the staff to work for long hours. Bad conditional of health could lead to staff performance and related to safety concern as well since some staff have to work at aircraft site. However, this factor also relate to manpower, which the researcher has described more details in the operational factors.

5. Income and Benefits: From the respondents’ point of view during the focus group, they mentioned that salary and benefits is a factor that motivating staff to perform their job. However, currently there is no any issue regarding this factor since all staff satisfied what the company has offered since currently the company offer a reasonable salary and benefits comparing with another Thai nationality airlines. Therefore the supervisor believes that this factor needs no corrective action.

Operational Factors:

1. Workloads: According to respondents had discussed during focus group. This is the critical factor out of other operational factors that affecting service quality in Passenger Service Department. Here is a sample given from the supervisor during the focus group interview regarding workload issue. The supervisor claimed that the current manpower in Bangkok Hub was very minimum. The manpower indicator was 1.24 staff per flight (as of December 2011). Below shows how to find the manpower indicator in Bangkok Hub.

\[
\text{Manpower Indicator} = \frac{\text{Number of Passenger Service Staff}}{\text{Number of Flights Handling}}
\]

The supervisor believed working with minimum manpower lead to staff’s fatigue and stress, which will be affecting to their service quality. All supervisors agreed that the corrective actions and improvements are needed to solve this issue. However, the researcher has different idea regarding manpower indicator calculation. From the calculation above, the researcher disputed that the number of staff should not include the staff that are on day off and the correct calculation should be as below.

\[
\text{Manpower Indicator} = \frac{\text{Number of working Passenger Service Staff}}{\text{Number of Flights Handling}}
\]

The manpower indicator above (0.83 staff / flight) shows that the average staff per flight is below than 1 staff. This is the reason why passenger service staff being fatigue and not being healthy.

2. Working Environment: This is another factor that affecting the quality service of passenger service department. The researcher (moderator) has divided this factor into 2 categories, which are Tangible Working Environment (airport infrastructure, working areas or working places for examples) and Intangible Working Environment (Shortell, 1989). However, from the group discussion, the respondent claimed that currently they are concerned about Tangible Working Environment. They said that the working places of the staff are check-in counters, sales counters, boarding gates, arrival halls, parking bays, and etc. These working places belong to airport authority. The infrastructure and facilities of the airport affected to staff performance. For examples, Bangkok International (Suvarnabumi) Airport's infrastructure, to save the electricity usage of lighting system, the passenger terminal's roof is made from transparent glasses which allow sunlight go through the roof. In fact, the sunlight thought the transparent glass creates heat over passenger terminal. The staff feels uncomfortable during performing their duties a check-in counters, ticketing counters and boarding gates. For Intangible Working Environment, the supervisor also agreed that it also affected their service quality. They agreed that if leaders facilitate with more effective leadership, communication and good conflict management skills it will create more staff cohesion and higher perceived work effectiveness (service quality). From the discussion, the supervisor is also concerned about internal communication among the department since they claimed that the communication among their staff is not efficient due to there are many staff and they are working as a shift, currently they use email as the main communication. However, many staff never checks their email. Some staff’s email boxes are full, therefore they lost communication. Moreover, the supervisor also mentioned that many leaders are lacking of conflict management. Most of conflict
that happened in their department and other operational departments (Flight Attendant, Pilot, Ramp and Engineering) is about having different ideas, and thoughts.

3. Equipment and Machines: We could assume that Passenger Service Department is now lacking of equipment and machines. From the focus group, the respondent claimed that up-to-date equipment and technology could help their staff to perform the duties efficiently, which means service quality. Currently at check in counters, the staff have to key in passenger’s information manually such as, passport number, date of expire, date of birth, and sex. The airlines are required to submit this information (API- Advanced Passenger Information) to the immigration and customs of the destinations prior to aircrafts arriving. The supervisor added they wanted to have a passport reader to be equipped at check-in counters. This equipment will help the passenger service staff to expedite the check-in process.

4. Staff Training: The supervisor suggested that the company should provide more training for passenger service staff since they are front liners. At present, all new staff have been sent to AirAsia Academy, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for initial training. And the recurrent training (most of recurrent training to be conducted every 2 years) would be conducted in Thailand. Moreover, the supervisor suggested that the company should set up training more often since the airlines has always launching new products or process changes during a year. The staff must be trained before new products or new processes launched. Currently when new products or new processes launched, the staff will be notified via IIB (Internal Information Bulletin) few days in advance via company email. From the supervisor perspective, this is just a one-way communication; there are no interactions between staff and company. Many staff do not understand or misunderstand the IIB, this will lead to double standard services. The staff practice or exercise the service differently according to their own understanding. This issue is a root cause of most complaints from passengers.

5. Company Policy: The respondent mentioned during the focus group that company policy is another factor that has a relationship to their service quality. Since AirAsia is a low cost carrier, there are many limitations regarding services. The company mission is to attain the lowest cost so that everyone can fly with AirAsia (www.airasia.com, December, 2011). The limitations of services, such as, no frills service, no free baggage allowance, seat selection fee, flight change fee, and etc., this kind of limitations may lead the customer perceiving that the staff have no empathy when customers asking for help that beyond airlines’ Terms & Conditions.

6. Quality Control: The quality control, ISO 9002-2008, to be used as a quality tool in AirAsia under Corporate Quality Department, however, respondents mentioned in the focus group discussion that most of the staff do not realize that Corporate Quality is all about. Their mindset needs to be corrected since many staff perceived that they are not comfortable when there are auditors come to audit their jobs. They perceived that the auditor come to find their faults. The research found that there is no briefing about Corporate Quality for new employees during the company orientation class.

Implications

The benefits of the research would also help Passenger Service Department to reinforce their service quality, help them feel comfortable to perform their duties meanwhile the airlines can still minimize its cost when the service quality is up to the standard. Service quality helps the company to create customer loyalty. In addition, a consistence of service quality would create customer retention, which results in company revenues. Customer loyalty has a significant effect to the company. It is found that higher loyalty will lower servicing costs, reduce marketing expenses, and maximize company incomes from the current customer (Reichheld and Sasser, 1990).

Manpower Analysis and Planning: From the conclusions, the researcher found that Passenger Service Department of AirAsia (Thailand) has manpower issue since the workload and manpower is not balanced. However, manpower analysis would help the department find out the equilibrium point between manpower versus numbers of flight handling. By doing the manpower analysis, the researcher believes that the department could find the proper number of manpower indicator. The proper number of manpower indicator will be used for manpower planning. When the company plans to open new flights, then the Head of Passenger Service Department could be able to decide how many staff to recruit in order to meets up the manpower indicator that have set in the earlier state.

Staff Recruitment: From the focus group discussion, it shows that some staff have personality and attitude issue which causes passenger unsatisfied. Moreover, the staff also mentioned that personality and attitude test is currently been used for some positions only such as Pilots and Flight Attendants while there is no personality test for Passenger Service Agents. Especially, the staff attitude is not only critical to passengers but also critical to the company as well. From the supervisor’s point of view, they claimed that if the staff has wrong mindsets about their work and the company, it would be more impact to their service quality. The staff attitude or mindset is most challenging factor, the supervisor added. Therefore, Human Resources Department might has the personality or/and behavior test for Passenger Service Agents too since they also working as front liners which is facing passengers all the time. Human Resources Department should take charge more during recruitment and selection processes.

Training: During the focus group discussion the researcher found that soft skill training and product training for Passenger Service Department is not adequate. At present, all new staff had been sent to AirAsia Academy, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia for initial training which consists of Passenger Services, SOP (Standard Operating Producers), Check In & Reservation System, Dangerous Goods Regulations, Emergency Response Procedure, First Aid and Bomb threat. And the recurrent training (most of recurrent training to be conducted every 2 years) will be conducted in Thailand. However, it can be found that passenger service training and SOP training is not in the recurrent training program. Passenger service training and SOP training is considered as a soft skill training. Therefore, it is recommended that the department should add service training & SOP training in the recurrent program. The supervisor themselves also suggested that the soft skill trainings are a must and need to be added in
recurrent training program.

**Technology & Equipment:** The company may invest more technology or equipment since the technology and equipment helps business improve productivity. Currently, the airline is now practicing self-check-in (via web check-in, mobile check-in and kiosk check-in). However, the self-check-in system has some limitations such as document verification (passport validity, visa requirement, passenger information and etc.) As the finding during focus group, the staff really needs to have technology or equipment at check in counter and boarding gate. At the check in counter, the staff need to key in API (Advanced Passenger Information) in to system. This data is to be used for next arrival destination by the immigration. Currently the staff has to key in passenger information manually, which takes about 90 seconds each passenger. This will cause passengers stuck in the long queue. Moreover, by implementation of passport readers at check-in counters it helps the staff improve productivity and also helps them to reduce the fatigue and human error during their duties. At the boarding gate, the staff also has the difficulty of boarding pass checking. To check the number of passengers gated, the staff has to do bingo check by manually since there is no computer system at boarding gates. By doing bingo manually, it may cause human error, long time spent and also staff fatigue. In additional, in baggage service area, the company should consider investing more on baggage tractors and baggage carts to avoid baggage delay delivery.

**Quality Control:** AirAsia (Thailand) has been practicing ISO 9002-2008 as a quality tool. However, during the focus group interview the researcher found that most of the staff has no idea about ISO 9002 due to there is no proper training for them. Therefore, the company may set up ISO training or briefing for all staff so that the staff could be aware of. The company may include ISO briefing into orientation program for all new staff. Moreover, to create the momentum of quality control in Passenger Service Department, it is to recommend that the company should practice Continuous Improvement Program or Quality Circle Control (QCC) within the department such as 5S Good Housekeeping, 7 Step Problem Solving, Lean and etc.

**Suggestions for further research**

However, for the further research that could be conducted in the future, the researcher would recommend for studying on the factors that could affect the staff loyalty in Passenger Service Department of AirAsia, Thailand. The reason given is that during focus group interview of supervisory level, most of supervisor raised that high turnover rate of the staff in passenger service department also affected their service quality. The department has less good skilled staff. Training new staff would take long time and cost spent. The researcher believes that this issue also affected the company in term of service quality and high cost of new staff recruitment and training. In additional, even the mentioned issue (high turnover rate of the staff) is not in the scope of this research. However, it is interested one and the researcher believes that the further research on this issue could benefit to the airlines.

**REFERENCES**


51. School of Public Health. Universality of California, Berkeley.


