

# **AIRLINE SERVICE QUALITY IN PAKISTAN – A CUSTOMER PREFERENCES APPROACH**

**Syed Sartaj Qasim<sup>1</sup>**

## **Abstract**

*This study attempts to identify the service and value factors that are given the highest importance by passengers travelling on domestic flights in Pakistan. A survey methodology involving personal interviews with 100 passengers was used on a convenience basis to gather the required information. This methodology has yielded data which was internally consistent in previous studies even though it is a non-probabilistic sampling technique. The study resulted in the following main findings. The results show that passengers of domestic flights in Pakistan attach the highest importance to the timeliness of flights. The next service dimension in order of importance was cabin service followed by cabin crew and convenience of booking.*

**Keywords:** Airline Industry, Service Quality, Customer Preferences, Open Skies Policy, Gateways.

**JEL Classification:** Z000

---

1- Dept of Commercial and Professional Studies, Institute of Business Management (IoBM), Karachi, Pakistan

### **Introduction**

In recent years research has been conducted in various countries on airline service quality ever since pioneering research by scholars established a relationship between passenger satisfaction and airline profitability (Namukasa, 2013; Bukhari, Ghoneim, Dennis & Jamjoom, 2013; McKechnie, Grant & Golawala, 2011). Earlier Nowak and Newton (2006) had reported a direct linear relationship between customer satisfaction and profits. This important relationship is substantiated by Park (2007) who concluded, not surprisingly, that high quality service is essential for a viable air transportation industry. During the 1990s, the Pakistani airline industry had undergone a dramatic transformation with the advent of deregulation and as a consequence of the open skies policy pursued by successive governments. This has resulted in the emergence of new gateways for international travel from Pakistan and the entry of new domestic airlines within the last twenty years. With the easing of barriers to entry several domestic airlines have started commercial operations on the domestic routes.

### **Literature Survey**

According to researchers Park (2007) and Atalik (2007), the most effective way to ensure repeat customers is to provide a service that meets customers' expectations consistently. Second, an airline must keep the promises it makes. The reality is that most airlines fail to appreciate these factors and continue to ignore their importance in the planning phase with disastrous results.

Aksoy, et al. (2003) find that most companies do not recognize the importance of this approach "until driven to it by circumstances". Given a choice, dissatisfied customers are more likely to voice their complaints than satisfied customers are prone to provide positive feedback. Long term relationships with customers need to be nurtured by a carefully planned process of providing service and value. Aksoy

et al. (2003) highlighted that customer expectations strongly influence the service decisions at all points of service delivery. Thus it is imperative to find out airline passengers' expectations and then try to meet as many of them as possible.

Palmer (2008) has listed several 'critical incidents' between an airline and its customers e.g. Pre sales (initial inquiry, making reservations, issuing ticket), Post sales, Pre consumption (e.g. Baggage check-in, inspection of ticket, issuance of boarding pass, quality of waiting conditions), Consumption (e.g. Welcome on boarding aircraft, assisting in finding seat and stowing baggage, punctuality of departure, attentive in-flight service, quality of food service, etc), Post consumption (Baggage reclaim, information on arrival, queries regarding lost bags, etc.). The pattern of critical incidents has been used as a basis for defining passengers' expectations on domestic airline services in Pakistan and to compare it with earlier studies carried out in South Africa and Malaysia (De Jager, 2013).

Whereas Pakistan International Airlines and its predecessor dominated the domestic travel business since independence (1947), lately Shaheen Airlines and Air Blue have established themselves as viable players and steadily increased their market share. A number of new airlines (e.g. Aero Asia, Bhoja Air, Hajvairi, and Rajhi Aviation) have already exited from the industry as they could not survive in the intensely competitive domestic airline market leaving the aforementioned three carriers in the field. Of late, a new entrant called Air Indus has started flights on a few domestic sectors but, so far, its share of the domestic market is very small.

Once opened to competition, the Pakistani airline industry underwent a dramatic change and, for the first time, the domestic passengers were able to choose an airline. Faced with increasing competition, the domestic airlines had to offer the travelling public better services in order to retain their passengers or face the prospect

of an early exit from the market. The time had come when only satisfying customers was not enough for customer retention, word-of-mouth publicity and profitability. Poor service quality delivered by airlines results in diminished ability to retain passengers, loss of reputation and resultant loss of profitability.

There is a need to develop the domestic airline services in line with international standards of safety and operational and service efficiency. The burgeoning population growth rate puts enormous pressure on the airline industry to improve their services and maintain profitability to ensure their survival. Robust planning of all necessary facilities and services is a basic requirement for the orderly growth of the domestic airline industry (De Jager, 2012). If Pakistan is to come out of its dismal state of law and order, recover its reputation and regain its position as a major tourist destination in South Asia, it is of utmost importance that its domestic airline industry grows in an orderly fashion and is well positioned to meet the expectations of local and foreign passengers.

This objective can be achieved by continuously improving the product offered by the domestic airlines in line with international standards by focusing efforts on Customer Experience Management. As a first step this study attempts to identify service and value factors that are cherished by air travelers in Pakistan and to compare the same with other countries that exhibit similar level of economic and social advancement.

### **Methodology**

The primary research objective was to identify those service aspects that airline passengers typically consider most and least important when travelling on a domestic airline in Pakistan. The mean importance ratings obtained for each of the service items were calculated and ranked from the highest to the lowest scores. Overall, the service factors were ranked within the following four dimensions

labeled: convenience of booking, cabin services, cabin crew, and timeliness of flight.

A questionnaire developed by De Jager (2013) has been adopted with modifications to measure the foregoing attributes and passengers' expectations regarding all phases of the travel experience. In order to gauge customers' expectations of airline services, the modified questionnaire was used to collect information from the domestic flights' passengers at Quaid-e-Azam International Airport, Karachi, over a two week period. Personal interviews were conducted with domestic passengers and the required information was recorded on the spot. Passengers were selected on a convenience basis. The average ratings of key items along with standard deviations were used for measuring the level of importance attached by passengers to each of the key elements in the modified structured questionnaire. Further to the previous study conducted by De Jager, Van Zyl and Toriola (2012), this study focused on measuring four of the most important service dimensions, namely, convenience of booking, cabin services, cabin crew and timeliness of flight. A 7-point Likert-type scale was used ranging from 1= most important to 7=not important at all.

### **Results and findings**

The main research objective involved identifying those service aspects that domestic air passengers rate the highest and the lowest in importance. The mean importance ratings obtained for each of the service items were calculated and ranked from highest to lowest. The results are compared in Table 1 below with the service elements ranked within the four service dimensions mentioned earlier. The first service dimension is labeled 'convenience of booking' and includes such elements as convenience in making reservation/booking, online booking opportunity, allowable weight, pre-seating options, availability of airline website on internet, and adequacy of information on airline's website. The highest mean rating was given to convenience in making reservation/booking by the Pakistani passengers whereas

this element was rated second by both the South African as well as the Malaysian samples respectively.

The lowest rating (sixth) was accorded to adequacy of information on airline's website which was rated fourth and third by the S. African and Malaysian samples respectively. The factor rated second most important was allowable weight. This is not surprising since most passengers travelling by air on domestic flights need to carry all their personal effects including items of daily use as well as

**Table:1 Passengers' rating of service items**

	<b>Mean</b>	<b>SD</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Rank</b>	<b>Rank</b>
			<b>Pakistan</b>	<b>S.Africa</b>	<b>Malaysia</b>
<b>Convenience of booking</b>					
Convenience in making reservation/booking	1.6	0.30	1	2	2
Allowable weight	1.67	0.28	2	6	5
Pre-seating options	1.73	0.33	3	5	6
Online booking opportunity	1.74	0.35	4	1	1
Availability of airline website on internet	1.76	0.40	5	3	4
Adequacy of information on airline's website	1.92	0.45	6	4	3
<b>Cabin Service</b>					
Variety of food served during flight	1.22	0.19	1	7	7
Quality of the food served	1.23	0.17	2	3	3
Cabin cleanliness	1.39	0.25	3	2	2
Comfort of the seats	1.46	0.24	4	1	1
Amount of the food served during flight	1.50	0.37	5	10	9
Cabin ventilation	1.56	0.41	6	4	5
Amenities in aircraft	1.69	0.31	7	8	8
Carry on (overhead) storage space	1.73	0.34	8	6	6
Timeliness of food and drink service	1.92	0.63	9	9	10
Continuous innovation and service improvement	2.02	0.42	10	5	4
<b>Cabin crew</b>					
Cabin crew's credibility	1.54	0.29	1	1	2
Cabin crew's ability to answer questions	1.58	0.29	2	2	1
Physical appearance of cabin crew	1.60	0.26	3	3	3
<b>Timeliness of flight</b>					
Speed of check-in	1.29	0.21	1	3	4
On-time luggage delivery on arrival	1.30	0.21	2	2	1
On-time departures and arrivals	1.33	0.22	3	1	2
Direct service to destination	1.72	0.22	4	4	3

gifts, books (students), samples (business travelers), electronic items such as laptops, cameras, etc. The pre-seating options scored third on the passengers' priorities as they prefer to be seated with their friends and families. Some passengers may prefer a window seat, a bulkhead seat or an aisle seat. Some elderly passengers may prefer a seat near the entrances.

The next item in order of preference was online booking opportunity. Although the use of computers is growing in the country at a fast rate, passengers living in rural areas still do not have access to the internet. As the country grows and the internet infrastructure spreads to the remotest corners of the country this element would grow in importance. Similarly, the availability of airline website on internet and the adequacy of information on airline's website were rated fifth and sixth respectively which is a reflection of the low level of literacy among the labor class as well as the older generation of passengers who grew up without exposure to computer technology. As the younger generation with a higher level of computer skills comes to dominate air travel in the next few years, the importance accorded to these last three elements would be likely to go up.

The second service dimension studied 'cabin service' relates to the provision of in-flight services. Although there is some variation in the level and variety of in-flight service offerings across airlines, for the purposes of this study these included such items as comfort of the seats, cabin cleanliness, food (quality, variety), timeliness of food and drink service, cabin ventilation, and onboard amenities. The three items rated most important by Pakistan sample were the variety of food served, quality of the food, and cabin cleanliness. The food served on board occupies a central place from the passengers' point of view. The main reason could be the lack of hygienic catering facilities on the ground. Some passengers whose travel originates from outside the big cities use public transportation like buses and trains to reach the airport and may have already spent a lot of time away from home. Obviously their most important need is an adequate meal. Although the flight duration of most domestic

flights in Pakistan is under two hours, the total journey time may stretch to as long as six hours or more including ground transportation and connecting times. The three items which obtained the lowest ratings were carry-on (overhead) storage space, timeliness of food and drink service, and continuous innovation and service improvement. These elements have probably scored relatively lower importance ratings because of the low level of expectations of the domestic passengers. Having had less than enjoyable experiences on past flights, some passengers might have permanently lowered their expectations of service on board. This is a direct result of the use of old aircraft on domestic routes by all airlines except Air Blue. PIA continued to operate F-27 Fokker aircraft on domestic routes for over thirty five years. Some of the new entrants started service using old aircraft (such as old BAC One Elevens and first generation Boeing 737s) which were prone to frequent breakdowns. Unless the airlines take urgent steps to modernize their fleets, they would not be able to meet their passengers' expectations.

The third service dimension studied, namely 'Cabin Crew' included such service elements as cabin crews' credibility, their ability to answer questions, and physical appearance of cabin crew. Cabin crew's credibility got the top service rating followed by their ability to answer questions, and physical appearance of cabin crew rated lowest. It is interesting to note that a similar rating pattern emerged from the South African sample whereas the Malaysian sample differed only in the rating accorded to the first two elements with cabin crew's ability to answer questions being given the first slot. The low value of the SD (between 0.26 and 0.29) shows a high degree of consistency of the data.

The last dimension studied was labeled 'timeliness of flight'. This service dimension consists of the elements of speed of check-in, on-time luggage delivery on arrival, on-time departures and arrivals, and direct service to destination. The highest importance rating was accorded to speed of check-in (1.29) closely followed by on-time luggage delivery on arrival (1.30) and the lowest priority was given to

direct service to destination. However it was noted that these four elements had the lowest SD values ranging between 0.21 and 0.22. The highest and lowest ratings for the S. African sample were given to on-time departures and arrivals and direct service to destination, whereas, for the Malaysian sample the highest and lowest-rated elements were on-time baggage delivery and speed of check-in respectively.

***Importance of service dimensions when travelling on a domestic airline:***

In the second phase of the study, the relative importance of the four service dimensions were analyzed. For this purpose a composite score was calculated for each dimension (Table 2). Lower average values depict higher relative importance. The results show that timeliness of flights (Mean 1.41) was rated as the most important broader service dimension amongst all three samples. The second position was accorded to cabin service (Mean 1.572) followed closely by cabin crew (Mean 1.573). Convenience of booking ranked lowest (Mean 1.74). The relative rankings for all three samples are shown in Table 2.

**Table:2**  
*Passengers' rating of service dimensions*

Factors	Pakistan			S. Africa	Malaysia
	Mean	SD	Rank	Rank	Rank
Convenience of booking	1.74	0.09	4	2	3
Cabin services	1.572	0.25	2	3	4
Cabin crew	1.573	0.02	3	4	2
Timeliness of flight	1.41	0.17	1	1	1

### **Discussion and conclusion**

The fact that timeliness of flights has been accorded the highest rating in all three samples clearly distinguishes this dimension. The fact is that most airline passengers are pressed for time and wish more than anything else to get to their destination in the shortest possible time. But if we look at the journey in a holistic manner, we find that many other variables enter the picture starting from the time when a passenger leaves home en route to the airport (he/she may well have to travel from out of town by train, bus or car) and then undergoing many stages of pre-departure formalities (finding trolleys, porters, parking space, security screening, checking-in, reaching the proper departure gate, waiting for boarding to start, and finally boarding the aircraft). After reaching the destination, the passenger has to deplane, ensure retrieval of his luggage, undergo further security screening, search for ground transportation (if not pre-arranged), and finally leave the airport for the last leg of his journey. Any major delay at any stage may result in inconvenience and costly disruptions in further arrangements including hotel booking cancellations/penalties. Thus, from the passenger's point of view flight timeliness is accorded prime importance. The practical consideration for the airlines is increased level of coordination with other agencies which are involved in the provision of the customer service mix. Chief among these are the Civil Aviation Authority and the Airports Security Force (responsible for providing security services at all airports in Pakistan) followed by various ground service providers like baggage handlers, porters, parking space providers, caterers, line maintenance, fuel suppliers, etc. These non-airline service providers (called 'situated agents' by Palmer (2008)) also affect the quality of the overall passenger satisfaction and the perceptions held about a particular airline.

While the actual quality of services offered by these 'situated agents' is beyond the control of the concerned airline, focus must be on the more direct encounters between the passengers and the airlines' front-line staff as their behaviors directly influence the passengers'

service perception. These include identifying those service and value factors that are accorded high importance level by the passengers. This study provides an insight into the four broader service dimensions measured in Pakistan for the first time: namely convenience of booking, cabin service, cabin crew, and timeliness of flight.

The results show that timeliness of flights was rated as the most important service dimension among all three samples studies so far. It is significantly more important than the other three service dimensions. Persons associated with the airline industry would appreciate the fact that passenger satisfaction is a team effort involving both front-line staff (those who come in direct contact with the passengers) as well as ground personnel such as aircraft technicians, refueling personnel, baggage loaders, caterers, cleaning and janitorial staff, etc. The quality of service provided by these ‘invisible’ staff is a moderating factor in the passenger satisfaction levels. In other words, unless all the teams involved in providing various aspects of the airline passenger services work in close coordination with one another and maintain proper level of support and the required service levels at all stages of the journey, the passenger is not likely to have a positive level of satisfaction.

As mentioned above, domestic travel often forms part of an international journey and passengers depend on the timely departures and arrivals of flights at gateways in order to connect with onward international flights which may be scheduled to leave within a short period. Any delay could result in mis-connection which has a high cost implication for such passengers, thus affecting levels of satisfaction.

The cabin service ratings reveal that passengers in Pakistan accord top priority to the variety of food served during flight, quality of food, and cabin cleanliness. This rating reflects the passengers’ desire to be well catered considering the overall amount of time spent away from home. Increasing traffic congestion and the absence of a

viable urban public transport system in all the big cities of Pakistan mean ever lengthening journey times for airline passengers. The factors accorded the lowest priority were carry-on (overhead) storage space, timeliness of food and drink service and continuous innovation and service improvement.

In the third dimension studied, cabin crew, the cabin crews' credibility obtained the highest average importance rating, followed by cabin crews' ability to answer questions. Physical appearance of cabin crew rated lowest. These ratings mirror the findings of the S. African sample.

With regard to the convenience of booking, the factor rated highest was convenience in making reservation/booking followed in second place by allowable weight and pre-seating options. The factor emerging with the lowest rating in this category was adequacy of information on airline's website. To conclude, these findings present a valuable starting point for airlines to assess the present levels of their service offerings. They may be shared with the relevant departments in the airline service delivery chain. By constantly striving to find, meet and exceed the passenger service needs and expectations, the airlines can ensure their passengers' continued patronage and, resultantly, their own survival and profitability. Through a constant and repetitive process of the above cycle, the airlines can ensure a high level of effectiveness of services rendered by the airline industry. The role played by situated agents (non-airline service providers), being crucial, cannot be ignored and would continue to play a significant role.

#### **Limitations and opportunities for further research**

A non probability sample was used due to time and cost limitations as this study was not sponsored by any agency. Having a larger sample would definitely improve the accuracy level of the results. However the opportunity to compare the results of this study with the

results of similar studies carried out in South Africa and Malaysia validates these findings and should serve as a benchmark for conducting detailed studies at other locations as well. Another limitation was the lack of demographic analysis which the author would like to investigate in a future study. These demographic features would include occupation, age distribution, and information regarding frequency and purpose of travel.

A second recommendation involves expanding the scope of a future study to find out the preferences of international passengers so that airlines can improve their service offerings accordingly.

#### **Acknowledgements**

The author would like to thank and acknowledge the help of: Prof. Johan W de Jager for granting permission to use the airline questionnaire; Mr. Ejaz Rashid for his valuable guidance and suggestions and Mr. Javed Khan for his help in organizing interviews at the Quaid-e-Azam International Airport, Karachi.

### References

- Aksoy, S., Atilgan, E. & Akinci, S. (2003). Airline Services Marketing by domestic and foreign firms: differences from the customers' viewpoint. *Journal of Air Transport Management*, 9, 343-351.
- Atalik, O. (2007). Customer complaints about airline service: a preliminary study of Turkish frequent flyers. *Management Research News*, 30 (6), 409-419.
- Bukhari, S.M.F., Ghoneim, A., Dennis, C., & Jamjoom, B. (2013). The antecedents of travelers' e-satisfaction and intention to buy airline tickets online. *Journal of Enterprise Information Management*, 26(6), 624-641.
- De Jager, J.W. (2012). Domestic Airline service expectations in South Africa and Italy. *International Journal of Business Policy and Economics*, 5(1), 185-198.
- De Jager, J.W., van Zyl, D. & Toriola, A.L., (2012). Airline service quality in South Africa and Italy. *Journal of Air Transport Management*, 25, 19-21.
- De Jager, J.W., van Zyl, D. (2013). Airline service quality in South Africa and Malaysia- An international customer expectations approach. *Journal of Economics and Behavioral Studies*, 5 (11), 752-761
- McKechnie, D.S., Grant, J. & Golawala, F.S. (2011). Partitioning service encounters into touch points to enhance quality. *International Journal of Quality and Service Sciences*, 3(2), 146-165.
- Namukasa, J.(2013). The influence of airline service quality on passenger satisfaction and loyalty: The case of Uganda airline industry. *The TQM Journal*, 25(5), 520-532
- Nowak, L.I. & Newton, S.K. (2006). Using the taste room experience to create loyal customers. *International Journal of Wine Marketing*, 18(3), 157-165
- Palmer, A. (2008). Principles of services marketing, 5<sup>th</sup> ed. London: McGraw-Hill.
- Park, J.W. (2007). Passenger perception of service quality: Korean and Australian case studies. *Journal of Air Transport Management*, 13, 238-242.