

An Examination of Service Failures Encountered in Indian Aviation Industry

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Service encounters are critical in all service industries; India's dynamic aviation market is of no exception. There is fierce competition among airlines and 'customer satisfaction' is the only mantra to survive in this competitive market. The present study aims to identify, classify and analyze the type of service failures encountered by airline passengers during travel in domestic sectors of India with the help of critical incident technique. Hundred critical incidents were collected from 100 respondents out of which 95 are dissatisfied service encounters. From these 95 incidents, twenty-six service failures were derived which again classified into groups and category of type of incident outcome given by Bitner et al, 1990. The study focuses only on negative critical incidents in the relations between the airline companies and passengers.

KEYWORDS: *Service Encounter, Critical Incident Technique, Indian Aviation Industry.*

1. INTRODUCTION

India's dynamic aviation market is the ninth largest civil aviation market in the world and this forward march is likely to culminate in India becoming one of the three largest markets in the world by 2020 (Travel Trends Today, Jan., 2011). The domestic passenger traffic recorded a 19.6% growth during Jan-Feb, 2011 (Travtalk, Apr, 2011). The monthly statistics compiled by the DGCA for April, 2011 that total no. of complaints is 1090 and the no. of passenger related complaints is 2.4 per 10,000 passengers carried (dgca.ac.in). These complaints or service failures are those which are compiled by DGCA but there are many which might not be filed by the passengers to the airlines. The present study aims to identify, classify and analyze the type of service failures encountered by airline passengers during travel in domestic sectors of India.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Encounter

Service encounters are critical in all service industries; these are critical moments of truth in which customers often develop indelible impressions of a firm. Service encounters have been defined as the moment of interaction between a customer and a firm (Shostack 1985; Keaveney 1995; Winstead 1997). Encounters may take place face-to-face in an actual service setting, over the phone, through the mail, or even over the internet. Each encounter is an opportunity for a firm to sell itself, to reinforce its offerings, and to satisfy the customer. However, each encounter is also an opportunity to disappoint.

Previous research illustrates how important individual service encounters are for business success. Encounters

have been shown to affect critical outcomes such as customer satisfaction (Bitner, Booms and Tetreault 1990; Bitner et al 1994; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, and Berry 1985, 1994; Smith and Bolton 1998; Kivela and Chu 2001; Holloway and Beatty 2008), intention to repurchase (Bitner 1990, 1995; Keaveney 1995; Meuter, Ostrom, Roundtree, and Bitner 2000; Smith and Bolton 1998; Petrick, Tonner and Quinn 2006), word-of-mouth communications (Bitner 1990; Keaveney 1995; Meuter et al 2000; Tax, Brown, and Chandrashekar 1998); relationship quality (Bolton 1998; Czeipiel 1990), and loyalty (Gremler and Brown 1999). Ineffective or unsuccessful service encounters can result in significant costs to the firm such as performing the service again, compensating customers for poor performance, lost customers and negative word of mouth (Bitner et al 1994, Keaveney 1995; Tax and Brown 1998; Tax et al 1998). Empirical research also affirms the importance of service encounters in the global assessment of service quality (Parasuraman et al 1994). "in most services, quality occurs during service delivery, usually in an interaction between the customer and contact personnel of the service firm". (Zeithaml, Berry, and Parasuraman 1988).

In the context of services provided by airlines, a passenger may have to interact with ticket encounter employees, gate attendants, flight attendants, baggage handlers, the person sitting next to the passenger and others. All these interactions between the passenger and the airline personnel are considered as service encounters. Each of these entities or conditions contribute to the passenger's perception of the overall service experience. A poor performance in one area may succeed in negating exceptional performances in other areas (Ostrowski, O'Brien and Gordon, 1994). If there is any deviation in the expected service and service delivered, it leads to customer dissatisfaction. There are some airline performance areas which determined the air travelers' satisfaction or dissatisfaction are on-time arrival and departure, baggage handling, handling of complaints, information to the customers and security services etc. For Example, overall on-time performance of scheduled domestic airlines for April 2011 was 88.1% which implied that there was 11.9% of delay in flights and overall cancellation rate in April 2011 was 0.8% which would cause dissatisfaction among passengers (dgca.ac.in).

Service failures are specific events that lead to dissatisfying service encounters from the customers' point of view (Bitner et al, 1990). Service failure involves activities that occur as a result of customer perceptions of initial service delivery behaviors falling below the customer's expectations or "zone of tolerance" (Zeithaml,

Berry and Parasuraman, 1993). Service failure can occur in several ways, such as when customer requested service is unavailable, when the service is unreasonably delayed, or when the core service is delivered below a minimum acceptable level (Bitner, Booms, Tetreault, 1990). Whether the initial reaction to service failure is one of mere disappointment or one of anger, a customer's negative attitude can become much stronger if the firm fails to resolve the service failure. Since service failures are inevitable and do impact satisfaction, even if they are perceived as "acceptable" by customers, since service recovery management is crucial (Michel, 2001).

Critical Incident Technique

It is a qualitative interview procedure in which customers are asked to provide verbatim stories about satisfying and dissatisfying service encounters they have experienced. The critical incident technique (CIT) in its original conception consisted of "...a set of procedures for collecting direct observations of human behaviour in such a way as to facilitate their potential usefulness in solving practical problems and developing broad psychological principles" (Flanagan, 1954, pp. 327-357). The use of this technique in various services like hotels, restaurants, airlines, amusement parks, automotive repairs, retailing, banking, cable television, public transportation, self-service technologies and education has been reported. Bitner et al's (1990) findings became the foundation for the future studies in examining the service failure incidents with the help of critical incident technique and the classification by type of incident outcome provided guidelines to improve customer satisfaction. Kelly, Hoffman and Davis (1993) in their research work; the work of Bitner and her colleagues (Bitner, Booms, Tetreault, 1990; Gremler and Bitner, 1992) served as a starting point for the content analysis of the critical incidents collected. They identified nine categories of service failures in group1- employee response in service delivery system failures, two categories of service failures in group2- employee response to customer needs and requests and four categories of service failures in group 3- unprompted and unsolicited employee actions. Bitner, Booms and Mohr (1994) collected 774 critical service encounters reported by employees of the hotel, restaurant and airline industries. The purpose of the study is to evaluate the soundness of the classification scheme developed by Bitner et al, 1990 in a distinctive context. All the categories found in the original customer-perspective study were also found when employees were asked to

report and also identify an additional source of customer dissatisfaction i.e. their own misbehaviour.

Hoffman, Kelly and Rotalsky (1995) used the CIT to describe a typology of service failures and recoveries and three main categories previously identified by Bitner et al (1990) was used to classify the service failures. By using CIT, Kivela and Chu (2001) collected 1294 favorable and unfavorable responses from the customers of restaurants. The results of this study concur with and confirm Bitner et al's 1990 findings and suggest that classifications and sub classifications are more critical contributory factors of favorable and unfavorable service encounters in restaurants. Hoffman, Kelly, and Chung (2003) investigated service failures relating to problems with the management of the servicescape with the help of CIT. The three primary types of servicescape failure identified are - cleanliness issues, mechanical problems and facility design issues. Chung-Herrera, Goldschmidt and Hoffman (2004) examined perceptual similarities and differences between customers and employees in terms of critical service incidents. Each critical incident through a deductive sorting process systematically categorized into three major failure groups developed by Bitner et al (1990).

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is based on both primary and secondary data. Primary data was collected through a survey using convenience sampling method. The survey instrument is self-administered and consists of two sections. The questions in the first section are about demographic profile of the respondents like gender, age, income and occupation. In the second section, respondents were asked about an incident that stands out in their mind as either satisfying/positive or dissatisfying/negative experience with the airline in domestic sectors of India during the last five years of their travel in domestic sectors of India only. The following questions were asked from respondents and answers were recorded in the recorder or written down on the paper attached with the questionnaire as per the convenience of the respondents:

- Was this a satisfying/dissatisfying experience?
- Describe what happened during the incident. What specific details do you recall that made this experience memorable for you?
- What was the outcome of the incident?
- How could this experience have been improved (if at all)?

- Did you complain to the organization about this incident? If yes, how did you complain? If no, why not?

The respondents were approached at Jammu airport, govt. employees who are frequently travelled and other air travellers as per the convenience of the researcher. Hundred critical incidents were collected from 100 respondents. Five of the incidents reported were service failures encountered by respondents but they were satisfied with the recovery actions taken by the airlines and ninety-five of the incidents were dissatisfied service failures encountered by respondents.

TABLE 1. Demographic profile of respondents (N=95)

S.No.	Variable	No. of respondents	Percentage
1.	Gender		
	(a.) Male	65	68
	(b.) Female	30	32
2.	Age (in years)		
	(a.) below 20	3	3
	(b.) 20-40	59	63
	(c.) 40-60	27	28
	(d.) above 60	6	6
3.	Income (in Rs.)		
	(a.) below 10,000	11	11
	(b.) 10,000-30,000	35	37
	(c.) 30,000-50,000	33	35
	(d.) above 50,000	16	17
4.	Occupation		
	(a.) service	51	57
	(b.) business	20	22
	(c.) student	3	3
	(d.) others	16	18

The above table presents the distribution of sample respondents with respect to the demographics used in the study. From this distribution it is seen that there are 65 (68%) male and 30 (32%) female amongst the respondents. The main age group is 20 – 40 years representing 63 % of the respondents (below 20 with 3%, 40-60 with 28% and above 60 with 6%). Majority of the respondents (34%) have income between Rs. 10,000 to Rs. 30,000 and 57% of the respondents belong to occupation service.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study builds on previous research by examining failures encountered by air travellers in domestic sectors of India through the critical incident technique. The critical

incidents collected were categorized as per the classification given by Bitner et al, 1990. For the classification of incidents, the procedures used by Bitner et al, 1990; Kivela and Chu, 2001; Forbes et al, 2005 were considered. The analytic induction process was used which consists of repeated, careful readings and sorting of the incidents into groups and categories according to similarities in the reported experience. After initial sorting process and classification, twenty-six service failure categories were identified. All twenty-six service failures classified in to sub categories of three major groups as per the classification given by Bitner et al (1990). Bitner et al classified the incident outcomes into three major groups - Group 1 is Employee Response to Service Delivery System Failures, Group 2 is Employee Response to Customer Needs and Requests and Group 3 is Unprompted and Unsolicited Employee Actions. With in three major groups, a total of 12 categories were developed- three in Group 1, four in Group 2 and five in Group 3. The present study defined the twenty-six identified service failures into categories.

TABLE 2. Bitner et al's (1990) Group and Category Classification by Type of Incident Outcome

Group & Category	Type of Incident Outcome	Number of Service Failures
Group 1	Employee Response to Service Delivery System Failures	
G1A	Response to unavailable service	Six
G1B	Response to unreasonably slow service	Four
G1C	Response to other core service failures	Six
Group 2	Employee Response to Customer Needs and Requests	
G2A	Response to special needs customers	One
G2B	Response to customer preferences	Two
G2C	Response to admitted customer error	One
G2D	Response to potentially disruptive others	One
Group 3	Unprompted and Unsolicited Employee Actions	
G3A	Attention paid to customers	One
G3B	Truly out-of-the ordinary employee behaviour	
	Two	
G3C	Employee behaviours in the context of cultural norms	One
G3D	Gestalt evaluation	One
G3E	Performance under adverse circumstances	Nil

Six service failures are included in category **G1A Response to unavailable service** - cancelled flight without prior notice, non-availability of seat at departure terminal, overbooking of passengers, no provision of any refreshment when there is long delay in flight, flight delay and non-availability of right information about flight delay; **four** service failures are included in category **G1B Response to unreasonably slow service**- delay in refund of cancelled ticket, rescheduling without prior notice, provision of food not on time and delay of baggage delivery; **six** service failures are in category **G1C Response to other core service failures**- mishandling of baggage, food and beverage not of high quality, missing of baggage, exchange of baggage, inconvenience due to non working of air condition in aircraft and printing mistake on ticket; **one** service failure in category **G2A Response to special need customers**- mishandling of carry-on items/delicate items; **two** service failures are included in category **G2B Response to customer preferences**- less leg space and allow to carry-on items at one sector and deny the same at another; **one** service failure is in category **G2C Response to admitted customer error**- staff shows unwillingness to assist the customer in solving the problem arises due to customer error, **one** service failure in category **G2D Response to potentially disruptive others**- co-passengers show interrupted behaviour; **one** service failure included in category **G3A Attention paid to customer**- inefficient staff; **two** service failures are included in category **G3B Truly out-of-the-ordinary employee behaviour**- unfriendly and unhelpful attitude of ground staff members and unfriendly and unhelpful attitude of crew members; **one** service failure in category **G3C Employee behaviour in the context of cultural norms**- theft of items which are under the scrutiny of airline staff members and **one** service failure is included in category **G3D Gestalt Evaluation**- unfriendly and uncomfortable ambience for the travellers. There is no service failure incident outcome that falls in category G3E, Performance under Adverse Circumstances.

Table 3 shows the comparison of failure frequency of incidents in airline sector of Bitner et al's study and present study.

The above table indicated that 83.16% of incidents reported by passengers in domestic sectors of India occurred due to service delivery system failures i.e the incidents are related directly to failures in the core service and inevitable system failures that occur for even the best of firms, 10.53% of incidents occurred due to employee response to customer needs and requests i.e. when a customer requires the contact employee to adapt the service

delivery system to suit his or her unique needs, the contact employee's response determines the customer's dis/satisfaction and 6.31% of incidents reported due to unprompted and unsolicited employee actions i.e. events and employee behaviours that are truly unexpected from the customer's point of view.

TABLE 3. Comparison of Failure frequency in percentage

Group	Statements	Bitner et al Failure Frequency (Airlines)		Present Study Failure Frequency	
		No.	%	No.	%
Group1	Employee Response to Service Delivery System Failures	35	45.5	79	83.16
Group2	Employee Response to Customer Needs and Requests	21	27.3	10	10.53
Group3	Unprompted and Unsolicited Employee Actions	21	27.3	6	6.31
	Total	77	100	95	100

Examination of table 4 reveals that a large proportion of dissatisfactory encounters were related to employees' inability or unwillingness to respond in core service failure situations (36.84%). These core service failures are related with missing, exchange and mishandling of baggage, quality of food provided by the airlines and technology failures like non-working of air condition in the aircraft. After careful and repeated readings of the incidents indicate that it is not the initial failure to deliver the core service alone that causes dissatisfaction but rather the employees' response to the failure.

Incidents classified under category of unreasonably slow service made up of 30.53% of total incidents collected. These dissatisfactory encounters are delay in baggage delivery and delay in refund of cancelled ticket. Also, food provided in the aircraft is not on time and rescheduling is not intimated to the passengers.

Category unavailable service accounted for 15.79% of the total failures. It includes non-availability of seat at departure terminal, no information is provided about flight delay, after long delay flight cancelled, flight cancelled

without any prior notice to the passengers, not provide any refreshment when there is long delay in flight and some passengers suffered due to overbooking.

TABLE 4. Group and Category Classification by Type of Incident Outcome

Group & Category	Type of Incident Outcome	Count	Percentage
Group 1	Employee Response to Service Delivery System Failures		
G1A	Response to unavailable service	15	15.79
G1B	Response to unreasonably slow service	29	30.53
G1C	Response to other core service failures	35	36.84
	Total (1)	79	83.16
Group 2	Employee Response to Customer Needs and Requests		
G2A	Response to special needs customers	4	4.21
G2B	Response to customer preferences	3	3.16
G2C	Response to admitted customer error	2	2.11
G2D	Response to potentially disruptive others	1	1.05
	Total (2)	10	10.53
Group 3	Unprompted and Unsolicited Employee Actions		
G3A	Attention paid to customers	3	3.16
G3B	Truly out-of-the ordinary employee behaviour	1	1.05
G3C	Employee behaviours in the context of cultural norms	1	1.05
G3D	Gestalt evaluation	1	1.05
	Total (3)	6	6.31
	Total (1+2+3)	95	100

In all group 1 dissatisfactory incidents, the employee failed to handle the situations in a way that could have satisfied the passenger.

Group 2 failures involved employee response to customer needs and requests and accounted for 10.53% of total failures. Incidents classified under category of response to special needs customers made up of 4.21% of

total incidents. It is mishandling of carry-on/delicate items by the airlines' personnel after special request is made by the passengers. Response to customer preferences accounted for 3.16% of total failures. Respondents considered inconvenience caused due to less leg space in aircraft and allow to carry-on items at one sector by the airline personnel and deny the same item by the same airline personnel at another sector considered dissatisfactory encounters. Two incidents were reported that fall in the category response to admitted customer error (2.11%) i.e. airline staff shows unwillingness to assist the customer in solving the problem arises due to customer error. And only one failure incident was identified in the category response to potentially disruptive others (1.05%) i.e. co-passengers in the aircraft caused inconvenience to the other passengers. Thus, failures to accommodate the need for customized service are relatively infrequent in comparison with other sources of dissatisfaction.

Group 3 has the lowest proportion (6.31%) of dissatisfactory service encounters are related to passenger's negative reactions to unprompted and unsolicited employee behaviours. Three service failure incidents were identified that belong to the category attention paid to customers (3.16%) i.e. inefficiency shown by the staff of the airlines while solving the problems of the passengers. Only one incident was identified in each category truly out-of-ordinary employee behaviour, employee behaviour in the context of cultural norms and gestalt evaluation. In this group incidents, the assessed character or attitude of the airline personnel as inferred from particular behaviours both verbal and non verbal, caused dissatisfaction to passengers.

CONCLUSION

From this study, it is concluded that in-depth understanding of passengers' actual feelings about service encounters appears to require a broadening of airline personnel's perception. The airline personnel should consider the dissatisfied service encounters to regain passenger satisfaction. With the proper employee response, dissatisfactory encounters due to failure of the delivery system can be transformed into satisfactory encounters. Likewise, the proper response to passenger needs and requests can lead to customer satisfaction. In the context of Indian aviation industry, the incidents reveal that generally a passenger's need is for knowledge. Frequently information about flight delay, baggage delivery, rescheduling of flight can create satisfaction or mitigates

dissatisfaction. The airline personnel should inform the passengers about what happened, what can be done and why their needs or requests can or cannot be accommodated. They should keep transparency of airline policies and standards and inform the same to the dissatisfied passenger. Managers of the airline companies should give control to customer contact employees to act and enables them to fix problems and respond to requests in effective ways. If the customer is met with initiative and commitment, a negative situation can be turned into something positive. For instance, even if the duration of delay may not be known, airline personnel should quickly communicate the exact nature of the delay to passengers; if there is long delay the management of the airline should compensate the passengers with light refreshment. It is important that the employees show empathy and the ability to communicate with the customers and that they deal creatively with complaints in critical situations. Training programmes should be imparted to customer contact employees to gain understanding of what shapes customers' expectations and perceptions of quality. In order to maintain a high level of service, it is necessary to develop more customer-oriented complaint management.

It is also inferred from the study that critical incident technique is a useful method for assessing customer dis / satisfaction in service encounters. The results of CIT studies provide much greater detail and depth understanding than do typical customer satisfaction surveys (Bitner et al, 1990). The service encounters collected with the help of this technique provides interesting and meaningful information about customers which help managers to derive range of action alternatives that customer contact employees can exercise. In the context of Indian aviation industry, there is fierce competition among airlines and customer satisfaction is the only mantra to survive in this competitive market. So, it is essential and significant for the managers of airline companies to take care of service failures encountered by passengers and manage it by customer relationship.

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