

**Managing the Air Travel Experience:
An investigation for the Quality of Informative Service Setting Items
from Travelers' Perspectives**

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ABSTRACT

Airport are key economic factors in the cities and regions which they serve. In fact, significant growth in the hospitality industry in recent decades has been fueled by increases in disposable income, leisure time, and political stability. Consequently, the air travel and airlines industry have grown both larger and more competitive. As more organizations become global, engineering and marketing pleasurable experiences requires an important integration of customer experience. Thus, this study will examine discusses the airports attributes of *Informative Services Setting Items* (ISSI) that can impact customers' air-travel experience, determine the importance and performance of the existing self-serve ISSI as perceived by air-travelers. Our goal is to derive an integrated and unbiased customer-and-operator-based airport quality performance.

Keywords: Airport, Informative Service Setting Items, IPA Model, Service Performance

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INTRODUCTION

Airports are key economic factors in the cities and regions which they serve. More than 3.2 million passengers pass through US airports each day; and it is estimated that US airports create US\$380 billion a year in economic activity (Rhoades, Waguespack, & Young, 2000). In recent decades, significant growth in the hospitality industry has been fueled by increases in disposable income, leisure time, and political stability. Many third world countries turn to hospitality and tourism as an economic development strategy shortly after achieving political stability. Consequently, the air travel and airlines industry have grown both larger and more competitive. Multinational companies that pursue strategies of product adaptation frequently run the risk of falling victim to global competitors that have recognized opportunities to serve global customers (Keegan & Green, 2000). Engineering and marketing pleasurable experiences requires an important integration of customer experience. And from an experiential perspective, engaging customers' senses and delivering quality physical services are critical success factors (Mitchell, 1998).

Service quality is a very important factor for achieving competitive advantages and efficiency. High service quality is a strategy that has been related to success especially during times of intense competition both domestically and internationally (Wong, Dean, & White, 1999). For example, hotel businesses must seek profitable ways to differentiate their services/products from other lodging companies. Service attributes,

such as imprecise standards and fluctuating demand, have been identified. Those attributes further complicate the task of defining, delivering, and measuring service quality in the hospitality industry (Wong, Dean, & White, 1999). Oliver (1981) defined customer satisfaction as a customer's emotional response to the use of a product or service. Measuring customer satisfaction is an integral part of the effort to improve a product's quality, expecting to result in repeat purchases and favorable word-of-mouth publicity, and, ultimately, a company's competitive advantage. Service satisfaction is a function of the service setting and the consumers' experiences and reactions to a provider's behavior during the service encounter period. Several work environmental situations within each hotel service sector can create gaps in services as well as result in hotel employee stress (Hardin, 2002). In the hospitality environment, *service setting* is generally known as *servicescape*. A *servicescape* consists of man-made physical items that assist in providing and enhancing hotel services to customers.

Informative Service Setting Items (ISSI) are products, services, signs and items that are used in airports to provide information or assistance to air-travelers without requiring them to have direct human contact with airport/airline employees. Examples of ISSI include direction and operating hours of dining facilities, money-exchange, children's playing area, and the location of maps and floor plans. Airport operators and airline companies often use informative service settings to communicate their services and to serve air-travelers on a regular basis. From a human resource perspectives, airports/airlines that want to provide more efficient and higher quality services, may need to re-engineer and adjust their service setting at all levels.

Informative Service Setting/Design

Informative service setting/design, also known as “servicescape”, can be referred to as the “built environment” or the “man-made, physical surrounding as opposed to the natural or social environment” (Bitner, 1992). Researchers hold various perspectives on the purposes of the service setting/design. Combining their perspective, the purposes of the informative service setting/design result in the following: (1) provide an excellent opportunity to meet or exceed customer expectations in the overall service experience; (2) create and enhance the moods of both customers and employees; (3) be part of the service itself and help create a memorable experience; and (4) contribute to the creation of a better hospitality environment (Bitner, 1992; Wakefield, & Blodgett, 1994; Nie, & Young, 1997; Nicholls, Gilbert, & Roslow, 1998; Fottler, Reberts, & Spears, 2000). Within the airports worldwide, a variety of different services have been provided to cater air-travelers. Hutton and Richardson (1995) concluded that the exterior environment delivers a message about the organization, its services, and quality long before the actual encounter takes place. Disneyland and Disney World and other benchmark guest service organizations use their physical structures/items and ISSI to make sure that they define and structure proper mood for their guests (Ford & Heaton, 2000).

The informative service setting is important to airport service providers for two major reasons. First, it gives an excellent opportunity to meet or exceed air-travelers in the overall service experience. Second, it can create and enhance the moods of both air-travelers and airports/airlines employees. There is little dispute among academics and practitioners that the service-setting influences the nature of social interaction between and among travelers and employees (Harris, Baron, & Ratcliffe, 1995). By re-engineering the environment and the delivery of services in an effort to assist and educate air-travelers

on how to self-serve themselves on day to day items, airport/airlines employees can deliver higher levels of service rather than answering FAQ's, besides, air-travelers also have information whenever they need to access it. Thus, airport operation can decrease employee frustration, improve the efficiency and quality of services norms, and contribute positively to airport image and security.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Service Attributes versus Guest's Expectations

The hospitality industry is part of a multi-service industry. The U.S. turned into a service-driven economy in 1940s, and more than 70% of its workforce is now engaged in service-producing jobs (Bare & Turkel, 2003). More than 205 million people work worldwide in the hospitality industry comprising 11% of total employment and representing 10.2 % of the Global National Product. This is the highest percentage of all service industries. The tourism industry also brought in considerable tax revenue (US\$6550 billion per year) as worldwide total revenue. (Naisbitt, 1994). It is estimate that US airports create US\$380 billion a year in economic activity, and this includes 1.6 jobs on airport property (Rhoades, Waguespack, & Young, 2000). Furthermore, the tourism industry in the United States produced over \$582 billion in revenues for the economy, supporting over 18 million jobs (direct and indirect) and \$92 billion in federal, state and local tax revenues (ITA, 2001).

The increased number of international hotel guests makes it likely that airport/airlines employees could encounter travelers from diverse nationalities. Moreover, service performance can play an important role in air travel service and experiences.

From a managerial perspective, travelers can be viewed as an unpaid human resource in the service delivery system. Globalization of the human resources that include people from different cultures, economies, and legal systems presents some challenges. The most common obstacles to global services are cross-cultural adaptation, different organizational or workforce values, differences in management style, and training programs (Marquardt & Engel, 1993). Although airport operators and airline companies may provide alternatives that satisfy international travelers with language and personal services, they may face challenges in providing an environment familiar to the international travelers. Thus, knowing what drives customers' value perceptions should allow hoteliers to allocate resources more efficiently (Mattila, 1999). Specially, if travelers could identify the most important and highest performing ISSI in assessing service quality or perceived value for airports/airlines services, airport and airline companies could then optimize financial benefits by investing in those ISSI that enhance and increase the customers' air-travel experience. Overall, service quality is conceptualized as composed of three sub-dimensions: employees' service performance, the quality of physical goods quality, and servicescape quality (McDougall & Levesque, 1994; Brandy & Cronin Jr., 2001).

In past research studies, much effort was devoted to hospitality services and attributes that tended to be comparative in nature (see Table 1). However, to date, these efforts have focused primarily on establishing the links between service quality, service value, satisfaction, and marketing segments. To compete in today's marketplace, hospitality organizations should be prepared to consider the opportunity of global service design. However, few research studies have considered the customers' perceptions about

airports service attributes.

Table 1. Studies of Hospitality Services

Authors	Research Focus	Sub-theme
Saleh & Ryan (1991)	Using SERVUQL model to analyze service quality in the hospitality industry	Identified the existence of gaps between provider and customer perception An empirical study that presents critical incidents in an airline that from customers' view-points
Edvardsson (1992)	Examining the critical service issues that are important aspect to management	
McCleary & Weaver (1992)	Compare hotel attributes for frequent and infrequent travelers	The important attributes to business travelers
Clow & Beisel (1995)	An approach to increase levels of customer satisfaction	The important attributes to leisure travelers
Gilbert & Morris (1995)	Using critical incident analysis to uncover business travelers behavior	The important factors of hotels and airlines to business travelers
Rhoades, Waguespack, & Young (2000)	Developing airport quality index	Identifying airports service of quality concern by using Factor Analysis
Heung, Wong, & Qu (2000)	Using SERVQUAL model to analyze service quality in airport-restaurant	Discuss different types of restaurants at Hong Kong International Airport
Bitner, Ostrom & Meurer (2002)	Identifying factors that impact customer satisfaction and dissatisfaction	The difficulty to implement self-service technologies
Curran & Meurer (2005)	Providing evidence that a variety of different factors influence customers' attitude toward self-service technologies	Comparing some self-service technologies
Oyewole, Sankaran, & Choudhury (2007)	Examining the factors that influence customers' satisfaction	Discuss the issues of customers satisfaction in the airline industry with special reference of Malaysia

Customer Satisfaction

Service satisfaction is a function of consumers' experiences and reactions to a provider's behavior during the service encounter period. It is also a function of the informative service setting. In the study of overall satisfaction with ISSI, the rating for private sector organizations was significantly higher than for organizations in the public sector (Nicholls, Gilbert & Roslow, 1998). Moreover, service-marketing research has largely focused on measuring service quality and satisfaction associated with the primary service itself, with little attention given to the effects of the physical surroundings of the service setting. Service quality can be measured by the match of how well the service

delivery and customers' expectation. The key to service quality is consistently meeting or exceeding customer expectation. Service quality evaluation includes both the outcome and the process of service delivery. Kollat, Engel and Blackwell (1970) suggested that satisfaction is the final outcome in the consumer decision process of problem recognition, search, alternative evaluation, choice, outcomes and satisfaction. An important principle learned by the guest service industry is the importance of providing the setting that customers expect. Another important principle is to create an environment that meets or exceeds customer needs for safety, security, support, competence, physical comfort and psychological comfort (Fottler, Ford, Roberts, Ford, & Spears Jr., 2000).

It is generally agreed that customers' expectations are used as the standard, to which actual service experiences are compared to evaluate satisfaction or quality. Customers' expectations are the beliefs that consumers use to make predictions about what is likely to happen during a service encounter. The performance of a customer contact employees is reported as forming a dominant quality cue (Bitner, 1990; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985). However, when an organization has multiple employee groups interacting with consumers, the question which groups act as the dominant performance cue received very little attention (Gould-Williams, 1999). On the one hand, service organizations should realize that effective quality management requires total quality management (TQM) within all aspects of the service environment (O'Neill & Palmer, 2001). Needless to say, satisfying customers is especially important because it encourages repeat business and fosters word-of-mouth advertising (Spinell & Canavos, 2000). Improving customer relationships and increasing satisfaction is not just simply about managing interactions with customers but serving them using a fundamentally

improved approach. Thus, with appropriate ISSI in place, perceived service quality can be improved.

METHODOLOGY

Researchers have focused on the issues that surround the conceptualization and measurement of service quality (Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1985, 1988). Hence much progress has been made in understanding various aspects of service quality. However, better insight into the relationships between service quality and a range of customer behavioral intentions is still needed (Gould-Williams, 1999). Very little has been done to actually determine the needs of air-travelers regarding airport/airline environmental amenities. In addition, little information is known regarding the attributes of *Informative Service Setting Items* (ISSI) in lodging industry.

Research Design

The purpose of this study is to uncover how the airport ISSI (informative service setting items) are being perceived by air-travelers, and how these perceptions affect customers' air-travel experiences. Thus, the research design for this study will be a cross-sectional descriptive research that investigated customers' perceptions of ISSI. To learn more about ISSI and the application of current ISSI. A self-administered questionnaire to gather the specific viewpoints and information regarding ISSI will be designed and posted online. A webpage linkage will allow the target population to access the online survey. The structured measurement technique that relied on the Likert-type scale and itemized-rating scale that related the effective and/or important components of ISSI is adopted. The scales measurement techniques are utilized to capture the unique assessment of ISSI components and customers' perceptions regarding current airports

ISSI's. The end goal is to understand the relationship of ISSI attributes on customers' perceived quality of air-travel experience.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of this study builds upon the works from several fields and disciplines. As service quality is becoming a major part of business practice, it is important to be able to measure and research its effectiveness. Based on literature review and general industrial information, ISSI elements can be categorized into two groups – ISSI under the airport control and ISSI under the airlines control. And the ISSI under the airport control are the attributes that directly provide by airport organization (e.g. terminal maps, floor plan, and operation hours of shuttle services, etc.). The purpose of this paper is to examine service quality from ISSI prospects and determine which items/dimensions best predict overall service quality in the airport environment by applying a modified version of Importance-Performance Analysis (IPA).

FINDINGS & CONCLUSION

An survey was designed and posted online more than 3 month. Overall, approximately 3500 subjects (randomly selected online-group population) were invited via electronic message and around 280 surveys were returned. Only 159 out of 280 responses were usable.

Profile of Respondents

The demographic profile of the respondents is shown in Table 1. There were 81 (50.9 %) male respondents and 78 (49.1%) female respondents. In terms of age,

surprisingly, three groups were almost mostly distributed (20.1% from the 21~29 age group, 34% from the 30~39 age group, and 20.8% from the 40~49 age group).

Table. 1 Demographic Profile of the Respondents

	Frequency	Valid Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	81	50.9
Female	78	49.1
Age Group		
Under 21	3	1.9
21 ~ 29	32	20.1
30 ~ 39	54	34.0
40 ~ 49	33	20.8
50 ~ 59	27	17.0
Above 60	10	6.3
Educational Level		
Associate degree (2 years)	16	10.1
Bachelor degree (4 years)	43	27.0
Master degree	59	37.1
Doctorate degree	41	25.8
Place of Residency		
North America	70	44.0
Europe	16	10.1
Asia	67	42.1
Australia/New Zealand	6	3.8

Most people travel abroad were regional from North America (44%) and Asia (42.1%), and 10.1% of the respondents were from European countries. As for the occupational background, the results indicated two major foreign traveler group: 17 (10.7%) of respondents were Executive/Manager, and 45 (28.3%) of respondents were Teacher/Professor. The traveling behavior of the respondents is shown in Table 2. The most frequently identified purpose of traveling abroad was “Pleasure” (36.5%) and “Business” (33.3%). The majority of the respondents traveled abroad between 2 to 6 months ago (39%). As for respondent’s flying status, only 6.9% were using airline

upgraded services; on the other hand, more than 70% of respondents travel abroad without using Frequent Flyer Mileage or Upgraded services.

Table. 2 Traveling Behavior of the Respondents

	Frequency	Valid Percentage (%)
Purpose of Trip		
Pleasure	58	36.5
Business	53	33.3
Visiting Friends/Relatives	28	17.6
Meeting/ Conference	9	5.7
Most Recent Trip Abroad		
Less than 1 month	42	26.4
2 ~ 6 months ago	62	39.0
7 ~ 12 months ago	16	10.1
1 ~ 2 years ago	26	16.4
More than 2 years ago	12	7.5
Cabin Status		
First Class	2	1.3
Business	16	10.1
Coach/ Economy	138	86.8
Flying Status		
Frequent Flyer Mileage	29	18.2
Upgraded	11	6.9
Neither	116	73.0

Survey participants were asked to rate the satisfaction for ISSI items (see Table 3); and analysis of the rating (1-strongly disagree, 2-disagree, 3-neutral, 4-somewhat agree, 5-agree, 6- extremely easy) on the questionnaire items that focused on locating ISSI in the airports. In terms of considering ISSI can increase airport service performance, surprisingly, respondents' overall mean score was 1.08. However, respondents seriously consider that airport provide ISSI can increase service quality – where as the mean score was 4.65.

Table 3. Airport ISSI Satisfactory Profile of the Respondents

	N	Mean	Std. Deviation
ISSI can Increase Airport Service Performance	159	1.076	0.265
ISSI can increase Airport Service Quality	159	4.654	1.085
Airport ISSI can impact on First Impression of a Foreign Destination	159	4.509	1.423
Airport ISSI can increase Travel Satisfaction	159	4.654	1.158

When asking respondents' perception toward ISSI satisfaction, a 6-point scale was employed. Generally speaking, airport provided ISSI can fairly increase customers' first impression of a foreign destination (Mean=4.51) and overall travel satisfaction level (Mean=4.65). In other words, most respondents agreed that airport could improve service quality for customers by providing ISSI attributes. Over 70% of the respondents indicated that hotels that provided ISSI would increase the probability of guest returning.

For years, informative service setting/design has been well recognized as an operational tool to achieve marketing goals and service improvement in several service sectors such as banking industry and healthcare systems. Customers perceive control over when they receive a service (such as ATM), and it results in higher customer satisfaction. However, there has not yet been a study in the airport operators and airline companies that focused on determining air-travelers' specific ISSI needs and how these needs relate to customer air-travel experience, or their airports' environmental amenities satisfaction. As travelers are investing their time and energy in air-travel, they tend to expect immediate solution to all their problems. Thus, the issues associated with poor service informative service setting/design could cause major setbacks for the airport operators and airline companies that are trying to satisfied air-travelers. Many service

issues can be automated, but research is needed to identify the major service issues that the air-travelers prefer have automated. Thus, this study examined the airport/airlines attributes of *Informative Services Setting Items* (ISSI) that can impact customers' air-travel experience. Second, this study discovered the importance and performance of the existing self-serve ISSI as perceived by air-travelers.

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