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Inflight Service Quality Can Affect Customers' Perspective Thus Satisfaction

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Abstract: This study focused on quality and attributes which play important role in airline's performance and success during its transformation. Objective was for the improvement and strategy of its inflight service quality and customer satisfaction. This study's theoretical framework adopted quality improvement concept and five dimensions of SERVQUAL scale by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry in 1985. Variables involved were personal attributes, inflight service and flight safety as constructs of inflight service quality as independent variable and customer satisfaction as dependent variable. The study employed cross-sectional research design using 5-point Likert scale which was used for 27 items of questions. Total 117 respondents were selected at airport for the stratified sampling interpreted using SPSS, mean analysis, Pearson correlation, ANOVA and multiple regressions to test inflight service quality and customer satisfaction. Result deduced that inflight service quality factors variables explain 75.1% of the customer satisfaction and findings revealed were significant. Approach was concentrated on gathering wide data range and impressions and established the relationship between variables, questionnaire and formal interview with respective airline's senior officers. From the findings, managers would have the opportunity to learn from results of this investigation and improve on inflight service quality to achieve more because these results provided knowledge directly obtained from the respondents' voice. The results were mostly valued as high potential elements to differentiate the airline from competitors and as factors to increase customer satisfaction.

Key words: Airline, flight attendant, inflight service quality, attribute, knowledge

INTRODUCTION

Inflight Service (IFS) can be paraphrased in terms of its generic key characteristics that have been attributed to the airline service industry because air transportation industry is part of a steadily growing service sector. According to Clemes *et al*. (2008) air travel has always been classified as one of the most intangible service in service industry. Air transportation is found to play an important role in moving people and cargo fast from one place to another either domestically or internationally (Oyewole *et al*., 2007). The airline industry is at the heart of the travel and tourism industry and is the main contributor to many countries' overall economy through international tourist arrivals (Chan, 2000; Pincus, 2001; Zahari *et al*., 2011). Customer satisfaction has become an important marketing metric for many years and the most common business-to-business market research and is often connected to quality and production measurement, rather than as straight marketing based research (Zins, 2001; Johan *et al*., 2014). Service is ideas and concepts; however products are things. Service theoretical frame work of this study (Fig. 1) is an illustration of SERVQUAL (Service Quality) research that has been progressed since 1990 when the book entitled 'Delivering Quality Service' is first published by Zeithaml, Parasuraman and Berry. All dimensions are important to customers and some may be more important than others; at the same time airline cannot focus on only one dimension and let the others suffer (Zeithaml *et al*., 1990). SERVQUAL research shows that all dimensions are important to each other. Later, they simplify the ten SERVQUAL dimensions to five: tangible, reliability, responsive, assurance and empathy.

Personal attributes may give a three-dimensional view of IFSQual: interactive quality as being eloquent and spontaneous, IFS activities as being conversant in every aspect of on board service, corporate image as being in a good personality and maintain airline's grooming standard (Parasuraman *et al*., 1985). Parasuraman *et al*.

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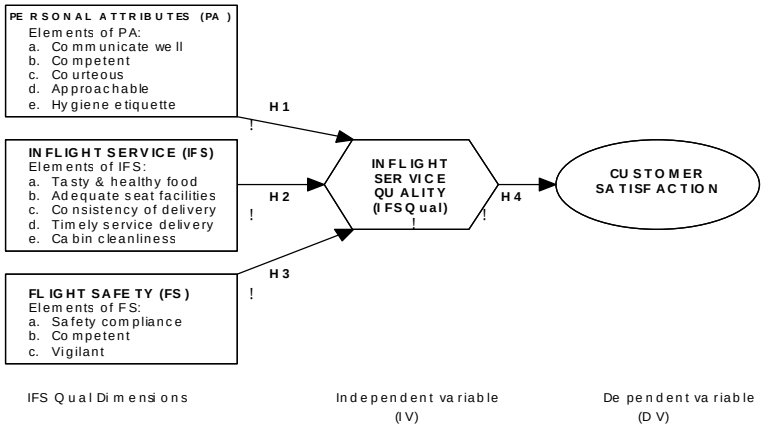

Fig. 1: Conceptual framework

(1985) further explain that at a higher level and essentially from customers' perspective, they see quality as being two-dimensional, consisting of output and process quality as occurring prior to and resulting in outcome of the quality. Operational/functional personal attributes is concerned with how the end result of the process is transferred to the customers by the flight attendants. This concerns both psychological and behavioural aspects that include the accessibility to airline as the provider, how airline's flight attendants perform during the service, what they say and how the service is done. Zeithaml *et al.* (2006) early prove that customers perceive quality is the result of the evaluation from their expectation and what they experience. Personal attributes and inflight service belong to the airline because 'flight attendant' is airline's product and those can influence the airline's image and its customers' votes.

IFS involves customers from their boarding until to their arrival at destination airport which include looking after customers throughout their journey, food and beverage, gentle reminders about safety, travel advice and basic medical assistance on board if there is such emergency situation required (Yang *et al.*, 2010).

Safety aspects will always be on everyone's mind and this is a requirement that airline has to be in compliance with safety regulation and will not be the reason why customers buy from this one airline operator but not from the other. Customer's disruptive behaviours on ground can be a preliminary disruption when they get on board, thus for airport services to effectively screen for unruly customers who present a potential risk will reduce the work stress and the risk of safety to those on board (ITF, 2000; Yang *et al.*, 2010). Developing appropriate safety training, work plans and managerial strategies to provide frontline staff with the necessary emotional restraint and mechanisms for handling crises especially when those uncontrollable behaviours occurred on board can also be really effective (Reynolds and Harris, 2009; Yang *et al.*, 2010). Emphasising the safety related duties to ensure customers comply aligned with the airline's safety policy because safety standards is a must for safe journey and the comfort of the people on board. Knowledge is one of the most important resources needed to obtain a competitive advantage (Drucker and Maciariello, 2008). Apostles appreciate the international safety standard. Some of those international safety standards are:

- Bags to be stowed in the overhead compartment
- Aisles and emergency exits must be clear of obstructions
- All passengers must remain seated with the seatbelt fasten during aircraft taxiing, take-off, landing and when the fasten seatbelt sign is on
- Safety briefing video must be shown before take-off
- Ensure cabin and galleys are secured for take-off and landing
- Hot beverages are not served during bad weather or when the seatbelt sign is on during flight. During take-off and landing, passengers must put their seatback in the upright (un-reclined) position and stow their chair-table

In most service encounters, customers do not expect a service failure, so the initial reference point is likely to be 'no failure,' because customers will encode service failures as losses and weigh failures disproportionately in their evaluations of service encounters if flight attendants fail to perform and unable to deliver accordingly (Berry and Parasuraman, 1991).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Description of concepts:

- Personal attributes
- Communicate well: communication has two main goals: to share content and organise relations between the interlocutors
- Competent: to consistently distinguish outstanding from typical performance in a given job or role
- Courteous: it means that when customers look at the flight attendants, they like them, feel able to talk to them and will be receptive to a conversation
- Approachable: means flight attendants are well presented and able to interact more with people and that their journey is filled with little moments
- Hygiene etiquette: proper hygiene requires a range of behaviours that promote cleanliness, health, disease prevention and the social etiquette of personal hygiene

Inflight service:

- Tasty and healthy food: ensuring the quality of the inflight meals and food and creating a more intelligent concept of catering
- Adequate seat facilities: seats must be equipped with features
- Consistency of delivery: to deliver consistent IFSQual for customer satisfaction and to keep good image in the minds of the customers
- Timely service delivery: able to complete the full meal service at approximate time
- Cabin cleanliness: to keep the cabin and the lavatories clean, neat and tidy throughout the flight for customers' comfort

Flight safety:

- Safety compliance: committed to deliver the safety standard of the airlines
- Competent: consistently distinguish outstanding safety responsibilities
- Vigilant: protect the safety of people on board during flight

To describe customer satisfaction components and to identify the interrelationships clearly, this study involved the major parts of theoretical framework development, development of measure and survey. First, this study proposed a research model on the basis of models and theories and then compared and analysed with the previous literature review studies. Second, research questionnaire was prepared. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of the literature as well as comments gathered from the several case studies. Multi-item method was used. Third, survey was performed to provide the empirical validation of proposed research model. Survey was conducted at the arrival hall of the Kuala Lumpur International Airport (KLIA) main terminal building. This study adopted a total design method for manual survey. Stratified random sampling was used because we were unable to meet a large number of people due to time constraint and customers had to rush to their connecting flight, or got onto the taxi. The aim of having the customers to participate in the exercise was to get their perspective of an airline's inflight service quality (IFSQual) and at what level were their satisfaction. In this study, we chose stratified random sampling fraction of half (Explorable.com, 2009). Fourth, the result of this study had provided meaningful implications to establish effective customer satisfaction, personal attributes programmes could be proposed and enhanced and similarly on the IFSQual. With those outcomes, this study was able to extend to find relationship between IFSQual and other variable items interpreted using SPSS, mean analysis, Pearson correlation, ANOVA and multiple regressions to test inflight service quality and customer satisfaction.

We had projected to collect a total of 230 samples from customers from London (LHR) and Frankfurt (FRA) flights arrived at Kuala Lumpur (KUL) within seven days in March 2015. Out of 230 (overall response rate demographic of this survey based on 100%), this study was able to collect 123 (53.48%) samples. Six (2.61%) samples were excluded due to a large percentage of missing values because the respondents had to leave immediately during the survey. N = 117 (50.43%) of total samples, which were analysed in this study. Target population was based on seat configuration of each aircraft type because the actual total passengers on board was undisclosed:

- Total target population 230 (100%)
- Total responses 123 (53.48%)
- Non-useful responses 6 (2.61%)
- Total useful samples 117 (50.43%)

Primary data was collected from the survey, interviews with airline's leaders and interaction with passengers. The secondary data consists of existent information that was collected from external sources such as airline's training manual, corporate publication, magazines, internet, journals. Using secondary data method had benefited in saving time and money. The

advantage of collecting secondary data had given some general ideas to this study on how to conduct this research and the understanding on using different methods (Trochim *et al*., 2015). It should further be noted, that the response-rate in the survey at hand was expected to be significantly high. The amounts of effective answers collected were 117 accomplished entries in seven days period with approximately, 5 h execution a day and we also received indirect information on many other matters that were not in the questionnaire which were used as the primary data and respondents were very receptive.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The reliability of the scale preformed in this study was examined through Cronbach's coefficient test. Table 1 illustrated the results of each questionnaire questions which distributed according to the study variables. The result in Table 1 showed all the variables and the results of Cronbach's alpha test values for measuring the invariability degree for the questionnaire questions. In general, not all areas in the table had achieved high reliability degree.

The validity and reliability analyses were conducted based on the procedures established by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994) and Hair *et al*. (1998). The original survey questionnaire had 27 items which were related to 2 variables: IFSQual had three dimensions that consisted of personal attributes (5 items), inflight service (5 items) and flight safety (5 items) and customer satisfaction (12 items). Table 2 showed the average mean analysis values for each variable were between 3.91 and 4.414, indicating the level of personal attributes, inflight service and flight safety. The Pearson correlation coefficients between the independent variable (IFSQual) and dependent variable (customer satisfaction) were greater than significance at 0.01 thus, indicating the data was not affected by serious collinearity problem. These correlations also provided further evidence of validity and reliability for measurement scales used in this research (Hair *et al*., 1998).

Table 3 showed the dimensionality of customer satisfaction was explored and 12 dimensions were identified; mean analyses for customer satisfaction's lowest respondents' results were highlighted in bold. Though all the results were generally low, this study was measuring the result amongst the construct of the survey (Table 4-6).

Table 7 and 8 presented the results of the ANOVA to test the slope of the final model. The result of the ANOVA analysis showed that the F-statistic ($F_{0.05}$, 3, 116, $p<0.05$) was significant value 2.68 which means that there was a

Table 1: Cronbach's value of variables alpha test

Value	Items	Cronbach's alpha	Percentage
Personal attributes	5	0.654	65.4
Inflight service	5	0.623	62.3
Flight safety	5	0.691	69.1
Inflight service quality	15	0.838	83.8
Customer satisfaction	12	0.734	73.4
Total			70.8

significant linear relationship between IFSQual and customer satisfaction. The IFSQual and other independent variables are significant:

- H_0: j = 0; H_1:β j = 0
- Reject H_0 at the 0.05 level of significance if
- t (i.e., t-ratio)<t 0.025, n = 1 (117-1) = +1.98+2.160 or
- t>t 0.025, n-1 (117-1) = -1.98

Since, the calculated t-value was greater than the t-value from the table for IFSQual and independent variables, one rejected the hypothesis at the 0.05 significance levels that there was no relationship between these variables and IFSQual. Hence, both variables were statistically significant in explaining IFSQual. The regression equation, with IFSQual and independent variables explained 86.6% of the variation in IFSQual:

- H_0: all j = 0; H_1: at least one j

Reject H_0 at the 0.05 level of significant if F (i.e., F-ratio)<-F0.025, 4.9 = 6.00 or F>F0.025, 4. 9 = +6.00. Since, the calculated F-value is greater than the F-value from the table for IFSQual and independent variables, one rejected the hypothesis at the 0.05 significant levels. In other words, we concluded that the regression model explained a significant proportion of the variation in all independent variables in the sample with (1-0.000174) = 99.999% confidence. The model was statistically significant. There is additional statistics information that useful in the evaluation of this model such as Analysis of Variance (ANOVA), Durbin-Watson (d) statistic (Table 9).

Airlines nowadays face increased competition, challenges and greater customer expectations. To improve customer satisfaction, this study is suggesting airlines to provide good training for their flight attendants in providing the IFSQual. Customers with dysfunctional behaviour, poor mental condition and customers in advance state of inebriation on board are the most difficult ones (Yang *et al*., 2010; Cheng-Hua and Hsin-Li, 2012). According to Reynolds and Harris (2009), consequences of dysfunctional customer behaviour can lead to:

Table 2: Mean analysis of IFSQual (15 items)

IFSQual	Average mean	Mean	SD	Verbal recognition	Rank
Personal Attributes	4.244				
Flight attendants communicate well		4.15	0.690	Agree	4
Competent flight attendants		4.31	0.499	Strongly agree	5
Flight attendants maintain hygiene etiquette		4.31	0.688	Strongly agree	5
Courteous flight attendants		4.37	0.484	Strongly agree	5
Approachable flight attendants		4.08	0.767	Agree	4
Inflight service	3.910				
Flight attendants maintain cabin cleanliness		4.00	0.719	Agree	4
Adequate seat facilities		3.75	0.694	Agree	4
Consistent inflight service		4.13	0.580	Agree	4
Serve tasty and healthy food		3.42	0.746	Agree	4
Meal service completed approximately, 2 h		4.25	0.571	Strongly agree	5
Flight safety	4.414				
Flight attendants comply with safety standard		4.38	0.521	Strongly agree	5
Safe air transport experience		4.62	0.486	Strongly agree	5
Reliable air transport service		4.39	0.508	Strongly agree	5
Airline's flight safety record high standard		4.39	0.601	Strongly agree	5
Airline's flight safety record excellent		4.29	0.456	Strongly agree	5

N = 117

Table 3:Mean analysis of customer satisfaction (12 items)

Customer satisfaction dimensions	Mean	SD	Verbal recognition	Rank
Satisfaction make big influence to choice	4.10	0.792	Agree	4
On time performance	4.23	0.736	Strongly agree	5
Good cabin ambience	4.10	0.635	Agree	4
Satisfactory inflight entertainment	3.50	0.805	Agree	4
Efficient flight attendants	4.12	0.604	Agree	4
Broadcast message clearly and effectively	4.06	0.698	Agree	4
Flight attendants well-trained	4.15	0.620	Agree	4
Airline's IFS good value for money	3.90	0.593	Agree	4
Pleasant air transportation experience	4.28	0.555	Strongly agree	5
Male uniform fashionable and appealing	3.99	0.825	Agree	4
Female uniform fashionable and appealing	4.02	1.034	Agree	4
Satisfy with airline's current IFS provision	4.05	0.585	Agree	4

N = 117; IFS = Inflight Service

Table 4: Pearson correlation (mean) matrix for all variables

Dimensions	Personal attributes (H_1)	Inflight service (H_2)	Flight safety (H_3)	IFSQual (H_4)
Customer satisfaction	0.736**	0.822**	0.533**	0.851**
Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000

Dependant: customer satisfaction; **correlation is significant at the ($p<0.01$) level (2-tailed)

Table 5: Multiple regression analysis examining the relationships (IFSQual and dimensions)

Dimensions	B	SE	Beta	t-test	p-values
Constant	0.341	0.231		1.478	0.142
Personal attributes	0.153	0.066	0.174	2.305	0.023
Inflight service	0.534	0.059	0.619	9.116	0.000
Flight safety	0.258	0.068	0.213	3.803	0.000

Independent: IFSQual; significant at $p<0.05$ level

Table 6: Multiple regression analysis examining the relationships (IFSQual and customer satisfaction)

Model 1	B	SE	Beta	t-test	p-values
Constant	0.529	0.203		2.604	0.010
IFSQual	0.374	0.022	0.851	17.34	0.000

Independent: IFSQual; significant at $p<0.05$ level

- Employees long term psychological effects, short-term emotional effects, behavioural and physical effects
- Other customers domino effects, spoilt-consumption effects
- Airline financial losses

Table 7: ANOVA: personal attributes, inflight service, flight safety and IFSQual

Model	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F-value	p-value
Regression	11.463	3	3.821	113.359	0.000[b]
Residual	3.809	113	0.034		
Total	15.273	116 (117-1)			

Predictors: (Constant) personal attributes, inflight service, flight safety; independent variable: IFSQual; significant at $p<0.05$ level

Table 8: ANOVA: customer satisfaction and IFSQual

Model	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F-value	p-value
Regression	11.048	1	11.05	300.782	0.000[b]
Residual	4.224	115	0.037		
Total	15.273	116 (117-1)			

Predictors: (constant), IFSQual; dependent variable: customer satisfaction Significant at $p<0.05$ level

Although, customer satisfaction tends to be measured as a static quantity, it is dynamic and evolves over time being influenced by a variety of factors. IFSQual was one of those factors that contributed to customer satisfaction which was an element of customer

Table 9: Hypotheses results

Hypotheses	Alternative hypotheses	Results
H_1:1	There is high significance evidence that Personal Attributes from customers' perspectives can support IFSQual to influence customer satisfaction	Accepted
H_1:2	There is high significance evidence that Inflight Service from customers' perspectives can support IFSQual to influence customer satisfaction	Accepted
H_1:3	There is high significance evidence that Flight Safety from customers' perspectives can support IFSQual to influence customer satisfaction	Accepted
H_1:4	There is high significance evidence that IFSQual from customers' perspectives can influence customer satisfaction	Accepted

Dependent variable: customer satisfaction

satisfaction measurement; the distinction between the two was very important (Looy *et al*., 2003; Peters, 2008) which the level of customer satisfaction was the result of the customers' decision of the IFSQual expected in a given service encounter. According to Zeithaml *et al.* (2006) the difference in measuring customer satisfaction is when the actual experience of the customer is the basis of the assessments; mean while in service, measuring the customer experience is not required because satisfaction or dissatisfaction is to measure or evaluate product/service ability that can meet customer's need or expectations.

Outstanding flight attendants will embrace the excellent personal attributes. It is important to hire qualified flight attendants and develop them so that they can make individual decisions with less supervision depending on the existing situations and conditions on board; motivated and professional flight attendants with passions for their work will be highly in demand (Wirtz and Johnston, 2001). After the prominence of flight attendants characteristics, inflight service was also a centrepiece of the airline to remain competitive (Parasuraman, 1998) and to keep its image in the customers' minds. To begin standardisation for consistency, a process map with the steps to complete the process was needed. In all of these aspects the impact on the customers as ones desired it was the consistency and that was where the challenge of being customer focus for customer satisfaction began (Zairi, 2000) from various business units to support flight attendants to deliver those as seamlessly as possible on board which was perceived as spontaneous. Some of the most common expectations we received during survey and for airline to consider, customers wanted:

- High quality products at a competitive price
- Fast, efficient and accurate service
- Friendly, helpful and well-trained flight attendants to provide information, answer questions and decision maker to solve problems
- Airline to give prompt responses to their inquiries, whether by phone or email in regard to their flight delay and special meals before their flight
- Sufficient stock/food or meal portion to meet customers' needs without long waits because customers know flight attendants were trying their level best to accommodate by looking for it from other zone
- Understand/study what kind of meals that were highly in demand from customers' profile, it may not be 100% accurate but at least the meal portion met the larger target
- Last minute seat purchase on board to superior class if there were available
- Clean cabin, seat and lavatory

This study is not focusing the airline to be the top-notch airline but at least a top-notch IFSQual is attainable. The above customers' expectations were few to mention; additional expectations may arise from customer research which can be addressed on an individual basis. Our suggestion is to send the questions/surveys directly to customers through their email, if they are interested and those questions matters on their next journey, they will respond. Perhaps, an entry into a drawing for a trip for two is a tempting prize; otherwise simply find out why and what airline can do to make inflight service better when they are on board. IFSQual was largely determined by customers' perception which was why meeting customer expectations were essential part of the process. However, this process is not as easy as it sounds customer expectations are a dynamic feature that ebbs and flows regularly in accordance with a wide range of factors. When flight attendants did not meet customers' expectations, dissatisfaction was the result. Airline can have the greatest inflight services operations team but if customers perceive their needs are not met, airline's inflight services reputation suffers. For airline that does not spend much time worrying about inflight services but manage to meet customer expectations consistently are perceived as offering good inflight service. Airline by accurately identifying those customers' expectations, meeting or exceeding them consistently, the airline is likely to enjoy happier customers and a healthier bottom line for its organisation. Customers expect certain things when they

get on board; airline with the highest level of inflight service quality will know how to identify those expectations and meet customer satisfaction. Airline has to focus what are its strengths to remain competitive.

Most of this kind of information also can be gathered from the 'focus group' using the knowledge of the senior flight attendants of various positions who are actually involved in performing the same process and the gaps that they encounter on board, it will be good to discuss upon the best way of working, effectiveness, efficiency and everyone can deliver without stress; too stringent processes can be tedious and cause burnout to flight attendants to meet requirement. According to Zairi (2000) customer focus is a statement of intent. The benefits of having a simple standard process are that the managers can be more certain about achieving a consistent output from the process because they are simple and convenient for the flight attendants to achieve customer satisfaction. Consistency may not just about the delivery of the IFSQual by the flight attendants but it also applies to the caterer, cabin cleaning, engineering and other business units who involve with the overall IFSQual processes. Zairi (2000) confirms that many organisations go to great lengths to remind their employees on the importance of customers.

Flight time and distance are used to measure and determine flight attendants' activities and what types of food service those customers will receive on board; time is crucial. state that one may argue that the experience that s/he faced is not 'the best' or the 'worst' or it is not 'dramatic' enough; what most important is to deliver an effective customer experience in a timely manner. Airline can develop a new system creating opportunities for its flight attendants to deliver the right service with greater efficiency and also provide them a foundation to enhance their analytical capabilities (Abdullah *et al*., 2007). With this awareness, flight attendants will be able to understand why 'customer satisfaction' and 'customer experience' must be met in a timely service delivery because in aviation industry time is precious to every one. Yes, IFSQual is important but time is precious to every one because every minute is wasted is considered perish; therefore both mean performance in the context of the airline industry and it is expected that total quality management (TQM) conformance is also about on time performance which is related to profitability as it results in cost reduction, eliminates reworks and consequential damages (Parast and Fini, 2010).

Airline has to create customer relationships that deliver value. This involves adding up its tangible and intangible elements to the core products thus creating and enhancing the 'product surround' (Zineldin, 2006). Zineldin (2006) states that to deliver customer value can be defined as the total value offered to a customer less than the total cost to the customer; total customer value can include functional value of the product, service value, emotional value, social value, conditional value, epistemic value and image. On the other hand, Zineldin (2006) further explains that total customer cost can include monetary price, time, purchase efforts, energy and psychological cost value. Airline has to remember that customers have to sacrifice to travel a distance to obtain and experience on board products/service after the purchase, these will have an effect on customer satisfaction, (Munusamy *et al*., 2011).

CONCLUSION

To deliver IFSQual is not a 'smiling campaign' or 'I'm sorry' because customers do not want just those; they also want the quality of what flight attendants can deliver and how flight attendants deliver it and they must have a thorough knowledge of the products and service and their customers. Putting customer's needs first will make customers happy and that will make them want to return and quality is not about goodness, it is about meeting customer's needs and expectations (Cengiz, 2010). The airline may employ thousands of people but the customer just needs one person who is capable to take responsibility for helping them and representing the organisation that person is the flight attendant. Offer to follow-up personally, customers want consistency in their dealings and prefer not to explain their situation again to someone new. Tell customers what we are doing, give them confidence that any delays they suffer are because we are trying to help them; this is an empirical evidence. Flight attendants who execute an outstanding and consistent service are hard to copy and this is what is called attributes. A positive attitude is one's dedication to getting it right first time and commitment to helping colleagues to help their customers, attention to detail, willingness to take responsibility and the confidence to stay calm under pressure (McManus and Newby, 2003).

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