

ELEVATING THE PERCEPTION OF DESIGN CREATIVITY TO INCREASE CUSTOMER SATISFACTION:

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Abstract: This is one of the first studies to explore the perception of design creativity in the airline industry. As a starting point, the relationship between creativity, design and customer satisfaction in the airline industry is explored. This is further supported by a review of existing literature on the importance of design creativity within business. Existing examples of the strategic use of creativity and design by airlines are given, which demonstrate that investments in design creativity improves the overall customer experience and increases customer satisfaction. This in turn can raise an airline's global standing and revenue. A case study for Saudi Arabia Airlines (SAA) is presented with particular emphasis on how the airline's perception of design creativity relates to customer satisfaction, and how they are perceived relative to their competitors. Results from the research highlighted areas for improvement, and further support that increasing the perception of design creativity can gain customers satisfaction.

Keywords: *Design Creativity, Customer Satisfaction, Airline Industry*

1. Introduction

In the present economic climate it is widely acknowledged that exceeding customer satisfaction is the key for the success of any business. Leading companies proactively increase tangible and intangible values in their creative products and services through unique and appealing innovative designs for customers. Bruce and Bessant (2002) argue 'design is a vital ingredient in marketing's ability to deliver customers fulfilment and to continually delight and excite the consumer.' Design creativity also drives a sustainable innovative culture within an organisation and creates a meaningful customer experience. Best (2006) supports the views of Coopers and Press (1995, cited in Best 2006) 'Understanding the consumer is important for designers, in order that they can develop a conscious and subconscious understanding of consumers needs, and translate that understanding into design features.' The context of this study is not that the concept of design creativity in business is new, but rather that what design creativity means for customers, users and organisations has changed over recent years. Bruce and Bessant (2002) state 'companies renowned for their design (for example Sony, Lego, Braun, Apple) have transformed their product design process into capabilities that repeatedly provide superior value to customers.' The term 'design creativity' in this paper refers to all the creative design disciplines related to the customers' experiences during an airline journey. This study explores the effective and efficient use of design creativity for leading airlines in the Skytrax world airline star ranking system, evaluating products and services measured with a 3 star ranking. Saudi Arabia Airlines (Skytrax, 2012) has a 3 star ranking, which was chosen for this study as key

beneficiary as SAA has experienced decline in their global standing and pressure from the press regarding poor customer satisfaction. This problematic situation demonstrates a serious need to raise customer satisfaction. According to CAPA (2011) SAA are looking to address the issues the Director General Mr. Khalid AlMulhem highlights to become a ‘customer-oriented airline, improve its Skytrax rating to four from three stars, boost operational efficiency and organisational effectiveness and profit. This is hoped to return the airline to its position as a market leader in the Middle East region, a position it held prior the rapid ascent of three carriers to the near east.’

2. Background

2.1 Design creativity:

Creativity is crucial for designing products and services to enable innovation that can add value to customer needs. Best states (2006) ‘the role of design in business is to help create products and services that address the needs of consumers.’ Large corporations have shifted their corporate culture dramatically to become a more creative design-minded organisation. Lockwood (2009) states design is ‘about being open minded to change.’ Martins and Terblanche (2003) supports the concept of creativity can be defined as the generation of new and useful/valuable ideas for products, services, processes and procedures by individuals or groups in a specific organisational context. The research presented here addresses the benefits of changing the mindset of corporate culture by demonstrating creativity and design’s ability to increase the level of customer satisfaction within an organisation. This change of perception includes the focus on effective and efficient investments offered to customers, in which creativity and design is no longer being treated as a styling and aesthetic tool but rather as a important business tool.

2.2 Customer satisfaction:

Design creativity benefits can actively contribute to a company in a positive way through their customers. Research undertaken for the Design in Britain 2004-2005 (2004) by Design Council emphasised that the main source for improving or change in a business is customer satisfaction.

Table 1. Design in Britain 2004-2005 by Design Council (2004)

What are your main sources for ideas to improve or change your business?

| | In the past year our turnover has | | | | | | Manufacturing | Retail, wholesale and leisure |
|--|-----------------------------------|-------------|-------------|------------------|---------------|----|---------------|-------------------------------|
| | All companies | Got smaller | Not changed | Grown moderately | Grown rapidly | | | |
| Customers | 60 | 81 | 56 | 58 | 97 | 81 | 57 | |
| Internal discussions with staff/management | 32 | 14 | 28 | 40 | 55 | 28 | 36 | |
| Suppliers | 19 | 16 | 17 | 24 | 20 | 36 | 18 | |
| Other | 14 | 10 | 13 | 15 | 4 | 13 | 12 | |
| Competitors’ actions/plans | 11 | 3 | 7 | 16 | 35 | 9 | 11 | |

Gilbert and Wong support the views of Johnson, Nader and Fornell (1996, cited in Gilbert and Wong 2003) who argued that cumulative customer satisfaction can help predict future retention behaviour and profitability. It has been noted that satisfying consumer expectation can be very challenging in business, indeed it may lead to significant customer dissatisfaction if expectations have not been met. The direction most leading airlines have taken is to address customers by adding value in products and services to achieve their satisfaction and loyalty. New research on key drivers of airline loyalty (Dolnicar *et al.*, 2010) ‘one way to strengthen an airline’s competitive position is to retain passengers as loyal users.’ Therefore one important study (Barratt and Dowd, 2006) looks closely at a new breed of research which focused on passengers and their needs (for the 787 Dreamliner) to ensure an ideal travel experience. In the development of the 787 Dreamliner, the research embedded the involvement

of customers in the creative design solutions which started in the preliminary stages of the design process and continued until the end in order to enrich the new plane for a new world.

3. Aim & objectives

The ultimate goal of this research project is to improve the perception of design creativity at SAA. The key challenge is to demonstrate concrete benefits of effective design creativity in the context of airline businesses. It is hypothesised that effective use of design creativity can significantly enhance customer experience and therefore could lead to business success. Hence, this paper aims to examine the relationships between customer satisfaction and strategic use of design creativity. By proving that creativity and design elements have significant impacts on customers' experience and satisfaction. The researcher can make the case for more effective use of design creativity at SAA as well as identify directions for improvement.

The research contains four objectives:

1. To critically analyse the use of design creativity for leading airline companies and SAA.
2. To compare the use of design creativity between that of leading airline companies and SAA.
3. To measure the level of customer satisfaction for leading airline companies and SAA.
4. To establish relationships between strategic use of design creativity and the level of customer satisfaction.

4. Research methods

There are two methods employed in this research. Firstly, case studies were conducted from three different regions to identify the overall view of design creativity contribution in the worlds leading airlines:

Table 2. Case studies for leading airlines

| Airlines | Region | Design Creativity Contribution |
|--------------------------|----------------|--|
| Singapore Airlines (SIA) | Asian | Singapore girl-service design |
| British Airways (BA) | Western | Flat-bed seats for business passengers |
| Emirates | Middle Eastern | Recognized for innovation excellence |

Secondly, in-depth interviews were carried out with frequent fliers of SAA to examine the value of design creativity in a customer's journey. As well as identifying the customers satisfaction with SAA compared with their experience of leading global airlines. This method allowed participants to describe what issues were important and in this way the richness of their cultural concerns can also be investigated. Since it is essential to understand every type of frequent flier, the interviewees were selected based on different segments of people with different characteristics (geographical area, demographics, psychographic, behavioural). The form of interviewing was face-to-face and by Skype conference call in instances when geographical location prevented face-to-face interviewing. The interviews were conducted in two languages Arabic and English according to interviewees nationality. The criteria are summarised below:

- One of the main criterion in selecting the participants was their frequent flying with SAA to be able to give accurate information about their experience with the airline.
- Participants needed to have experience of other leading airlines such as (Emirates, Malaysian airways, Singapore Airlines, Qatar airways, British Airways...etc),to enable a comparison with their SAA experience which will indentify whether if there is a gap in the perception of the value of design creativity between SAA and the other airlines.
- The interviewees represent a variety of key segments of the society who were frequent fliers and travelled several times a year.

4.1 Interview questions:

The same set of questions was used in every interview. These questions can be divided into Four parts:

1. **Interviewees profile:** Each interviewee was asked to summarise briefly their nationality, frequency and the list of airlines they have experienced.

Table 3. Profile of each interviewee

| Frequent Fliers | Nationality | Frequency | Airlines | |
|---------------------------|-------------|--------------------|--|-----|
| 1.TV presenter and writer | Saudi | 4 to 5 per year | BA,Etihad, Emirates, Lufthansa, Easy jet | SAA |
| 2. Researcher in KAUST | Saudi | 4 to 5 per year | BA, Etihad, Emirates, Air France | |
| 3. Business women | Saudi | 6 to 7 per year | SIA, Qatar airways BA, Etihad, Emirates, KLM | |
| 4. Housewife | Saudi | 4 to 5 per year | SIA, Malaysia Airlines BA, Emirates, Delta, Egypt air | |
| 5.STC consultant | Non-Saudi | 3 to 4 per 'month' | Qatar airways BA, Etihad, Emirates, Air France, KLM, Gulf Air, Kuwait airways | |
| 6. Design Consultant | Non-Saudi | 3 to 4 per year | BA, Virgin Atlantic | |

2. **Comparison between the airlines:** Each interviewee was asked to describe their opinion on their experience with leading airlines and SAA focusing on satisfaction level and design creativity.
3. **Design creativity comparison:** All interviewees were asked about design creativity and to provide an appropriate explanation for leading airlines and SAA design investments.
4. **SAA value of design creativity:** All interviewees was asked to describe creative design value for SAA.

The responses are collected, analysed and compared to find out the similarity and differences in terms of creativity and design, satisfaction and problems. As a result, the expectations and challenges of the customer journey were identified. Finally, conclusions were drawn as to how to utilise the findings to enhance SAA's position in the global market.

5. Results

The results of this research can be divided in two parts: the results from case studies and the results from primary research.

5.1 Case Studies

5.1.1 Singapore Airlines (SIA):

SIA is one of the worlds leading airlines, Heracleous,Wirtz and Johnson (2005) state that SIA 'has never incurred a loss on a annual basis and has shown healthy returns since its founding in 1972.' It has achieved its position through a thorough understanding of the value of design creativity. Heracleous,Wirtz and Johnson (2005) state 'SIA is a paragon of in-flight services and continuous innovation.' SIA's success has been built on the ability to be a serial innovator, one of the key sources for their success is customer satisfaction. The SIA example asserts that gaining a high level of customer satisfaction can maintain an airline's position in the global market, which emphasises the aim of this research. The airline succeeded in offering powerful and continuous quality of service, which gains the airline sustainable competitive advantage. Chan (2000) states 'Singapore Girl is now a well-known international service icon.' Customer expectation can sometimes lead to customer

dissatisfaction, however SIA is continually focusing its strategy on differentiating itself by design creativity on being superior in customer service, its corporate culture is geared towards service excellence throughout the organisation.

5.1.2 British Airways (BA):

BA is considered one of most well-known British companies who successfully used design creativity, Rich (2004) argues that BA ‘harnessed good design to drive their business forward.’ BA is a creative design-led company with a strategy that relies on good design creativity to help maintain its competitive edge. The airline focused on the interior design of its planes, the main aim was to increase customer’s satisfaction when flying with BA offering them a relaxing and comfortable flight. Rich (2004) states BA’s designers flew all over the world as passengers to investigate creative ideas in order to differentiate and create new innovative ideas that have not been explored by competitors. The approach BA took was to redesigning the seats for its club world passengers, BA invested a total of \$350 million in the ‘project.’ The new seat design can be reclined, so that it is completely flat allowing customers to sleep flat rather than simply slouch as in standard airline seats. The concept Rich (2004) describes was to create a ‘lounge in the sky.’ As a result, BA received recognition by the industry as being the first airline to have creative seats that could fully recline with three different sitting positions and a fully adjustable footstool. Rich highlights further outcomes as being a significant increase in sales and profitability for long-haul international flights (2004). This is additionally somewhat perpetuated by gaining customers satisfaction and loyalty leading to the now infamous BA tag-line of ‘the worlds favourite airline.’ (Rich, 2004) This case study supports the view of the relationship between design creativity and customer’s satisfaction with an outstanding increase in both design creativity and customer satisfaction.

5.1.3 Emirates:

Emirates Airline is well known as a rapidly growing airline as is demonstrated by its recent aggressive fleet expansion. Gulfnews (2012) report that Emirates, ‘is the largest airline in the world in terms of international Revenue Passenger Kilometres (RPK), the airline now flies to 122 destinations worldwide.’ The Airlinetrends (2011) reports show that Emirates is considered a creative design-led organisation as in developing its strategic expansion it has acknowledged the value of design creativity. The airline focuses on their customers offering continuous creative and innovative investments by introducing the most up-to-date technology in the in-flight experience. As well as proposing an in-flight extravaganza in its interior space with suites, showers and a staffed lounge for first class passengers. The design creative developments strengthened customers demand, achieving customer satisfaction and loyalty. As a result it added value for products and services, which can attract and increase the satisfaction of customers. In the Maktoob Research TravelMonitor (2009) study examined United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) travelers measuring their customer satisfaction regarding UAE airlines and SAA. Emirates, according to the study’s findings, appeared to be a clear winner in KSA, leading the table in terms of overall customer satisfaction

5.2 Primary research:

The results for primary research are presented in visual diagrams and cover three issues :

Table 4. Issues coved in primary research

| | Analysis | Visual Diagram |
|---|---|-----------------------|
| 1 | A comparison between the leading airlines and SAA, focusing on the relationship between design creativity and customer satisfaction | Figure 1 |
| 2 | The relationship between design creativity and customer satisfaction for SAA | Figure 2 |
| 3 | A comparison for the perception of the value of design creativity between leading airlines and SAA | Table 5 |

5.2.1 Analysis for the relationship between design creativity and customer satisfaction:

The visual diagram (shown in Figure 1) represents the analysis of the data collected from the interviewees addressing the comparison between the leading airlines and SAA focusing on their customer journey. The diagram examines the relationship between design creativity and customer satisfaction. The leading airlines are represented by their logos, clarifying how the value of design creativity enhanced their customer satisfaction. However, the SAA logo appears to be positioned as more of an average airline, due to the justification of the participants regarding SAA's use of design creativity. The diagram demonstrates that there is a significant gap between leading airlines and SAA. Furthermore common words were used by participants expressing their emotional feelings with the different airlines. In the study, the customer journey was addressed in three parts:(1) pre-flight (booking, check-in, waiting area), (2) on-board (seats, staff performance, meals and cabin interior) and (3) post-flight (reward cards, special needs and overall) special needs addressed the disabled, cultural needs and children travelling.

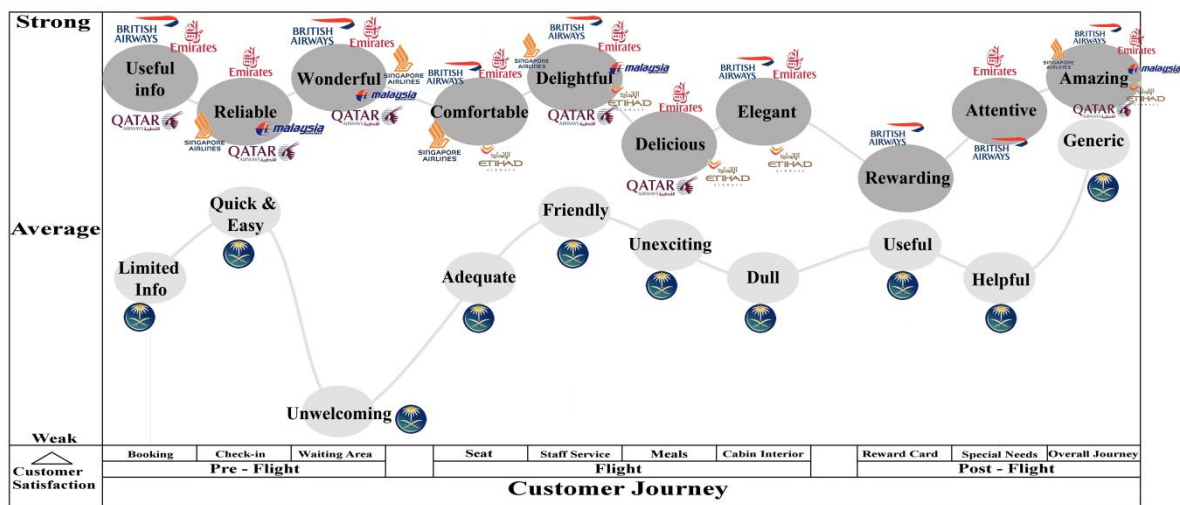


Figure 19. The relationship between design creativity and customer satisfaction

5.2.2 Analysis for the perception of the value of design creativity for SAA:

This visual diagram emphasises on the relationship between customer satisfaction and design creativity for SAA. The current design creativity used has greatly influenced their customer satisfaction level. In the interviews participants supported the fact that design creativity plays a major role in their chose of airline.

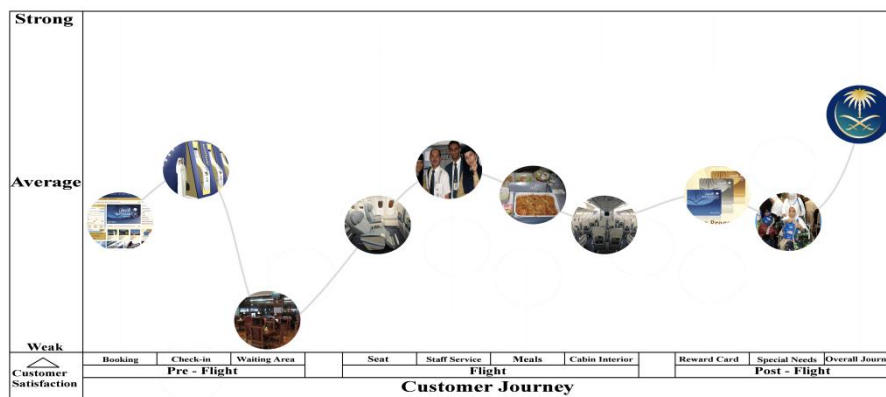


Figure 2. The relationship between design creativity and customer satisfaction for SAA

5.2.3 Analysis for the perception of the value of design creativity between leading airlines and SAA:

The visual analysis (table 5) demonstrates the perception of the value of design creativity for leading airlines and SAA addressing different products and services in a customer journey. The images in the top row illustrated leading airlines comparing it with SAA in the bottom row. Participants expressed their views in term of design creativity describing their experience, which justify the gap between leading airlines and SAA in relation to the different perception of design creativity. Furthermore their chose of airlines depends a great deal on the products and services offer by the airline.

Table 5. The perception of the value of design creativity

| | PRE-FLIGHT | | ON-BOARD | | POST-FLIGHT |
|------------------|--|--|--|---|--|
| | Booking | Waiting Area | Seat | Staff Performance | Overall Experience |
| Leading Airlines |  |  |  |  |  |
| | Smooth, Clear, Easy Navigation | Spacious, Relaxing, Pleasant Atmosphere, Enjoy my time | Comfortable , Can Sleep, Relaxing | Amazing, Wonderful, Target is to enjoy and Satisfy the Customer, | The Best, Excellent, Great |
| SAA |  |  |  |  |  |
| | Cultural impact weak, Additional info needs to be added | Crowded, Small, Very Dark | Uncomfortable, Standard seat | Friendly, inconsistent | Pleasant, Direct Flight, Not yet a leading Airline |

5. Discussion

The study established the value of design creativity by an examination of the relationship between creativity, design and customer satisfaction within the airline industry. Most successful businesses are recognised as using creativity in design effectively and integrating it within the overall corporate culture. The results for this study were divided into case studies and interviews. The case studies show that leading airline companies realise the importance and contributions of design creativity and perceive creativity and design as an important asset. Design creativity in these companies is fully integrated into all offerings and touch points, such as exterior and interior design, on-board services, in-flight entertainment and waiting areas. The interview results confirmed that customers are sensitive to design creativity. The majority of positive comments given to leading airlines were directly related to creativity and design, e.g. the quality of seating area and the atmosphere of waiting lounge. Evidently SAA has invested in design creativity, however, a relative poor perception of design creativity results in average-standard outcomes, which cannot help differentiate or build strong emotional connections with passengers. Interestingly, most customers' suggestions for SAA were also directly related to creative and design aspects, such as interior design improvement. In addition, frequent fliers expressed their emotional feeling regarding each airline, which strengthens the findings and main thrust of the study and clarifies and justifies SAA's position in the global market. Therefore to enhance SAA's current position in Skytrax (the worlds leading star ranking for airlines) as a 3 star, the results in this research show that by raising the perception of the value of creativity and design within SAA, the possibility of achieving customer satisfaction is very high, which can increase their ranking in Skytrax to 4 star. The leading airlines have achieved their customer satisfaction levels by enhancing their design creativity for products and services. Travellers conclude that design creativity plays a major role in achieving innovative and memorable customer experience.

6. Conclusion

The research has proved that the hypothesis was correct. The research presented case studies and interviews related to the airline industry, focusing on frequent fliers who travelled with SAA and leading airlines (Emirates, Qatar Airways, Singapore Airlines, British Airways, Eithad Airways and Malaysian Airlines). Results of the investigation identified that there is a strong and obvious relationship between investing in design creativity and customer satisfaction. The illustrated comparison between leading airlines and SAA, critically demonstrated that there is a gap in customer satisfaction in particular aspects of their journey and concluding SAA's performance was as an average airline in comparison to leading airline competitors. Apparently, there is a strong relationship between effective use of design creativity and customer experience. The areas that matter the most in the airline sector are touch points that customers have direct contacts with. Thus, these touch points should receive high priority and should be strategically designed to reflect SAA's brand and differentiate it from other airlines. Changing organisational perception of design creativity requires cultural changes. Although this research can demonstrate tangible benefits of design creativity, to help SAA move toward becoming a design creative organisation, a clear vision and a practical creative design framework are needed. In the next step, a conceptual model of design creativity culture will be developed for SAA in order to enhance the perception of design creativity at all level and provide practical guidelines for the organisation to change into a design creative culture.

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