

# **PASSENGERS' PERCEPTIONS OF AIRPORT SERVICE QUALITY: AN EXPLORATORY STUDY**

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## **Introduction**

The service sector has grown to be an integral part of Sri Lanka's economy and aviation is yet another energetic industry which has immense potential due to the country's strategic geographical location. Civil aviation industry in Sri Lanka has a 72 year old history and has shown a rapid growth during the last two decades. As a result of an increase in passenger traffic, the Sri Lankan Government has made enormous investment in infrastructure development on country's only international airport. As Sri Lanka is recognized as a tourist destination and a land conducive for foreign direct investment opportunities, passenger satisfaction of the services offered at the international airport has a significant effect on country's income generation and image. This is mainly due to the reason as the first impression of Sri Lanka would be the 'first landing and interacting point' which will make a significance influence in future patronization of the Island as a tourist or investor.

Therefore, the efficiency and speed of the 'procedures' at the international airport is decisive. These 'procedures' in general are termed as 'facilitation', i.e. giving free and unimpeded passage to aircrafts, freight and mail including all clearance and handling processes. One of the facets of facilitation is quality of service offered by the airport. In order to satisfy its customers, it is important to provide the best possible service according customer needs within the constraints which have put in place for safety of the passengers and country. In addition, clients have a 'global' perception of the quality of the entire chain of service offered at international airports and therefore all the elements of the service chain have to be efficient for customers to perceive a good level of quality of service of the overall facilitation.

In an airport, customer satisfaction/dissatisfaction embarks on from departure to boarding to aircraft and disembarking from aircraft to the exit from terminal. By considering the Complaints and Suggestions Registry at Bandaranaike International Airport (BIA), it is revealed that the quality of services offered by BIA is below par in terms of quality of services offered by other international airports in Asia. It is also revealed that BIA is more of a product-oriented organization than of been customer-oriented. Most importantly, despite the repeated complaints made by the customers, the airport authorities have failed to address the issues promptly. Therefore, this paper will assist the Airport Management to identify the needs and expectations of the passengers which will in return support do develop an effective service offer strategy. In striving for this, the research objectives are developed as; (1) to assess the quality of the services offered by the BIA in terms of perception of the passengers, and (2) to identify the service sectors at BIA which needs improvement.

### **Review of literature**

A useful definition for customer satisfaction could be found in the book “Marketing Management: An Asian Perspective” by Philip Kotler (1998). Accordingly, satisfaction is the level of person’s felt state resulting from comparing a product’s perceived performance (or outcome) in relation to the person’s expectations. The gap between perceived service and expectation has given rise not only to the construct of service quality (Zeithaml *et al.*, 1996; Wisniewski & Donnelly, 2010) but also to that of satisfaction (Zahorik & Rust, 2007; Kotler & Armstrong, 2004) where satisfaction has been linked to performance level of the business (Canel & Fletcher, 2001). In this context, customer satisfaction is the key to business success and can only be achieved by exactly understanding what customers’ expect and by evaluating the perception of the service delivery. The level of satisfaction is determined by consumers upon consumption and subsequently by comparing the perceived service with expected service.

It is of the essence to note that customer satisfaction is not just meeting customer expectations (Bateson, 2006; Kara *et al.*, 2005; Barraclough, 2000).). Clear communication of service delivery would adjust the level of perception making it easier to manage customer satisfaction as it is the feeling on attitude of a customer towards a product or service after it has been used. This results that customer satisfaction is a major outcome of marketing activity whereby it serves as a link between the various stages of consumer buying behaviour. For instance, if customers are satisfied with a particular service offering after it's used, then they are likely to engage in repeat purchase and try line extensions (Evans & Lindsay, 1999) and therefore, it is widely recognized as a key influence in the formation of customers' future purchase intentions (Tam, 2004).

Satisfaction and service quality are often treated together as functions of a customer's perceptions and expectations. Customer satisfaction is determined by defining customer perceptions of quality, expectations, and preference (Kopalle & Lehmann, 2001). Therefore, customer satisfaction is the collective outcome of the customer's perception, evaluation and psychological reaction to the consumption experience with product or service (Creswell, 2005). In conclusion, a customer's relationship with an organization's service quality is strengthened the assessment of service quality is favourable and there is a strong theoretical underpinning of the linkages among customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, and profitability (Sureshchander *et al.*, 2002).

### **Methodology**

#### **SERVQUAL as a measurement tool**

For the success of civil aviation organisations, accurate measurement of service quality is as important as understanding the nature of delivery system. Without a valid measure, it would be difficult to establish and implement appropriate tactics and strategies for service quality management (Lam, 1997). The most widely known and discussed scale for measuring service quality is SERVQUAL an instrument developed by Parasuman *et al.* (1985; 1988) which not only has been widely cited in marketing literature, but also its use in industry has been quite widespread (Berry *et al.*, 1988). Through an

empirical test, Parasuman *et al.* (1988), calculated successive Alpha's Cronbach and oblique factor analyses, and ten components were collapsed into five dimensions; Reliability, Tangibles, Responsiveness, Assurance and Empathy. Reliability, tangibles and responsiveness remained distinct, but the remaining seven components collapsed into two aggregate dimensions, assurance and empathy. To derive the level of service quality Parasuman *et al.* (1988) developed a 22-item instrument to measure customers' Expectation and Perceptions (E to P) of the five RATER (Reliability, Assurance, Tangibles, Empathy, Responsiveness) dimensions where each item is used twice: first, to determine customer's expectations about firms in general, within the service category being investigated; second to measure perceptions of performance of a particular firm. Seeing the objectives of this study, the SERVQUAL questionnaire consists of a 7-point Likert scale; 1 representing 'strongly agree and 7 been strongly disagree', is used in gathering the perceptions and expectations of the customers.

As this research study covers only the services provided for departing passengers in the terminal building of BIA and employees of the airport, data collections pertinent to this study is focused on departing passengers. The questionnaires are distributed among the 304 departing passengers at the transit lounge who had completed their departure formalities and the respondents are 105.

### **Results and discussion**

As employees in customer facilitation organization are concerned, 34% represented Airport & Aviation Services Ltd., and 17% each are represented by employees in duty free shops and banks. With regard to passengers, 81% are departing passengers while 19% are transit passengers. 14% of these passengers are first time visitors whereas 69% had previous experiences. In order

In order to derive a snapshot view of selected attributes of the service quality measurement, an average score is calculated. The summary of the results are given in Table 1. It is revealed that passengers' perception on the current service quality remain at a satisfactory level

as all attributes score are below four. Nevertheless, passengers are of the view that services offered at BIA are reliable but with less assurance.

**Table 1:** Comparison of value score for employees and passengers

Dimension	Passengers' view	
	Mean	GAP
Tangibility	3.20	2.20
Reliability	2.95	1.95
Responsiveness	3.35	2.35
Assurance	3.92	2.96
Empathy	3.06	2.06

The study reveals that services offered by immigration department, banks and duty free shops are considered as unsatisfactory by the passengers and are satisfied with the services offered by porters, foreign bureau and vehicle park/taxi divisions as the service quality dimensions are concerned. Passengers have a mediocre satisfactory level of the services offered by the customs and security divisions.

In relation to tangible aspects passengers are not satisfied with the written material at immigration department (3.97), duty free shops (3.57) and customs (3.25). Nevertheless, modern technology usage is comparatively low in immigration (3.76), banks (3.82) and duty free shops (3.29) when compared to other divisions at BIA. With regard to personality of staff passenger are not complacent with the staff at immigration department (3.87), banks (3.61) and duty free shops (3.63). Also passengers expect the banks (3.61) and duty free shops (3.75) to be outfitted with visual materials and better appearance of equipment.

As the reliability dimension is concerned, immigration department (4.53) has the least level of response when passengers proceed to the counter. In additions passengers are also dissatisfied with level of service offered by the staff employed at the immigration department (4.65), duty free shops (4.59), and banks (4.23) and of details/information given in writing/display notices at immigration department (4.95) and duty free shops (4.39).

With regard to the assurance dimension, passengers are of the view that documents/reports at the immigration department (5.32), duty free shops (4.96) are not clear and simple to understand. Passengers also feel unsafe when dealing with the immigration department (5.78) and banks (4.86) and strongly of the view that staff attached to immigration department (5.89), banks (5.78) and vehicle park/taxi division do not have adequate job knowledge and professional experience to handle customers to provide a better service. Passengers also state that staff at immigration and at duty free shops (4.56), taxi counter (4.54) and foreign employment bureau (4.29) expected something in return for providing a better service. Further, it is revealed that immigration department (5.89) in not capable of responding to questions asked by the passengers and lack responsible personnel to attend to such affairs.

It is revealed that immigration department (5.63) is weak in responding quickly when passengers proceed to the service point and willingness to listen to passengers' problems (4.85). Further, when compared with other departments, staff in banks (4.32) and duty free shops (4.12) too lacks willingness to listen to passenger problems and it is also identified that staff in immigration department (5.01), banks (4.65) and duty free shops (4.23) does not provide services to customers without a grope.

In relation to empathy, staff at immigration department (4.56) and duty free (4.58) do not give personal attention to customers. Further it is also stated that immigration department (5.35) and banks (4.56) is feeble in treating in a manner to make passengers happy and comfortable, and in comparison to other departments passengers appreciate least of the services provided by banks (5.69) and

immigration department (4.56) respectively. In addition, passengers are not satisfied with the friendliness/politeness/courtesy approach of the staff attached to immigration department (4.58) and duty free (4.12).

In summary the sub attributes of the service quality dimensions can be characterized as follows;

**Table 2:** Sub attributes and characteristics

Sub attribute	Characteristic
Understanding of written material	Process
Using modern Technology	Process
Personality of the staff	Physical
Appearance of the equipment	Physical
Response of the staff when passengers	People
Appearance of the equipments	Physical
Response of the staff when passengers proceed to the counter	People
Level of the Service of the Staff	People
Accuracy /neatness & validity of the details display writing	Process/ Physical
Understanding of docs reports of the counter	Process
Delaying with staff	People
Job knowledge & professionalism of the staff	People
Ability to talk to knowledgeable person	People/ Process
Response of the staff when passengers able question	People
Response of the staff	People
willingness to listening to passengers problem	People
Providing of service to customers without delay	People
The way they treat passengers & wining heart	People
Appreciating of the service provided by staff	People
Impression of the friendliness/politeness/courtesy of the staff	People
Personalize attention given by the staff	People

As illustrated in Table 2, this study reveals that of the problems/issues affecting the service quality dimensions are largely human related (61%) and followed by processes (22%) and physical evidence (17%) respectively.

#### **Summary of the study**

This study reveals that there are considerable gaps between service quality expected and perceived by passengers and the largest gap lies with the assurance aspect and followed by empathy, reliability, responsiveness with a least gap in tangibility respectively. Of the facilitating organizations operating at BIA, passengers are least satisfied with the services offered by the immigration department, banks and duty free shops. Services provided by the airport and aviation services, security services, Sri Lankan airlines, and other airlines are at somewhat satisfactory level. Although porter services and vehicle park/taxi division fall below expectations in some service quality dimensions, when considered as a whole, passengers are satisfied to greater extent. It is also revealed that BIA management should make necessary strategies for passengers to feel safe and create a more conducive environment so that passenger requests and questions are attended promptly. Further, documentation and other writing material should be made lot easier to address and the staff of the facilitation divisions should be enlighten of their job responsibilities and make them aware of executing their job in more professional manner. The major contributing factor for service quality is human related aspects such as reliability, responsiveness, assurance and empathy. It is divulged that passengers are satisfied with physical aspects of each facilitation organization in BIA. Therefore it is needed to study of the Human factors which affect customer satisfaction and to develop strategies through human relations.



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