A Tale of Two Airlines: A Comparative Case Study of High-Road Versus Low-Road Strategies in Customer Service and Reputation Management

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Customer surveys from Ryanair and Southwest Airline passengers were examined to determine their perceptions on customer service for the period of 2012-2013. Southwest Airlines (n=149) was rated significantly higher than Ryanair (n=165) in overall rating (p=.0228), seat comfort (p<.0001), cabin/staff service (p=.0001), and value (p=.0004). Additionally, passengers would recommend Southwest Airlines at a higher rate than Ryanair (p=.0006). Open area comments emphasized that customer service and policies had a large impact on the ratings. Specifically, 53% of Ryanair customers complained about inefficient or unwelcome processes and discourteous or unfriendly service compared to 29% for Southwest Airlines. Ryanair customers complained about check-in procedures, open seating policy, and fees ranging from oversized carry-on bags to fees for printing out boarding passes. The largest area of complaint for Southwest customers concerned how customers were treated for flight delays.

**HYPOTHESIS**

H1. Customers will award Southwest Airlines a significantly higher “overall ranking” than Ryanair.

H2. Customers will rate Southwest Airlines significantly higher than Ryanair with regard to seat comfort, cabin service, food and value.

H3. A greater proportion of customers will recommend Southwest Airlines than Ryanair with regard to seat comfort, cabin service, food and value.

**METHODS**

This study used a survey research design to examine customer perception of two different airlines, Ryanair and Southwest Airlines. Skytrax has continuously measured customer perceptions on airline and airport quality since 1989. The organization is “dedicated to improving quality of the customer experience for airlines and airports across the world” (Skytrax, 2017a, para. 1).

**DATA EXAMINED**

The survey responses examined were from the Skytrax database for both Ryanair (2017b) and Southwest (2017c) for the period of January 2012 to December 2013. This timeframe was chosen because of the different approaches used by Ryanair (low level of customer service – low expectation of service) and Southwest (high level of customer service – high expectation of service) and the different expectations of service. Both airlines are low cost airlines, however their different perceptions of customer service is well known.

Southwest Airlines - "The Somebody Else Up There Who Loves You"

"Ding! You are now free to move about the country!"

- Poor Customer Service 29%
- 10% overall concerned poor handling of flight delays

Ryanair Director of Customer Service - "We’re the airline everyone loves to hate."

"Always looking for a new way to con passengers into falling foul of a regulation so they can extort money to make our customers suffer."

Southwest customers rated significantly higher (n=0.05) than Ryanair customers on:

- Overall rating
- More willing to recommend airline to a friend
- Seat comfort
- Cabin/staff service
- Food
- Overall value

Price is a big factor to customers.

**REFERENCES**


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**ABSTRACT**

Customer surveys from Ryanair and Southwest Airline passengers were examined to determine their perceptions on customer service for the period of 2012-2013. Southwest Airlines (n=149) was rated significantly higher than Ryanair (n=165) in overall rating (p=.0228), seat comfort (p<.0001), cabin/staff service (p=.0001), and value (p=.0004). Additionally, passengers would recommend Southwest Airlines at a higher rate than Ryanair (p=.0006). Open area comments emphasized that customer service and policies had a large impact on the ratings. Specifically, 53% of Ryanair customers complained about inefficient or unwelcome processes and discourteous or unfriendly service compared to 29% for Southwest Airlines. Ryanair customers complained about check-in procedures, open seating policy, and fees ranging from oversized carry-on bags to fees for printing out boarding passes. The largest area of complaint for Southwest customers concerned how customers were treated for flight delays.

**RESULTS – ALL NULL HYPOTHESES WERE REJECTED**

**CONCLUSIONS**

Southwest customers rated significantly higher (n=0.05) than Ryanair customers on:

- Overall rating
- More willing to recommend airline to a friend
- Seat comfort
- Cabin/staff service
- Food
- Overall value

Price is a big factor to customers.

Low prices and low expectations of customer service offered by Ryanair did not result in positive customer perceptions. Customers expected fair treatment and fair processes that were not “mean spirited.”

Customer service programs add value and are important to customers.

**REFERENCES**


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