Surviving in the Airline Business with a Brand Image; Perceptions of Travel Agency Ticketing Employees on Turkish Airlines

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Abstract

Turkish Airlines' (TK) brand and brand equity, risk and technology management of the company as perceived by the ticketing employees (TE) were questioned in this study, taking into consideration the air traffic accidents and how they affect the brand image of TK. Phenomenology method of qualitative measures was used in the process of scale development and Paired Sample "t" Test was used for the perceptions of sample groups. The results revealed that the company possesses a well-known brand and the managerial efforts for branding efforts are currently sufficient even though TK has a kind of bad reputation when it comes to plane crashes.

Keywords: Airlines, Management, Turkish Airlines, Brand, Ticketing employees, Air traffic accidents

1. Introduction

Service oriented industries are known to be more sensitive to the environment when compared with product industries. In response to the pressure of globalization, increasingly competitive markets, and volatile market dynamics, many organizations are searching for ways to add value to their services and improve their service quality (Yee, 2008). Moreover, by operating in the service business, for the last decade airline companies have shown more survival instincts than all other industries, resisting the environmental factors such as terrorist attacks, economic crisis and so forth. The airline industry has been facing continuing rapid change and acute financial pressures with such process. The final global recession which has started in late 2008 and the weakening demand for air travel have all contributed to unwanted impacts for the industry in question. Some airlines have failed in the current situation and some 30 companies went bust in 2008 (DDB, 2009). Some of the former national airlines were transformed into successful private airlines while others (e.g. Alitalia) found it difficult to adapt (Beria et al., 2011). Airline consolidations and the proliferation of low cost carriers could be defined as the summary of the change in the airline business.

Setting aside the low cost carriers, the larger and better capitalized airlines have emerged to be as the dominant companies for consolidations and other marketing efforts. Building a strong brand is one of the most popular marketing efforts for any company nowadays. The airlines that survive in the battle for the market share may be attributed to the ones that build a strong brand, improve value, and build influence by engaging consumers within their brand. Brymer (2009) argues that "the value of a strong brand is more important than ever. At the same time, influencing in a community creates powerful leverage for strong brands." According to an online study by CNN International, 58 percent of Asia-Pacific respondents -out of 1493 individuals- would be willing to pay more to travel with an airline they liked, with 61 percent of those claiming to be prepared to pay any amount to travel with a trusted brand (ABI, 2009). This could sustain a theory of "focusing on the brand equity, not only will retain existing consumers, but they will also attract others disgruntled with the competition"(DDB, 2009). Taking all these into consideration, some airline companies survived despite the odds, and a few have been forthcoming by turning an extremely challenging economic situation to their competitive advantage in recent years.

Turkish Airlines (TK) has been a remarkable example of such successful companies in the process. Having been established in 1933 as 'State Airlines Administration' and restructured as 'Turkish Airlines' in 1955, the airline has celebrated its 75th foundation anniversary in 2008 (ETW, 2008). It has to be acknowledged that until 2003 98% of its share belonged to the government, and only 2 percent to other investors. The Turkish Ministry of Transport implemented a new policy in 2003 and withdrew all protection for the national airline. From 2003 to 2008, TK had embarked on a serious of marketing and promotional activities in order to determine itself as a regional leader in Eurasia and as a prominent global airline. In the year 2008, TK had become a member of Star Alliance which is one of the largest airline alliances in the world. In order to build and keep alive its brand equity, which provides a serious advantage in terms of competition, TK has also focused on the investments that support the brand equity. That is to say, offering quality, entertainment systems within the aircrafts, comfortable seats, aesthetics, and quality of presentations and investing in highly qualified personnel (Mechtronix, 2010). As a result of all the above mentioned efforts, the company was declared to be one the four most profitable airlines in the world carrying 22.53 million passengers with its fleet 130 aircrafts in 2008 (Businessweek, 2010).

Finally, it can be easily said that TK is another company that operates in the service industry. As mentioned before, service oriented industries are more sensitive to the environment. TK Boeing 737-800 (TK 1951) crashed sceptically 1.5 km before the intended runway at Amsterdam Schiphol Airport, on 25th of February 2009 (Ale et al. 2010) and at time the company froze all its promotional efforts temporarily. It is worth noting that, TK has not been well known for its safety in the airline business. Furthermore, the airline has suffered from a bad reputation with its plane crash rating in the aviation history (PCI, 2010). Despite all of these disadvantages, the company seemed to have recovered quickly and continued with the expansion of new destinations and markets in the year 2009, as well as new promotions and sponsorships globally. Considering Turkey as a bridge between Europe and Asia, the Turkish flag carrier started with the *'touristanbul'* promotion in 2010 which offered free Istanbul city tour to its transit passengers. Although it is early to compare TKs' expenditure on marketing and advertising with Emirates $ 380 million expenditure (Airline Business, 2006), the company has also signed agreements with the top sport names, organizations and brands in the progress. The television commercials of these sponsored figures all around the world contributed to the brand image of TK. Table 1 demonstrates the sponsorships of TK from various sport branches.

Table 1. Sponsorship Activities of Turkish Airlines

Football	*Basketball*	*Tennis*	*Golf*
FC Barcelona (Spain)	Euroleauge Basketball Organization	Thailand Open	Ladies Open tour (LET)
Manchester United FC (UK)	Kobe Bryant (USA)	Caroline Wozniacki (Denmark)	
Turkish Football Federation (TFF)	Maroussi BC (Greece)		
	Valencia BC (Spain)		

2. Literature Review

Air transport is a lightly complex system consisting of interlinking distributed network made up of human operators, procedures and technological systems. Furthermore, transportation itself is service based industry and naturally service industries are affected by many variables during their operations. Airlines working hard on brand image and even the ones that already have had a prominent brand image, could be still suffering easily after a hijacking attempt or an air traffic accident. These risks are unfortunately unmanageable. Assuming that flying is an individual's choice and that the system deploys some resources to satisfy such choice, Netjasov and Janic (2008) identified four types of risks: risk to an individual, statistical risk of the occurrence of an accident, predicted risk and perceived risk. The authors analysed the research on risk and safety modelling in civil aviation. Describing the definitions of risk and safety, they proposed a model on four categories: causal models for risk and safety assessment, collision risk models, human factor error models, and third party risk models. Airlines can not avoid the risk factors on their branding process. However, there are always some risks and the companies aiming to be well-known brands in the aviation market have to use some instruments in order to do so. One of these instruments is to be a member of aviation strategic alliances for the last decade. Putting aside the initial aim of an alliance pursuing a larger market share or a technology transfer, the final purpose of the companies is to achieve stronger results.

Considering the market share purposes of the companies, Fan et al. (2001) have argued the penetration of globalization of strategic alliances and consolidations in the airline industry. As a result of the study, they claimed that the economic forces will likely pressure airlines into a greater degree of consolidation; however, the number of truly global strategic airline alliances will likely remain small. On the other hand, Beritella et al. (2007) examining the wide-body long range aircrafts, proposed a strategic alliance model for aircraft producers. They focused on the rivalry between Airbus and Boeing aircrafts, and claimed that speed is not a relevant parameter in technical consideration, but other parameters, such as maximum take-off weight, are seem to be more relevant.

The importance of building a strong brand as a primary goal of many organizations has been recognised in the marketing literature for quite some time (Keller, 2001; Hoeffler and Keller, 2002). The main idea behind this view is that an organisation that builds a strong brand will create stronger earnings, and will be more constant in its marketplace performance. Brand performance can also be seen in any particular brand achieving its organization's established objectives in the marketplace. Hence, brand performance can be defined as the relative measurement of the brand's success in the marketplace (O'Cass and Ngo, 2007). Branding has been such a hot topic issue that affects many industries as well as destinations either on regional level or on a national level. Lately in the tourism industry, destination branding has been a specific discipline besides corporate branding. Conglomerates did not pay sufficient attention on branding in the seventies and eighties but they preferred more vertical integrations with several brands and several sectors. However, the trend has turned out to horizontal integrations since the globalization process forced companies, as well as countries and unions of countries in order to integrate in one single brand under the same business sector (Sezgin, 2008).

The integration instruments such as the strategic alliances as mentioned above, acquisitions and franchising have become more popular. The conglomerates started to integrate under a single brand instead of multi brands with multi sectors. Consumers on the other hand took the role of savvy researchers and gave more importance to brand and reliability factors. Chen and Chang (2008), studied the decisions of international air passengers on brand equity, brand preference and purchase intentions and they have found that there was a positive relationship between brand equity, brand preference and purchase intentions with a moderation effect of switching cost. Chang and Yang (2008), on the other hand, developed a method of measuring airline repurchase motivation; they explored service items affecting repurchase, and contributed airlines to self-evaluate their service marketing. The authors examined the four major airlines that fly between Taipei and Hong Kong by the Rasch measurement and claimed that although every airline has its own legal repeat passengers, preferences of passengers are somewhat different. This study focuses on the perceptions of ticketing employees (TE) in travel agencies who are assumed to be tourism professionals specialized in the aviation business. Turkish Airlines' brand and brand equity, risk and technology management of the company as perceived by the TE were questioned about air traffic accidents and how this would affect the brand image of TK.

3. Method

3.1. Sample

The sample of the study constitutes Antalya and Warsaw-two important tourist incoming cities- and TE working in travel agencies of these two cities. Although Istanbul is a more international city of Turkey with its transit Ataturk Airport connecting Europe to Asia, it is decided to use Antalya city as one of the samples in the study because of two significant reasons. Antalya's being the leading tourism destination city in Turkey both in incoming and ingoing markets is the leading reason. The other reason is that Antalya has an easier access to the sample group when compared to Istanbul. Taking those characteristics of the city into a consideration, it could be easily verified that every kind of travel agents are to be found in Antalya. Furthermore, TE's were presumed to have more information about TK than ordinary people since the airline is the Turkish flag carrier. Estimating 17 IATA (International Air Transport Association) agencies in the city (TURSAB, 2010), 39 (n1) TEs participated to form the first sample group. The other city, Warsaw, and the TE of the city were accepted to be more realistic about TK than their Turkish colleagues. Furthermore, Turkish TE might be more emotional while answering some items of the survey. There are indeed more cosmopolitan and international cities across Europe such as London and Paris. However, assuming how difficult it is to reach respondents in a foreign country, it was easier to reach Warsaw TE's via Polish academician colleagues. The other factors for selecting Warsaw are that there are frequent flights between Turkey and Poland, and accordingly presuming the Polish TEs are well-informed about TK. Finally, 52 (n2) TE from Warsaw participated as the second sample group of the study.

3.2. Measurement

Perceptions of TE both in Antalya and Warsaw cities on TK's brand image and management were undertaken in this survey. The survey for the sample picks out perception related questions (items) apart from the demographic questions. *Phenomenology* method –which is one of the Qualitative Research Methods-, was used with the subject group of 8 people who are professionals in aviation and ticketing, in the process of developing the survey items (Patton, 2002, p. 104). In the science of statistics, the collection of quantifiable data from people involves a phenomenological step. Namely, in order to obtain that data, survey questions must be designed to collect measurable responses that are categorized in a logically sound and practical way, such that the form in which the questions are asked does not bias the results (Molenaar, 1082). A prerequisite of a good survey is that all respondents are really able to give a definite and unambiguous answer to the questions, and that they understand what is asked of them in the same way (Wikipedia, 2011). On the other hand, the respondents (TE's) of phenomenology experiment in this study were created a survey questions (items) by negotiating during the experiment. 24 items were developed at the end of the interview and 19 of the items were selected for the questionnaire.

There are some limitations that affected the progress of developing measure regarding to Qualitative '*Phenomenology'* Research Method usage. The structures of the items in the scale are inconvenient for assessing the reliability and validity to the measure. Furthermore, the response rate of the survey (N:91) is relatively low for applying such statistics. A two-page questionnaire, -consisting of 22 questions- was administered either through face to face interviews or by e-mails. The questionnaire was developed in both the Turkish and English languages. Apart from the three demographic questions, there are 19 five-point scale items ranging from 1 (not agree at all) to 5 (strongly agree). The items were supposed to measure the respondents' perceptions on TK plane crashes; TK's managing policies, and the company's brand value. Reliability Analysis (Cronbach alpha) was applied for 19 five-point scale items to both Turkish and Polish TE's responses and the values for Turkish TE's responses "n1, a=0.8212", and for Polish TE's responses "n2, a=0.6859" were obtained as reliability scores. Ozdamar (1999, p.513) states that Cronbach Alpha is between 0&1, but if there is a negative correlation among the questions then Alpha would be taken as a negative value.

4. Data analysis and results

Descriptive profiles of two groups are demonstrated in Table 1. According to the table, reasonable majority of the Polish TE fall within the 21-30 age gaps with 78.8 percentages while 53.8 percentage of Turkish TE belong to at the same age group. The rest of the Turkish TE's, 35.9 percentage fall into the 31-40 age group and 10.3 in the 41-50 age groups. The table demonstrates that there are no Polish TE in the 41-50 age groups, but 21.2 percentages appear in the 31-40. Regarding the gender of the two groups, female TE witness taking the majority with 61.5 percentages in the Turkish group and 75 percentages when it comes to Polish respondents. Graduate TE from both nations (Turkish TE: 74.4 percent, Polish TE: 73.1 percent) are the largest groups when the educational levels of two groups are considered. 17.9 percent of Turkish TE and 26.9 percent of Polish TE are high school educated, and there are only 7.7 percent post graduate Turkish TE, while no post graduate Polish TE were represented in the survey.

Table 2. Descriptive Profile of Turkish TE and Polish TE

N=91	(n1 :39)	f1 (%)	(n2 :52)	f2 (%)
Age				
21-30	21	53.8	41	78.8
31-40	14	35.9	11	21.2
41-50	4	10.3	---	---
Gender				
Male	15	38.5	13	25
Female	24	61.5	39	75
Education				
High School	7	17.9	14	26.9
Graduate	29	74.4	38	73.1
Post-Graduate	3	7.7	---	---

The mean scores of Turkish and Polish TE's responses to the Likert scaled items are evaluated in Table 2. Paired Sample "t" Test comparison of n1 and n2 are demonstrated in the table considering the mean scores and applying them to SPSS statistical programme. Standard deviations, "t" values, degree of freedoms and significances of both groups are shown in the table besides the mean scores.

It appears that there is not a significant difference in 4 items out of 19 when the relations of the two groups are examined. In other words, the perceptions of two groups for the items; "*TA manages plane crash informing process of consumers and mass media properly*", "*The hijacked TK planes are the evidences of weak safety management*", "*TK investments for brand image are sufficient*" and "*Plane crashes cause a negative brand image for TK*" are not significantly differentiated. Hence, there is a significant difference among the perceptions of two groups for the rest 15 items.

It is observed that the conformity show difference from one item to the other when the agreement levels of n1 and n2 to the items are considered. Turkish TE have agreed at 4.67 level for the item claiming "*TA is a well known brand*", while Polish TE agreed at 4.02 level which could be measured also as a high assessment. An interesting result occurs for the item "*TK is good at public relations management*". Turkish TE's mean score for this item is only 3.3; however, Polish TE seem to agree more with the item scoring 4.10. A similar result occurs with the item "*TK is administered properly*" (n1:3.21, n2:3.81) where the Polish TE project themselves as being more optimistic about TK. Turkish respondents agreed with the item "*TK serves better quality than its' European competitors*" on a 4.21 level. On the other hand, Polish respondents don't seem very much fond of this item scoring only 2.94. When it comes to "*The equipments of TK are safe enough*" item, yet again Polish TE's mean score (3.50) is less than Turkish TE's (4.13). There are two items related with the Star Alliance membership in the survey. Both the Turkish flag carrier TK, and Polish flag carrier LOT Airlines are part of the member companies of this partnership. According to the results of "*Star Alliance membership for TK is a good decision*" and "*TK has adequate qualifications for joining Star Alliance Family*" items, Turkish respondents are optimistic with 4.18 and 4.13 scores. However, Polish respondents scored 3.62 and 3.27 for the same items which are assumed at lower agreement levels.

Table 3. Paired Sample "*t*" Test Results of Turkish TE (n1) and Polish TE (n2)

N: 91	Mean (n1:39)	s.d. (n1)	Mean (n2:52)	s.d. (n2)	t	d.f.	Sig.
1- TK is a well-known brand	4.67	.48	4.02	.54	5.940	38	.000
2- TK serves better quality than its' European competitors	4.21	.61	2.94	.42	12.010	38	.000
3- TK is well experienced for crisis management process	3.51	.64	3.12	.65	2.569	38	.014
4- TK is administered properly	3.21	.66	3.81	.40	-5.665	38	.000
5- TK is good at public relations management.	3.31	.73	4.10	.63	-5.350	38	.000
6- The equipments of TK are safe enough	4.13	.66	3.50	.75	4.127	38	.000
7- TK manages after plane crash procedures properly	3.87	.70	3.44	.50	3.156	38	.003
8- TK manages plane crash informing process of consumers and mass media properly	3.23	.58	3.52	.90	-2.012	38	.051*
9- The 11 September attacks couldn't stop TK's growing and positive image	4.08	.58	3.75	.65	2.765	38	.009
10- The hijacked TK planes are the evidences for weak safety management	3.46	.51	3.79	.70	-1.865	38	.070*
11- Larger and varied markets mean more responsibility and problem for TK	2.85	.59	3.37	1.03	-3.456	38	.001
12- TK plane crashes are mainly because of insufficient maintenance	2.21	.52	3.02	.58	-6.471	38	.000
13- TK plane crashes are mainly the results of cockpit errors	2.49	.51	3.08	.55	-4.938	38	.000
14- The aggressive growing policy of TK after the 11 September has negative results for the company	2.13	.52	2.85	.57	-6.533	38	.000
15- TK investments for brand image are sufficient	4.08	.66	3.83	.43	1.843	38	.073*
16- Star Alliance membership for TK is a good decision	4.18	.51	3.62	.84	3.883	38	.000
17- TK has adequate qualifications for joining Star Alliance family	4.13	.47	3.27	.49	10.289	38	.000
18- TK has the adequate infrastructure for overcoming crisis	3.77	.54	3.19	.82	3.953	38	.000
19- Plane crashes cause a negative brand image for TK	3.92	.58	3.62	.60	1.819	38	.077*

Note. '*' denotes not significant at 0.05 or lower probability level.

5. *Conclusions and limitations*

Airlines have overcome several problems in the last decade. The 11 September attacks in 2001 and the global recession in 2008 engendered deep impacts on the structure of the air transportation industry. Giant airline companies either in the US or in Europe went bankrupt unpredictably during that period. However, some companies turned this process into an opportunity and grew dramatically with an effective marketing and branding policies. One of the most notable examples is the Turkish flag carrier, TK. Despite the difficulties mentioned above and the withdrawal of the government from the company, the company has managed to become the fastest growing airline. Also it has become one of the four major airlines within the European network. Yet, the company had to deal with some other uncontrollable difficulties such as air traffic accidents.

The Amsterdam TK plane crash in 2009 decelerated the fast growing aspect of the company for some time; however, the crisis ended in shorter period than it was anticipated. Recessing the promotional efforts for some while, the airline started with the *'touristanbul'* promotion in 2010 which offered Istanbul city tours to its transit passengers. The company has also made several sponsorship agreements with top sport names and brands in the same year including worldwide famous soccer clubs (FC Barcelona, Manchester United FC), Euroleague Basketball Organization, world number one tennis player Caroline Wozniacki and the American National Basketball Organizations' (NBA) most valuable player (MVP) Kobe Bryant. Indeed, the advertisements of these sport figures all around the world contributed to the brand image of TK.

Both qualitative and quantitative measures were used in this study. Phenomenology method of the qualitative measures helped in the process of survey development. Affirming the efforts above, the results of the study reveal that TK has managed to set a trustable brand in the progress. Although the mean scores for "plane crashes cause a negative brand image for TK" item (Turkish TE: 3.92, Polish TE: 3.62) is reasonable, the respondents seem quite constant about the company's image, management and marketing policies.

This study is not without limitations. Firstly, the mean results of the items should be evaluated with the consideration of the respondents' demographical characteristics. Although the respondents are assumed as tourism professionals, it must be accepted that they come only from two countries. Therefore, it is hardly possible to claim that the responses to the items are completely neutral. Secondly, the sample group is rather homogeneous when it comes to their professions and education levels. Therefore, a future study with more heterogeneous groups and with larger respondents would contribute better to the literature. Lastly, the survey scale of the study was developed by using phenomenology experiment of qualitative research method. The inconvenience structure of survey items restrains the assessment of reliability and validity statistics to the scale. Collecting more responses and selecting the convenient items for statistical methods will contribute better in the further studies.

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