



*The Impact of Perceived Service Quality on Customer
Loyalty (Applied to travel agencies)*

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Abstract

The increase and retention of loyal customers has become a key factor for a long- term success of the travel agencies .The main emphasis in tourism marketing has shifted from winning new customers to the retention of existing ones. The market is highly competitive these days, customers have access to all kinds of information including price comparisons on line, and are less likely to be loyal to any given business. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of the impact of perceived service quality and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty in the travel agencies. A fourth-part questionnaire was developed as the instrument to collect data, the sample of the study consisted of customers using Egypt's travel agencies, who were selected through the non-probability judgmental sampling technique. A total of 200 questionnaires were found to be useful and data from these questionnaires were tested through SPSS statistical software. The research outcomes reveal that perceived service quality and customer satisfaction have a significant effect with a regard to customer loyalty in Egyptian travel agencies.

Key Words: Customer satisfaction, service quality, customer loyalty, travel agencies repurchase intentions, word-of-mouth intentions.

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Introduction

Many services industries are placing increased emphasis on managing quality and had been based more on customer-focused notions. New approaches such as total quality management and continuous improvement programs began to be applied by an increasing number of service industries. The travel and tourism industry was not immune to this "quality revolution" which was taking place—although it was rather late in adopting some of the principles (Graham, 2003). Structural changes such as privatization and globalization, together with increased competition between travel agencies encouraged them to place more emphasis on quality as high quality services designed to meet customer needs will create high levels of customer satisfaction. This high level of satisfaction will lead to greatly increased customer loyalty. And increased customer loyalty is the single most important driver of long-term financial performance.

Defining and measuring quality service is of importance to providers of travel agencies. This study diagnoses service quality perceptions of customers using Egypt's travel agencies, and then links these perceptions to their satisfaction and repurchase intentions to gain better understanding of the impact of perceived services quality and customer satisfaction on customer loyalty. In the wake of increasing competition, there is a need for managers to recognize the importance of service improvements in establishing a competitive advantage and retaining passenger loyalty and this requires reducing or eliminating negative influences on service quality by ensuring customers high quality rate service.

This study is necessary, useful, and relevant because it focuses on service quality perceptions of Egypt's travel agencies where quality of services is a significant strategic issue for increasing the competitiveness among the world travel agencies and also quality is considered to be a cause of satisfaction which will lead to greatly increased customer loyalty.

Literature Review

Quality of service and satisfaction

Service quality remains to be a very controversial issue, due to the features that characteristics services. Those features are intangibility, inseparability and heterogeneity. The debate regarding the differences between the concepts of the quality of service and satisfaction has been vigorous and not entirely conclusive (Parasuraman et al., 1994; Oliver, 1994). According to Zeithaml and



Bitner (2000) the main difference is that quality is considered to be a cause of satisfaction. Satisfaction is the umbrella concept and service quality refers to the specific attributes of the service. The service attributes relevant to the service quality are reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy and tangibles (SERVQUAL scale). The distinctiveness of the constructs of the perceived service quality and satisfaction is based on the antecedent factors. If service quality is to be improved, it must be reliably assessed and measured. Parasuraman et al. (1985) suggest that quality can be measured as the gap (the degree and the direction of the differences) between the customers' service perceptions and their expectations.

In a highly competitive travel and tourism industry, these expectations and experiences are the basis for comparing travel agencies against each other and ultimately for deciding to what extent the experience meets the passengers' level of satisfaction.

Service quality promotes customer satisfaction, stimulates intention to return, and encourages recommendations (Nadiri and Hussain, 2005). Satisfaction is a state of mind that can constantly change over the encounters (Gabbott and Hogg, 1998). The World Tourism Organization stated that customer satisfaction is a psychological concept that involves the feeling of well-being and pleasure that results from obtaining what one hopes for and expects from an appealing product and /or service. (Elias et al, 2008). Therefore no one gets the same satisfaction out of the same experience. Hesselink et.al (2008) summarized the factors affecting customer satisfaction as follows: (a) delivering quality service; (b) customer needs; (c) customer expectations; (d) measurement perceptions; (e) customer complaints; and (f) employee satisfaction.

At a heart of any successful strategy to manage satisfaction is the ability to make customer satisfaction surveys, as the results of customer satisfaction surveys are an important indicator of the health of the business, relying on them can generate valuable information that enables a company to compare the performance of one business unit or several business units in different time periods and locations. They can provide leading indicators of shifts and can provide a clear sense of the service attributes that individual customers most desire.

However, customer satisfaction surveys cannot supply the breadth and depth of information about customer needed to guide the company strategy and product innovation process. Satisfaction surveys alone will not enable a



company to fend off new competitors or to keep services attuned to customers' changing needs for this reason; companies must also utilize a variety of other methods to listen to existing, potential and former customers. There are five major categories of approaches that travel agencies can use to listen to their customers. Most highly successful travel agencies employ several, if not all. Many average or poor performers either use very few or, if they use many, do a poor job of incorporating the results into strategies. The five categories are summarized as follows: (a) customer satisfaction indices; (b) feedback customers' complaints; (c) frontline personnel; (d) market research; and (e) strategy activities.

Travel agencies are becoming increasingly aware of the need for focusing on customer satisfaction and are starting to realize that it can be much bigger task than expected to implement and maintain successfully. Measuring customer satisfaction rate allows travel agencies managers to know how well the business process is working, to know where to make changes to create improvements and to determine if the changes led to improvements (Busreslab, 1996). Satisfaction is thus important, a key to understanding the preferences of passengers. satisfaction is also considered important because satisfied travelers typically are more likely return and thus more beneficial for the business (Skogoland and Siguaw, 2004). with satisfied travelers business can put less efforts and expenses on attracting new travelers and instead focus their offerings on services that add value to existing travelers (Dick and Basu, 1994). In short, customer satisfaction increases profitability, market share, and return on investment (Stevens et al., 1995; Skogoland and Siguaw, 2004) and is the important key to securing customer loyalty.

Customer loyalty

Customer loyalty is the feeling of attachment to or affection for a company's services. These feelings manifest themselves in many forms of customer behavior; these behavioral aspects of the customer loyalty were characterized in terms of repurchase intentions, word-of-mouth communication and recommendations of the organization. In fact, recently Dean (2007) defined **customer loyalty** as "the degree to which a customer recommends, and expresses a preference for future use of, a particular company". A travel agency can gain a lot of **benefits from customer loyalty**. These benefits are illustrated by Nadiri et al. (2008) as follows:



- (a) *The costs of serving loyal customers are less*; it is clear that the costs of serving a very regular, loyal, repeat customer in principle are lower than those of serving any other type of repeat customer. The key variables driving cost is first purchase versus repeating purchase, while what repeating purchase need is loyalty.
- (b) *Loyal customers are fewer prices sensitive*; one frequent claim of brand-equity researches is that brand loyalty and higher prices are positively correlated. It simply means that these people buy a brand at a higher price because they perceive it to be better, or to be more suitable for them. What they care is the brand, not the price——this is customer loyalty.
- (c) *Loyal customers spend more on the company*, a loyal customer may buy a new, different service from the same supplier, rather than choosing an alternative. Also, a loyal customer may purchase repeatedly, and use the service again. It is the weight of purchase coming from customer loyalty that gains more profits for the company.
- (d) *Loyal customers pass on positive recommendations about their favorite brands or suppliers*; this is the most vivid advertisement. Words of mouth can not only help a company to market its products, but also help the company to build brand value.

Customer loyalty is thus fundamental to business profits. When customers praise the travel agency and express preference for the agency over others, it means that they are likely to increase the volume of their purchases (Zeithaml et al., 1996). There is overwhelming evidence in both service quality and customer satisfaction literatures that repurchase intention is an outcome of service quality perceptions as well as satisfaction obtained from purchase episode (Carman, 1990; Hammoud, G., and Haggag, M., 2005; Legoharel, 1998; Smith et al., 1999; Zeithaml and Bitner, 2000).

Measures of loyalty

Edvardsson et al. (2000) claimed that loyalty is a customer's intention to keep purchasing a service or a product from the same provider since he/she believes he/she could not receive a better value from other providers. Functionally loyal customers are loyal because they have an objective reason to be. Werner felt points out "cost-based brand loyalty" where brand utilities have a positive influence on brand choice. Functional loyalty can be created by functional



values using price, quality, and distribution, usage convenience of a product or a service through different loyalty programs giving a concrete reason to prefer certain agency. Unfortunately competitors can most easily copy functional values. Thus, creating functional value offers a fleeting competitive advantage: functional loyalty can't be very long lasting. (Barnes , 2004).

There are alternative measurements of loyalty which we have grouped in this study into two major categories: repurchase intentions and word-of-mouth (WOM) intentions. Existing literature acknowledges the importance of repurchase and WOM intentions and thus uses these two dimensions as consequence of service quality perceptions (for instance; Anderson, 1998; Anderson et al., 1997; Yi, 1990). The customer satisfaction found to be direct predictor of repurchase and WOM intentions (Cronin and Taylor, 1992). Similarly, research shows that the higher the degree of customer satisfaction, the greater the likelihood of repurchase and spreading positive WOM communication (Davidow, 2003; Ekiz and Arasli, 2007). In the present study, **repurchase intention** refers to the travelers' plans to book for travel with the travel agency in their next vacation. On the other hand, WOM also received considerable research attention.

Kau and Loh (2006) delineated **WOM** as "... the informal communication between consumers about the characteristics of a business or a product". Schiffman and Kanuk (2004) argued that WOM communications tend to be highly persuasive and extremely effective in nature; thus companies need to understand factors creating WOM intention and to invest heavily in creating a positive one.

Improving customer loyalty

Customer loyalty can always be improved, and the bottom line impact can be considerable. Improving customer loyalty is not a short term fix, but hard work, good strategic planning and implementation backed by the whole travel agency will pay off in the longer term (Nadiri et al. 2008):

- **In the first instance**, Travel agency staff, should focus on ensuring that the customer gets the best experience every time with the travel agency - this create the lasting impression and can create the loyalty required of the travelers.
- **Secondly**, The travel agency's challenge is to focus on those key travelers which can be and that are profitable for the travel agency and design its product accordingly.



- *Thirdly*, The travel agency needs to build direct customer relations via a range of initiatives designed to improve brand recognition and loyalty, such as; events, online activities, media, public relation relevant to its key audience.
- *Fourthly*, and the most challenging issue is to ensure the whole organization is bought into the travel agency's customer management concept and vision.

Finally, Service quality, satisfaction and loyalty are strongly linked to one another - it is their combination that can influence the travelers to make their final loyalty decision 'to book or not to book' a vacation with a certain agency.

Research Hypotheses and Study Objective

The objective of this study is to investigate the main factors affecting the formation of customer loyalty in Egypt's travel agencies. In addition, this paper also seeks to identify the effects of perceived service quality on the creation of customer satisfaction and examine the relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Background to the study and hypothesis development

In consumer and marketing research, there is a long tradition of using hypotheses to understand the relationships between dependent and independent variables (Ehigie, 2006). Based on the objective of this study, the researcher developed two hypotheses to support the research. They are testing the relationships between customer loyalty and the two variables selected for this study (perceived service quality and customer satisfaction):

H1: There is no relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty.

H2: There is no relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.

Research Methodology

The sample of the study consists of customers using Egypt's travel agencies with non-probability judgmental sampling techniques Judd et al., (1991) define judgmental sampling or purposive sampling as "picking" cases that are judged to be typical of the population in which we are interested, assuming that errors of judgment in the selection will tend to counterbalance one another. A total of 300 questionnaires were distributed to travel agencies travelers and respondents were requested to fill out these questionnaires in a self-administered manner. Of these, 210 questionnaires were returned. In all, 200



questionnaires were found to be useful, which represents a 66.6 per cent response rate from the original sample of 300.

A fourth-part questionnaire was developed as the instrument to collect data, the first part deals with the respondents' demographic characteristics and with personal information on them, the second part measure the first factor affecting customer loyalty considered in this study, perceived service quality. There were 12-items in all for measuring service quality perceptions: 3-items for travel agency reliability, 3-items for website customization, and 4-items for personnel, and 2-items for image. Part three measures the second factor affecting customer loyalty considered in this study , customer satisfaction using five-point Likert scale, ranging from completely satisfied (1) to completely dissatisfied (5). And the fourth part consists of 4- items which measure the customer loyalty, 2-items for repurchase intention (RI) and 2-items for word-of-mouth communication (WOM).

Results and Conclusion

- The majority of the targets respondents of the present study were males, who account for 140 of the 200 respondents (70 %). Aged between 30 and 50, fell into a medium income bracket and have employee-level jobs. Most of the respondents were from Egypt (150 of them).The highest percentages with regard to each demographic factor are summarized in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Summary of Demographics Highest Percentages

<i>Customer profile</i>	<i>Highest Percentage</i>	
	<i>Variable</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
<i>Gender</i>	Male	70
<i>Age</i>	Between30-50	77.5
<i>Income</i>	Medium	75
<i>Employee category</i>	Employee	67.3
<i>Nationality</i>	Egyptian	75

Source: created by the author for this study.



- Respondents were asked to rate each of the service quality perceptions on a scale with value from 1 to 3 with 1 meaning strong and 3 low. Within this range the most strong travel agency service perceptions was associated with " the information provided is up to date (80% of the respondents) followed by the" relying on the information on the website." and "product information on the website is accurate" selected by 76.5 % and 65% respectively.
- According to respondents, this item" The site helps to find exactly what I wants" and "The site is easy to customize" are considered the most strong website customization selected by (selected by 80%and 70% respectively) on the other hand " the site makes it easy to get in touch with the travel agency" gets low rating. Therefore ,customization play an important role, epically for pre-transaction .For customers to make the decision to book a vacation on a certain travel website depends on all services being accessible through fast and reliable links and the presence of an easy to use such engine.
- The personnel service perceptions got relatively low ratings (as shown in Table2) regarding "employees' general attitude", "employees' experience and level of education are adequate" and "employees have the knowledge to answer your questions" .on the other hand, the "whether the personnel show personnel care equally to everyone" is considered to be the most strong personnel service perceptions. Therefore, travel agencies needs to take actual steps towards improving employees in order to better understand and serve customers and thus, to be in a better competitive situation.
- According to respondents, their travel agency has a strong image (95% of the respondents), and they indicate that there is a strong consistence of prices with given service (90% Of the respondents.)



Table 2: Service quality perceptions

Scale items	Strong	moderate	Low
Travel agency Reliability			
The information provided is up to date	160(80%)	27(13.5%)	13(6.5%)
Product information (travel description) on the web site is accurate	153(76.5%)	22(11%)	25(12.5%)
Relying on the information on the web site	130(65%)	50(25%)	20(10%)
Website customization			
The site makes it easy to get in touch with the travel agency	27(13.5)	13(6.5%)	160(80%)
The site helps to find exactly what I want	160 (80%)	22(11%)	18(9%)
The site is easy to customize	140(70%)	38(19%)	22(11%)
Personnel			
Employees' general attitude	20(10%)	60(30%)	120(60%)
Employees' experience and education level are adequate	40(20%)	50(25%)	110(55%)
Whether personnel show personnel care equally to everyone	148(74%)	32(16%)	20(10%)
Employees have the knowledge to answer your questions	40(20%)	54(27%)	106(53%)
Image			
Consistency of prices with given service	180(90%)	10(5%)	10(5%)
Image of the travel agency	190(95%)	6(3%)	4(2%)

Source: created by the author for this study

- The majority (80%) of the respondents were completely satisfied with the quality of service of the travel agency. It is clear that different satisfaction levels reflect different issues and therefore, require different actions. The high levels of satisfaction among the respondents are a good indicator of the level of quality of the services they are receiving from the agency. One of the respondents comment saying: "*as satisfaction goes up, so does loyalty*".

Table (3): Customer Satisfaction Levels

Customer satisfaction (CSAT)	Frequency	Percentage
Completely satisfied	160	80 %
Satisfied	28	14 %
Neutral	8	4 %
Dissatisfied	4	2 %
Completely dissatisfied	1	1 %

Source: created by the author for this study



Regarding the repurchase and word of mouth intentions, the respondents agreed to consider a certain travel agency as the first choice for booking a vacation as well as to make use of the website to search for travel information in the next few years (80% of the respondents). In considering the reasons for their choice of a certain agency, service quality was chosen as the reason by the majority (76%) of respondents with convenience of prices and services of the website also selected by 14% and 12% respectively. Additionally, the respondents (84%) were also in favor to say positive things about the travel agency to other people whom seek their advice as well as (85%) of the respondents recommended it to their family and friends. It is well observed that completely satisfied travelers are to a surprising degree much more loyal than satisfied travelers.

Table (4): Customer Loyalty Measures

Repurchase intention (RI)	Agree (Freq. %)	Disagree (Freq. %)
I consider this travel agency my first choice to book for travel	160(80%)	40(20%)
In the future I will certainly make use the website to search for travel information in the next few years	160(80%)	40(20%)
Word-of-mouth (WOM)		
I say positive things about this travel agency to other people	168(84%)	32(16%)
I recommend this travel agency to my family and friends	170(85%)	30(15%)

Source: created by the author for this study.

The data was analyzed using statistical package of social science (SPSS) to test the two hypotheses. The hypothesis testing shows that the null hypotheses one and two were rejected, confirming that perceived service quality and customer satisfaction have a significant effect with regard to creating customer loyalty to travel agencies. This result is consistent with the findings of Ehigie (2006), Licata and Chakraborty (2009); and Matos et al., (2009). Hypothesis testing is summarized in Table 5.



Table 5: Summary of Hypothesis Testing

Null Hypotheses Statements	Sig. level	Results
H1: There is no relationship between perceived service quality and customer loyalty.	0.00	Rejected H1
H2: There is no relationship between customer satisfaction and customer loyalty.	0.00	Rejected H2

Source: created by the author for this study

Recommendations

Based on the research findings and results, several recommendations can be suggested:

- In terms of human resources (HR), Travel agencies management must train frontline employee to listen effectively and to make the first attempts at amends when customers have bad experiences. All employees-not just those with front line jobs –spend a significant amount of time interacting in-depth with customers.
- Travel agencies management should also concentrate on recruiting and training employees with good communication skills and retaining the good ones to compete against other agencies. This is necessary to keep customers satisfy and thus create positive word of mouth to attract more new customers. Employees' knowledge should also be enhanced so that they can better deal with customers when the latter report problems to them.
- Travel agencies management should focus on improving some of the tangibles elements of service quality, such as the appearance of the physical facilities and materials and equipment used to facilitate service to customers.
- In addition, Travel agencies need to invest more on service quality that has significant relationship with customer satisfaction which leads to create customer loyalty in future. In other words, the researcher can mention that customer satisfaction is still a strong predictor of customer loyalty in this study.
- Moreover, Travel agencies should update their online service facilities, to be successful, key factor is to keep the online service quality at high level and maintain this level. Failures will result in service dissatisfaction.



- Travel agencies must closely monitor customer characteristics to accurately target desirable customers, considering not merely demographics but also consumption behaviors, preferences, etc. Travel agencies, thus should effectively obtain loyal traveler decision information, including personal information, consumption behavior, and perceived service quality in order to retain traveler loyalty.
- It is incredibly important for travel agency to be able to understand its customer behavior and loyalty potential in order to sustain customer growth and potential for increased profitability. The more the travel agency knows about its customer segments and how to manage and market to them effectively, the more potential the travel agency will have for generating revenue.
- In order to better satisfy their customers, travel agencies can share customer information more efficiently among their customer service departments, reservations departments and loyalty programs. Regardless of the channel through which customers communicate with travel agencies- the Internet, telephone, e-mail, postal mail or face to face-travel agencies will maintain a consistent and accurate dialog with its customers, having on hand an understanding of customers' profiles.
- Travel agencies managers should maintain a loyal customer base through: (a) providing consistent and high quality customer service, especially in a society in which people are finding it harder to find decent customer service;(b) offering loyalty rewards, customers love to be rewarded for giving their business to an agency ; (c) seeking customer input, by talking to ,finding out how to improve their experience; (d)offering competitive prices, customers are looking for the best deal, they may enjoy the way they are treated but if they cannot afford the pricing they will not return; and(e)following the policy to make the customer happy by making a decision that best's for the customer.
- If a customer management strategy is implemented and run effectively, the travel agency will have increased its ability to generate more revenue and deliver positive return on investment over time.



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ملخص البحث باللغة العربية

أثر جودة الخدمة المقدمة على ولاء العميل (بالتطبيق على شركات السياحة)

لقد برزت في مواجهة شركات السياحة تحديات جديدة فرضتها المتغيرات الدولية - وأهمها ما يتعلق بجودة الخدمات - والمناقسة الشديدة التي زادت حدتها، وفي هذا الصدد أصبحت شركات السياحة في موقف يحتم عليها العمل الجاد والمستمر لتطوير وتحديث الخدمات التي تقدمها بأعلى جودة وتوفير قيم أكثر لعملائها لكسب ولائهم، وخاصة أن تكلفة الاحتفاظ بولاء العملاء القدامى تعد أكثر ربحية وأقل تكلفة من اجتذاب عملاء جدد، ويهدف هذا البحث إلى التعرف على أهمية تأثير جودة الخدمة المقدمة ورضا العميل على ولائه والذي يترجم في صورة معاودته للشراء من الشركة نفسها مرات ومرات مع عدم قبوله الشراء من المنافسين على الرغم من محاولتهم لجذبه، وقيام العميل بإقناع الآخرين بشراء خدمات هذه الشركة (الكلمة المنطوقة) مما سيكون له نتائج إيجابية على المدى البعيد.

هذا وقد اعتمد البحث على كل من الدراسة المكتبية والدراسة الميدانية والتي تمت من خلال توزيع استمارات استقصاء على عينة عشوائية من العملاء بالتطبيق على شركات السياحة المصرية بهدف إختبار صحتي فرض البحث والوصول إلى مجموعة من النتائج والتوصيات التي يمكن من خلالها تحسين وتطوير الخدمات بما يتلائم ويقف فوق رغبات العميل ومن ثم يتحقق رضا العميل والذي بدوره يؤثر على ولاء هذا العميل مما يمهد الطريق أمام شركات السياحة المصرية لإقتناص الفرص المتاحة من كسب ولاء العملاء والأستفادة منها واستثمار عوائدها وكذلك الإدراك المبكر للتهديدات التي قد تواجهها مستقبلا إذا لم تتخذ التدابير اللازمة لمواجهتها بفاعلية.

