Chapter 14

Social Software Platforms as Motor of Relationship Marketing in Services:
A Conceptual Framework with Focus on the Airport Industry

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ABSTRACT

The traditional role of German airports as providers of infrastructure serving macro-economic purposes gives way to a more market-oriented understanding. Airports with overlapping catchment areas increasingly compete for airlines and passengers. Despite an evolving awareness of the need for customer-orientation, airports lack genuine passenger insights, as airlines and tour operators own the passenger relationship. The emergence of public Social Software Platforms (SSP), such as the online social network Facebook or the micro-blogging service Twitter, provides airports with the opportunity to take a genuine customer-centric approach to airport service quality. The chapter provides an overview of the convergence of social and technological networks. Touching on the 'need-satisfier' approach of economist Max-Neef and contributions of self-determination theory, the motivational pull of SSP is analyzed, and success factors for harnessing their Relationship Marketing potential are deduced. Finally, the chapter summarizes opportunities and challenges for airport organizations when engaging with passengers on SSP.

INTRODUCTION

In the last decades, the German airport industry has undergone a lot of changes due to commercialization, privatization and liberalization. The traditional role of airports as providers of infra-structure serving macro-economic purposes is changing and gives way to a more market-oriented understanding. Airport service quality and the ability to constantly innovate are important variables that contribute to overall airport attractiveness in addition to location, price, destination portfolio, and flight scheduling (Fodness & Murray, 2007).

For years airports never thought of passengers as their customers, the airlines were. (….) Airports have to (…) reach a level of engagement that passengers start, whenever possible and practical, to think in terms of selecting flights on the basis of which is a better airport to fly from or connect through (Salah, 2011).

Being responsive to service quality expectations of passengers is paramount for achieving customer satisfaction and retention. The quality of a service depends on the attitude of a customer with regard to his perception of the way the service is performed in contrast to his service expectations (Bolton & Drew, 1991; Grönroos, 1984; Parasuraman, Berry Leonard, & Zeithaml, 1991; Zeithaml, Berry Leonard, & Parasuraman, 1988). By introducing the concept of perceived service quality Grönroos (1984) integrated quality also into a marketing-related context. A good perceived service quality leads to customer satisfaction. Customer satisfaction can be seen as a driver of profitability. Satisfied customers are likely to establish a strong relationship to a service provider resulting in customer loyalty (Storbacka, Strandvik, & Grönroos, 1994).

Understanding service quality expectations of passengers is vital for providing competitive airport services. However, airports are complex business relationship networks that lack genuine passenger insights. While no airport would exist without passengers, the passenger relationship and data base is owned by airlines and tour operators. Complexity is added by fact that numerous airport services are not provided directly by the airport to the passenger, but through airport concessionaires or tenants. Current instruments for measuring airport service quality, such as frequent passenger satisfaction surveys, are useful for benchmarking purposes, but do not reveal the true customer perspective. Typical passenger pain points are waiting times at check-in and baggage drop-off counters, lack of cleanliness of airport facilities or orientation in terminal buildings. Reducing the passenger to a statistical number while measuring the obvious might take the form of both operational weaknesses as well as limitations on customer-centric services. Passenger insights are a precondition for airports to carefully determine necessary investments in airport service quality. All quality improvement efforts need to be financially accountable. Based on customer feedback some potential improvements might be evaluated as being ineffective, as they have no impact on overall customer satisfaction (Rust, Zahorik, & Keiningham, 1995). As innovative airport services of today may quickly become the minimum expectations of tomorrow, it is also important for airports to timely notice shifting customer expectation to sustain stable revenues for themselves and their business partners (airlines, handling agents, shopping outlets, restaurants, etc.). By supporting their business partners to increase passenger-related revenues, airport organizations increase the competitive strength of the airport organism as a whole.

With a growing adoption of public Social Software Platforms (SSP) by customers, such as the online social network Facebook or the micro-blogging service Twitter, airports eventually are provided with the infrastructure to enter into a dialogue with their passengers and leverage direct passenger knowledge. SSP are web-based services that allow users to set up a profile within a bounded system (Boyd & Ellison, 2007), virtually connect to other users, groups or organizations and share information, videos, photos etc. with their network of connections based on privacy settings. On SSP interpersonal relations as well as the relations between organizations and their customers are extended into the virtual world. Individuals publicly display their social relations (connections) to other individuals, groups, or organizations and by this enable researchers to get a glimpse of their offline social network.

The purpose of the chapter is threefold. First, it provides an overview of the ongoing convergence of social and technological networks and

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