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Upgrading Guiding

Focus on less frequently travelling airline customers

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Description <p>The main purpose of the thesis was to react to the industry-wide trend of simplifying processes, flowing the customer journey and implementing self-service in the customer journey. The aim of the research was to identify themes on what the less frequently travelling Finnair customers expected and experienced during the customer journey and guiding at Helsinki Airport as a case study.</p> <p>Semi-structured interviews were executed on the targeted customer segment at the departure gates and arrival hall at Helsinki Airport, where a total of thirteen departing, transiting and arriving passengers were interviewed. The aim was to identify themes around fear and uncertainty factors and the factors of best-case scenarios linked in the service processes at the airport. The interviews were qualitatively analyzed by using phenomenography.</p> <p>According to the study, the customers expected to experience an effortless and flowing journey without any negative surprises. The interviewees' expectations towards the personnel were to get support, reliability, clear communications, professionalism and personal recognition. The customer experiences, on the other hand, were linked typically in surroundings, personnel, self-service, one's own journey and the passengers' fears and irritating factors. It was found out that the importance of guiding by human personnel was much needed in terms of the journey flow. Customers valued guiding in enhancing the smoothness of the journey, reducing stressful factors as well as facing new or previously unknown factors or experiences.</p> <p>The results can be used for further development of the guiding role and the customer journey at the airport. Developing the guiding role to a more individual and innovative direction, a wider future research could be conducted.</p>		
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<p>Tiivistelmä</p> <p>Ilmailualalla vallitseva globaali trendi – prosessien yksinkertaistaminen, palvelukokemuksen ja -polun sujuvoittaminen ja itsepalvelun lisääminen matkustajan palvelupolulla – on muokannut lentoyhtiöiden palvelutapoja. Tämän tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli selvittää tapaustutkimuksena lentoyhtiö Finnairin harvemmin matkustavien matkustajien odotuksia ja kokemuksia palvelupolusta ja opastuksesta Helsinki-Vantaan lentoasemalla.</p> <p>Yhteensä kolmeatoista lähtevää, vaihtavaa ja saapuvaa matkustajaa haastateltiin teema-haastatteluin Helsinki-Vantaan lentoaseman lähtöporteilla ja tuloaulassa. Haastattelujen tavoitteena oli selvittää lentoaseman palvelupolkuun liittyviä pelkoja ja epävarmuustekijöitä sekä erinomaisesti onnistuneiden palvelutilanteiden tekijöitä. Aineisto analysoitiin laadullisesti fenomenografiaa avuksi käyttäen.</p> <p>Tutkimuksen mukaan matkustajat odottivat, että palvelupolku on heille vaivaton, sujuva ja vailta negatiivisia yllätyksiä. Opastavalta henkilökunnalta haastatellut odottivat tukea, luottavuutta, selkeää viestintää, ammatillista osaamista ja matkustajan henkilökohtaista huomioimista. Matkustajien kokemukset taas liittyivät tyypillisesti ympäristöön, henkilökuntaan, itsepalveluun, omaan matkaan sekä matkustajien pelkoihin ja ärsytyksiin. Lentoyhtiön henkilökunnan toteuttama opastus koettiin arvokkaaksi ja tarpeelliseksi palvelupolun sujuvuuden kannalta. Opastus koettiin tärkeänä myös stressiä aiheuttavien tekijöiden poistamisessa ja uusien tilanteiden kohtaamisessa.</p> <p>Tutkimustulosten pohjalta matkustajien palvelupolkua ja henkilökunnan opastusroolia lentokentän prosesseissa voidaan kehittää edelleen. Opastusroolin kehittämistä eli yksilöllistämistä, lisämyynnillistä puolta ja roolin innovatiivista hyödyntämistä tulisi kuitenkin tutkia laajemmin.</p>		
<p>Avainsanat (asiasanat) opastus, odotettu palvelu, koettu palvelu, ilmailuala, lentoyhtiöt, IATA Fast Travel Programme, itsepalvelu, laadullinen tutkimus</p>		
Muut tiedot		

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1 Introduction

The most visible phenomenon behind the importance of passenger guidance at airports, and the purpose of this thesis is automatizing processes in airport service environments. According to the scenario by The International Air Transportation Association, IATA, (Best 2013) fully automated airport service processes should be provided to 80% of the commercial passengers by the year 2020. This is due to partly about going more streamlined and simplifying processes for the customer but partly about cost-effective solutions for the companies – keeping the industry alive. Companies from the fields of industry with high fixed costs, such as airlines and the whole aviation industry, are put under a high economical pressure to optimize workforce and resources and inventing cost-effective solutions. Including the customers firmly into the automatized customer service processes is attractive for the airlines and they can take advantage of it for a good reason. The problem is that by automatizing processes and including customers tighter to the service process by implementing more and more self-service in the process, the role of customer service personnel might experience a radical change from transaction-oriented actions to a more guiding- or process supervising-oriented direction. From the customer point of view, the main concerns seem to be whether they get value for their money, and uncertainty towards new systems, as traditional face-to-face service has been the kind of service they are used to get from an airline, even though, a more control over their own journey is trending. (Fordham et al. 2013, Best 2013.) Low-cost carriers, such as Southwest Airlines, Ryanair and Norwegian have paved the way for this direction by simplifying their processes, while cutting from the staff presence in the service process, to more function-oriented processes.

According to IATA Fact Sheet: Fast Travel (2015) the background for the whole Fast Travel initiative is not only to respond to the rapid evolution of technology, customer demand for faster and eased customer processes but also to raise airline cost-effectiveness and to improve and to focus on customer service. It could be easily said that giving more responsibility to the customer and raising the percentage of self-service in the overall process would mean that there is less need

for traditional service personnel. This may be the case in certain processes such as check-in and bag drop, for those passengers using airline services frequently and those not needing any irregular procedures or special attention in the basic actions of a customer journey, but as air transportation becomes more accessible for more people, also the percentage of those travelling for the first time or less frequently becomes higher.

This thesis has a focus on the constant need to react to the passengers', especially the less frequently travelling passengers', needs for guidance at the airport service processes at Helsinki Airport, and how the commissioner of the thesis, Finnair Plc, could develop their customer service from a certain customer segment point of view.

Some of the terms are opened up in this thesis when they appear in the text but some of the most important and commonly used terms are explained in the following Table 1. The explanations will tie the following terms to the right context as they may have meanings in other contexts as well.

Term	Explanation (Cited in this study as)
Airline Personnel / Staff / Agent	Airline employees in customer service tasks at the airport
Baggage Drop	A point at the airport departure hall, where passengers leave their baggage to be carried into the hold of the aircraft.
Boarding	A procedure at the departure gate at the airport, where passengers proceed to the aircraft.
Check-in	A procedure at the departure hall at the airport or online, where passengers register themselves on the flight.
Customer Journey	The path and all its touch points that passenger goes through to consume the service. Often referred as the passenger journey at the airport.
Customer Segment	A certain group of passengers that share the same behaviour, needs and expectations.
Guiding / Guidance	Mostly referred as airline personnel actions, those include giving advice to and supporting the passengers' customer journey.

Less Frequently Travelling Passengers	Passengers travelling abroad by air once, twice or maximum three times a year
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Table 1. Key Terms in the Thesis and Their Explanations

1.1 Research Problems and Research Questions

Every company the size of Finnair that is interested in the value they provide to their customers collects quantitative and qualitative data through various different customer feedback channels. The previous and collected knowledge about the customer are a critical, highly valuable, source in developing services. However, regarding the service process the airlines have, customers are rarely systematically interviewed about their feelings, perceptions and expectations about the service process or customer journey at the airport – seldom about guidance in focus and interviews executed on-site during the customer journey. Passenger feedback about guiding can be given to Finnair through an open online feedback form at finnair.com, through a Finnair customer satisfaction survey and directly to Finnair staff at the airport. It may be problematic in terms of validity when customers' voice is more of a feedback to the company than an interview on the service process conducted by an outsider. The results may be easily biased depending on the experience of the customer about the company or the industry as a whole and the real expectations and experiences may stay within the customers' mind.

The research problem in this study is to acknowledge the expectations, experiences and the guidance as well as critical touch points in the customer journey of a less frequently travelling Finnair customer at Helsinki Airport. That makes the main research questions the following:

- How does a less frequently travelling Finnair customer perceive guidance in the service process at Helsinki Airport?
- What kind of guidance and service is being expected and needed from the Finnair staff by less frequently travelling passengers?

1.2 Research Objectives

The objectives for this research are to hear the best and worst-case scenarios of customer journey at the airport directly from the passengers, gather qualitative data concerning guidance at Helsinki Airport from the less frequently travelling customer segment. This will give support to the development and improvements of the customer experience in ground processes through better customer understanding. Another goal is to give knowledge and tools for Finnair staff to shape and craft their guidance and professional role and skills through a better customer understanding.

The research objective is also to support future conceptualization of service processes and working roles. As service is a constantly transforming and time-sensitive subject, constant research and reform must be done for service excellence. Moreover, what the future brings along with self-service infused processes will raise the importance of guiding and more conceptualized airline staff job descriptions from multiple points of view; for example brand engagement and passenger flow.

1.3 Finnair Plc in Brief

Finnair, founded in 1923 as Aero O/Y, is one of the oldest continually operating airlines in the world. Today, Finnair covers over 70 destinations worldwide and with their code-share network with **oneworld** alliance as well as with other co-operations, Finnair's customers can reach up to around 1000 destinations in over 150 countries. (Finnair 2014, 5) Finnair has been named as Northern Europe's Best Airline five years in a row since 2010 (Finnair 2015a) by a renowned airline research and evaluation organisation Skytrax, which also rates Finnair as a 4-star airline in product and service quality (Skytrax 2015).

Finnair's operational mission is to offer the smoothest connections and one-of-a-kind Nordic experience in the northern hemisphere with its own route strategy and **oneworld** alliance cooperation. Finnair specializes in being the link between the Far East and Europe. The Far East has a strong presence in Finnair's strategic objectives as Finnair aims to double their Asian revenue by the year 2020 from

the revenue level of 2010. Helsinki Airport being Finnair's hub airport and Helsinki being located geographically in a shortest route from Europe to the Far East is a real competitive advantage for Finnair and the basis for their strategy (Finnair 2015a).

Finnair has divided their implementation of strategy into four focus areas; profitable growth, cost competitiveness, customer experience and international winning team. (Finnair 2015a) The last two of the focus areas are a sign that Finnair puts a high emphasis on the customer experience and the delivery of a Finnair experience. Finnair Group employs around 4500 employees out of which about 6 per cent are working under Finnair Ground Services; the unit, where the Finnair customer service personnel working at the Finnish airports belong and the unit delivering the Finnair experience at the airport to a customer in the first hand (Finnair 2014, 47-50). Finnair marks customer satisfaction as one of their key performance indicators (ibid., 13), which accents the importance of coherent customer service processes and a smooth customer journey – a true Nordic experience.

2 The Operational Characteristics And Changes In The Commercial Airline Service Processes

Generally, airports are areas that have a complex and specific infrastructure and design. When you take the airport functions into their basics and do not take into account the design factors, the infrastructure of all airports can be divided into two parts: the landside and the airside. In common language and from the passenger point of view, the landside is the area where the functions happen before the security control and airside can be understood as the area after the security control. The typical landside in the airport area consists of supporting infrastructure linked to the access of the airport such as roads, railways and parking areas and the pre-security-control-side of the terminal building. The typical airside of the airport consists of post-security-control-side of the terminal and aircraft operations, which are less visible for the customer; including for example taxiways

and runways, hangars, aircraft stands and maintenance, ramp and apron area as well as a fire station (FAA 1988).

Similar to the common nature of airports basic functions mentioned above, the basics of a customer journey in a commercial airport are quite alike in all airports. The journey includes arriving to the airport landside one way or another, going through the airline's departure processes such as check-in and baggage drop, passing the security control to the airside, possible travel document checks if exiting the passport-free area and entering the aircraft through a departure gate. When landing at an airport, the journey is counter wise; exit the aircraft to the airport facilities, possible arrival document checks, collect the baggage and exit the airport facilities. The main purpose of a commercial airport is to facilitate the movement of passengers and their physical and intangible travel needs.

Looking back to the history of commercial aviation, since the first commercial flight carrying one passenger in 1914 to the numbers of year 2014 when over 100 000 flights carried around 8 million passengers, one of the biggest changes in the industry, alongside with technical improvement in aircrafts and airport facilities, was that 100% of flight tickets could be issued as electronic tickets in 2008. E-ticketing has been a great deal for airlines: bringing notable cost savings and improved customer convenience. The industry change from traditional paper ticketing era to a digital e-ticketing era was not only a huge step for redesigning the customer journey and procedures as well as systems at the airports and airlines, but also a crucial matter to even imagine such things common today as automatic check-in or other bits of the Fast Travel Initiative (IATA, E-ticketing).

Travelling Fast Towards The Future

IATA's Fast Travel program is part of IATA's larger Simplifying the Business (StB) program the core of which is in the topic -- to simplify the business in its many different aspects. The goal for StB is not only to react to and to develop the economic side of the business as well as customer experience but also to "make the industry easier to do business with for both customers and partners" (IATA 2015).

The Fast Travel program has its focus on raising the number and level of self-service processes and its implementation is divided into six areas:

1. Check-in
2. Bags ready-to-go
3. Document check
4. Flight rebooking
5. Self-boarding
6. Bag recovery.

From a customer point-of-view this means that instead of an airline agent doing all the work, more responsibility in executing the process points is given to the customer. Fast Travel emphasis is on most of the customers and it is naturally understood that there are and will be passengers who need special attention from an airline agent.

The Fast Travel desired customer journey would go the following way. The check-in is done either automatically, using check-in kiosks at the airport, using the Internet or by a mobile application. Before the bag drop, the bag tag is already attached to the bag. At the time of writing, there are already reusable, digital bag tags powered by the RFID technology available on some airlines but the sticker paper bag tag still has the majority of users. The paper bag tags can be printed from kiosks or at the self-service bag drop machines at the airport, depending on the system. The next step would be, in most cases, to go through the security control that has its own development program under the StB program, Smart Security project (IATA 2015). Document checks can be done using a self-service machine. Self-boarding through machines, e-gates, is possible by scanning the boarding pass. If there was to be a delay, cancellation or other kind of irregularity in the customer journey, it would be possible for the customer to use self-service channels such as kiosks, web or mobile applications to manage the passenger's own journey, such as flight re-booking or refunds/compensation from the interruption of the journey. These are the areas of Fast Travel implementation when departing or transferring. The Fast travel program affects the arriving part of the journey by offering a self-service bag recovery through kiosks, web or mobile when baggage is broken, lost or otherwise mishandled (Best 2015).

According to Best (2015), IATA's goal is that 80% of passengers would be offered a coherent Fast Travel experience globally by the year 2020. While the whole project is still in its infancy, 24,4% of utilization rate of the whole Fast Travel program (IATA), the finish line, year 2020, is not that far away. The raised amount and level of self-service and self-service infused systems have their sides. From the customer point-of-view, especially, if the airport facilities cannot keep up in size and services for the growing number of passengers, the Fast Travel program offers ease and flow for a smooth journey.

Using self-service machines and appliances is not an everyday task for those not used to using them, but with a little guidance and in overall, self-service take the customer flow at the airport to another level. On the other hand, from the airline side, traditional agent roles, such as the systems and ways to operate in general, are on the transformation table when the amount of self-service gets up. Self-service processes provide more time disposable for the airline staff to focus on the customers in need of assistance and to concentrate in those procedures where staff presence and actions are needed more such as solving possible irregularities and other barriers in the customer journey or doing ancillary sales for example.

The scenarios of the direction of the future passenger journey are going to be straightforward by the industry authorities, IATA. A special report about the future of air travel in Airlines International (2013) addressed five themes to be developed in the future: "Airline products; Passenger Data; Real-Time Interaction; Hassle Free and A Seamless End-to-End Journey". One scenario of the future passenger journey is designed to be as:

They will drop their bags off at a convenient location, catch a train to the airport, walk through a less crowded facility barely stopping unless they want to, and board a plane looking forward to the meal and inflight entertainment of their choosing. At their destination they will be relaxed as they speed through immigration and make their way to the hotel where their bags will be delivered. (Airlines International 2013.)

Naturally, it must be taken into account that the industry must work together to make the steps towards this direction. Co-operation with multiple stakeholders

is crucial and to mention a few; airlines, airports, funders, designers, system providers and legislative authorities must work together for compatibility and industry-wide results in development. Airlines International (2013) cites that it would be a total chaos if there were no common goals in the industry.

Helsinki Airport and Finnair

The largest airport and the airport with most passenger traffic in Finland, Helsinki Airport is owned and run by Finavia; a public limited company with a total ownership belonging to the Finnish State. Finavia has twenty-four airports to manage all around Finland and also takes care of the air navigation inside the Finnish borders. In other words, Finavia facilitates and supports the airline industry in Finland (Finavia).

Helsinki airport is Finnair's hub airport – it is an airport Finnair can call home. First opened in 1952 for the summer Olympics in Helsinki, Helsinki airport has changed a lot and grown to be one of the most important and awarded airports in Northern Europe, Europe and even in the global scale. Helsinki airport consists of two passenger terminals, three runways and 33 operating airlines. There are over 15 million passengers per year at Helsinki airport and the airport holds over 20 000 employees in its surroundings (ibid.).

Finnair and Finavia share a strategic point in using the geographical location of Helsinki as an efficient and short route connecting Europe and Asia. Helsinki airport is known and awarded for its smooth operations for both departing and transit passengers. With high expectations in the passenger number growth, this requires exceptional details in passenger flow and streamlined processes (ibid.).

Moreover, especially Finnair flights to and from Helsinki airport are being operated in two hectic action peaks daily. Finnair being the major airline operating at Helsinki airport, these two peaks put the terminals under a high pressure twice a day. Well-functioning processes but with only a limited space to a growing number of passengers has forced the airport to adopt the self-service wave early on, which is taking over the whole service industry. Technologically speaking, that means a lot of new investments and changes in the airport facilities but the fact

that interests the author of the thesis is whether the change will also change the customer processes and experience – and to which direction the change will take the processes. According to the Fast Travel Programme by IATA (Best 2015), it seems to be the direction of the airlines as well when it comes to adopting the self-service-oriented processes but on the other hand, customers need to be guided to right directions one way or another. For the facility owner, Finavia in this case, this can be seen as for example added signs and visual or other kind of guiding whereas the airlines are left with less space to play in terms of guidance; or is the sky still the limit when it comes to innovative solutions in guiding as well? The biggest question here seems to be what is the right kind of guiding for airline passengers by an airline at the airport environment? To put it in more detail, what is the right kind of guidance for a specific segment of passengers or even an individual passenger?

3 Creating Value in the Service Process

3.1 Service and Service Process

The definition of services has experienced note-worthy change in perspective over the years. Grönroos (2009, 77) cites that the discussion on the definition of services has not been very active in the recent years though. The definition of services has gone from the old, product-oriented definition of services by American Marketing Association (1960, 21) in which services are regarded as vendible or part of something vendible to recent definitions such as Kotler's et al (2013, 6) statement of services being immaterial actions or benefits that can not be owned to various other attempts to define services. Grönroos (1998, 51) notes that many of these, at least previous, attempts lack the finding of Gummesson (1987, 22) that services can be exchanged but not often touched or experienced in a concrete manner. On the other hand, a less theoretical perspective in thinking what the services are is that services may be considered as an organization, a core product, a product augmentation, a product support or an act (Gilmore 2003, 5).

Grönroos' (2009, 77) definition of services from 1990 in which he refers to says, "services are processes consisting of intangible actions that are produced and consumed mostly at the same time". These actions have a problem-solving nature for the customer. A participant or participants in the process, which may be either from the service provider side or the customer side, execute the process in co-operation and interaction between and/or by using the tangible and intangible resources of the participants. Grönroos points out (Op.cit. p. 86-87) that where the physical product is about consuming the final product, services are more about consuming the process and getting a need fulfilled, from the consumer point of view, as a result on the consumption. Due to the intangible nature, to execute services, there have to be at least those two sides: someone with a need and someone with a solution to it. The two sides are not necessarily always in a personal touch or straight interaction with each other but the need and the solution have to be in place to create grounds for a service process (Op.cit. p. 77). These are the basic characteristics of services according to Grönroos (2009, 79; 1998, 53). Zeithaml et al. (1985) propose that the basic characteristics of services are intangibility, inseparability, heterogeneity and perishability, which share the same ideologies on the process nature, as does Grönroos' definition.

As service processes are composed of service moments, which consist of important interactions where consumer converges or diverges the service provider, called the moments of truth (Grönroos 2009, 111; Grönroos 2000, 72; Grönroos 1998, 39-44; Solis 2013, 61-62), it is beneficial for the experienced quality that consumer's expectations are fulfilled or/and exceeded at every point of the service process. The moment of truth is also extremely closely linked to the intangible nature, as well as its perishable and inseparable nature (Gilmore 2003, 11; Meroni & Sangiorgi 2011, 16-20), of services as the service provider gets only one chance to win the consumer on its side. Perishability means basically the same as moments of truth and by inseparability it is meant that services cannot be taken out of the context.

3.2 Service Value

When it comes to the basics, value is defined as the correlation or relationship between a price and/or a sacrifice and a benefit. Especially in services, a numeric price tag is not the only value indicator as there is most often effort, practising and planning needed before the consuming of a service. As service quality is always individually experienced, so is service value – there is no such thing as a standard perceived value but always an individually experienced and created value (Tuulaniemi 2011, 16).

Value in services, due to the unique characteristics of services, is created during the service process and a consumer can be seen as a co-creator of value (Sangiorgi 2013, 97). Grönroos (2009, 192) suggests that service value cannot be formed beforehand. Value is formed in consumer processes and gained during the processes, as is service as a whole. However, value can be suggested beforehand and in fact it plays a major role in the total perceived value (Op.cit. p. 192).

3.3 The Blueprint Model and Customer Journey

The Blueprint model is a visualized way to picture service processes from various viewpoints linked in the service process. L. Shostack first introduced it in Harvard Business Review back in 1984 (Shostack 1984). Its goal is to trace all the touch points and identify all the resources needed in the process from all process' stakeholders' perspective creating a logical continuum for the process. The power of blueprinting lays in its nature that is true to the facts, when it is constructed carefully and precisely, and reveals weaknesses in the process. Therefore, blueprinting may be used for creating a new service product, developing an old one or documenting the process to help the service provider know its processes. On the other hand, Tuulaniemi (2011, 90-93) states, that the accuracy and details depend on the purpose blueprinting is used for. If blueprinting is used for figuring out the big picture of the process, it may be beneficial not to get too attached with the little details.

There are two sides in the blueprint model for designing services: what is visible to the customer and what is invisible to the customer. These sides con-

struct four layers or tracks that must be taken into account: customer actions, service provider actions in straight relation with the customer, those technical devices and programmes the customer is using during the service process and the last one is the part of process that is completely invisible to the customer but necessary to execute the service (Tuulaniemi 2011, 90-93).

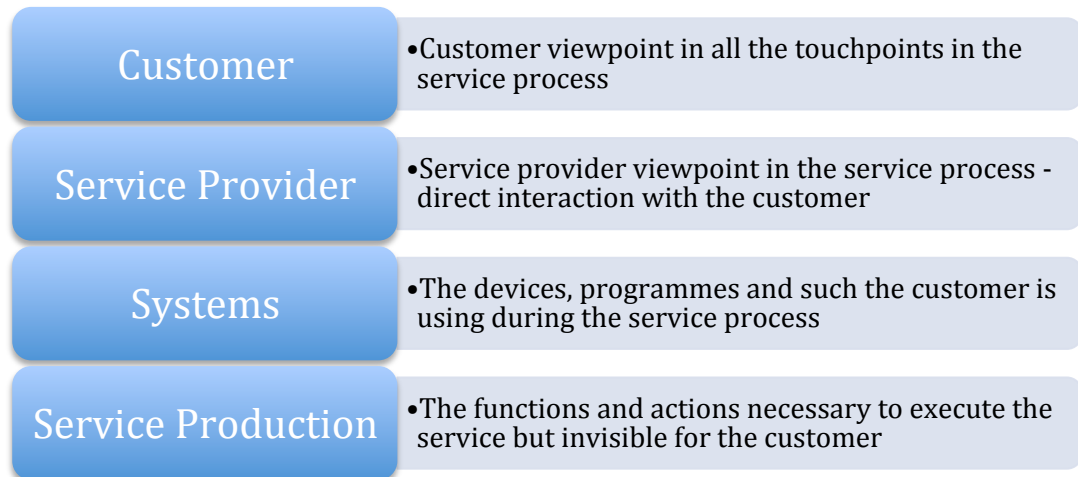


Figure 1. Summarizing the Blueprint model (Shostack 1984, 133-139., Tuulaniemi 2011, 90-93.).

The customer part of the blueprint model can be called also as a **customer journey**. A customer journey includes and pictures all the touch points and the significant factors in the customer's path in the service process. David, Norton and Pine (2013, 12) state customer journey as

“Customer journey,” in essence, means the sequence of events – whether designed or not – that customers go through to learn about, purchase and interact with company offerings – including commodities, goods, services or experiences.

A customer journey is simply from where the customer is coming, where is s/he is going to and where s/he ends and continues to. What does s/he do along the way in the service process and how s/he gets from one point to another. The customer journey planning and customer journey as a strategic tool is an extremely useful tool in managing customer processes, identifying obstacles, innovating better services and products. Mapping a customer journey done right can really help a company to understand customers and create a customer-centric approach in service development (Op.cit. 12-17).

3.4 Guidance and Customer Experience at Helsinki Airport

Finavia has personnel as guides all around the airport roaming and guiding in the most bottlenecking areas in the most bustling hours of the day. The majority of the most visible signs are out of airline control – they are designed, implemented and controlled by Finavia. Finnair has had their own personnel as guides in the check-in area since introducing the first self-service appliances, the self-service check-in kiosks in 2013. Before that, the airport, Finavia, mainly organized guidance and in some of the most hectic moments the on-duty Finnair customer service duty managers were helping in guiding the passengers through Finnair check-in and bag drop processes. Since the launch of self-service bag drop appliances, Finnair has had its own guiding agents to support the self-service processes and to guide Finnair passengers in the check-in area of Helsinki Airport terminal 2 (Leppikangas 2015).

Finnair guidance at the gate area is shown to the passengers as signs with Finnair logos above the departure gates. In June 2015 Finavia (Finavia News Room 2015) introduced Helsinki Airport as a silent airport. This means that only the most necessary announcements are being announced and most preferably focused on a specific gate area. The reason is to raise the level of comfortability of the passengers and improve the calm feeling before and after traveling. This means more responsibility is given to the passenger in terms of figuring out the correct gate number and being there early enough. More weight is given on the airline face-to-face guidance and interaction. Reduced announcements can be seen as decreasing factors in the amount of guidance at the gate area from an airline point-of-view. If more guidance at the departure gate area will be needed, other ways than announcements must be used.

Transit and arrival guidance on the ground, at the airport, is mainly organized by Finavia and executed by signs, maps and Finavia's and Finnair's digital channels such as websites and mobile applications as well as Finavia guide personnel. On the arrival gate, on every Finnair flight arriving in Helsinki, there is a member of Finnair personnel, a gate service agent, to greet and serve the passengers (Leppikangas 2015).

The current points in the customer journey, where the airline ground personnel staff have opportunity for interaction with the passengers are when the passengers are departing and arrive at the airport terminal, at the check-in and bag drop area, after the security control at the departure gate area and at the gate. When the passengers are arriving from a flight, the interaction points are at the arrival gate and in the arrivals hall.

According to Lahtinen and Isoviita (1999), the basic needs of service product customers are that they want to be respected, accepted, appreciated, listened, served and to be part of the service. On the same page, the authors state that the key factor in great customer service is

-- to know, how people want them to be treated. (48.)

In the modern airport environment filled with self-service solutions, there is a huge emphasis on the role of guiding. In some cases, especially for the economy passengers, the only human contact with the airline company before entering the aircraft may be an airline staff member in guidance tasks. That means knowing the (needs of a) customer and reshaping the ways of guiding, serving and selling ancillary services are one of the most important skills for the airline customer service personnel. For the customer, that interaction may also be one of the key determinants in forming the image about the company and its quality.

Marketing and customer service research have found liabilities in the consequences about successful or unsuccessful customer experience and its reflections to a long-term relationship between the company and the customer as well as image-building and attracting new customers. Whether it is the 1/12 -rule where one broken interaction with the customer would require 12 successful interactions to be fixed or the 3/11 -rule in which a customer would share a good experience with three people and a customer with a negative experience would tell about the bad interaction for eleven more people or some other liability, the main point in between the lines is to avoid bad interactions during the service process and always aim for the good ones (Lahtinen & Isoviita 1999, 4-5).

3.5 Focus on Leisure Travellers

According to The CEO of IPK International, Rolf Freitag (Freitag, 2015) The global share of leisure travellers was 71% of all the travellers in year 2014 and the share seems to be growing each year. Amount-wise, leisure travellers are the main customer segment in the whole tourism industry. As leisure travellers are usually those seldom travelling kind of customers with high expectations on smooth and effortless process, they are also the segment that is less likely to keep up with the changing airport environments and modernizing airport processes. It is easy to understand that a trip abroad or by an airplane only a few times a year or even more seldom can be an important event in life and security and ease may be considered as high priority factors when embarking on a journey. After all, for this kind of travellers a journey abroad is about taking a step away from the everyday life – to have a successful vacation.

An assumption can be infused that this type of customers may need more guidance at the airport environment than those travelling frequently, in business intentions and commuting purposes for instance. That is why leisure travellers make the primary customer segment to be studied for this research.

4 Service Quality

Service quality is often known as something how a consumer experiences the service and how the experience is in relation to the expectations of the consumer. Grönroos (2009, 100-103; 2000, 61-68) divides service quality into two dimensions: technical quality and functional quality that create the experienced quality. Buswell and Williams (2003, 11) give functional quality an alternative denotation of interpersonal quality. The technical quality dimension tells what is the final outcome of the service is while the functional quality consists of how the consumer reaches the outcome. In a commercial airline industry, the technical quality for the consumer could be to get from place A to place B by an airplane, as that is the desired outcome for the service. As functional quality is how the outcome is reached, the functional quality in this case is all the processes, external as well as internal actions and factors. These dimensions then go through “the image filter”

that sands off the edges of the experience to either worse or better direction depending on the consumer's mind-set about the image of the service provider. Then the experienced quality can be assessed or sensed.

According to Grönroos (2009, 104; 2000, 66), functional quality is often regarded as a more important dimension as the technical quality needs to be at an acceptable level for the service to be executed, but it is the functional quality that fulfils the experienced quality and, for example, differentiates the service from a competitor and compensates the possible loss in the technical quality. Grönroos even cites that the moments of truth explained earlier in this study determine the level of the functional quality (2009, 111). Again, in the airline industry, where all the competitors share the same technical quality of moving consumers from the place A to the place B, it is the functional quality, for example service processes or accessibility, that creates the competitive advantage for the service provider.

The Grönroos model for Total Perceived Quality (Grönroos 2009, 105-106) adds the expected quality to experienced quality that creates what is known as the total perceived quality. The expected quality consists of basically all that is expected about the service by the consumer. That includes factors such as marketing communication, image, sales process, word-of-mouth and the needs and values of the consumer. This process is visualized in Figure 2 below.

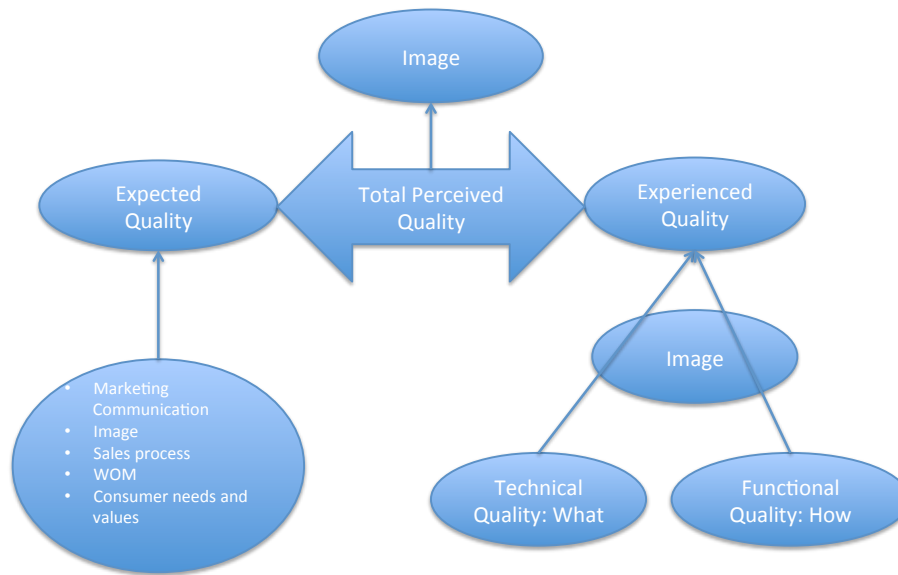


Figure 2. Total Perceived Quality (Grönroos 2000, 67).

Pesonen sees that, due to intangibility, services cannot be tried out or experienced beforehand, which leads to insecurity about the service product and the service quality compared to a tangible, physical product. Pesonen also cites that services cannot be stocked or owned and the service quality is not therefore easily controllable. These characteristics of services lead to the fact that every single service process is unique which makes them extremely hard to repeat exactly in the same way as done before (Pesonen et al 2002, 23-27) and cannot be patented or copied (Gilmore 2003, 10). Intangibility and uniqueness of every transaction and how functional quality is perceived make it almost impossible for service providers to copy each other. This characteristic of services is also considered as heterogeneity as Meroni and Sangiorgi (2011, 16-20) refer to through Zeithaml et al. (1985) definition of service characteristics.

Measuring Perceived Service Quality

Grönroos (2007, 84) introduces the service quality determinants pattern by Parasuraman, Zeithaml and Berry from 1985 that is called the SERVQUAL instrument. According to Grönroos, the original ten factors that measure service quality were squeezed into five factors when the SERVQUAL instrument was studied further. These five factors are Tangibles, Reliability, Responsiveness, Assurance

and Empathy, which are being researched through 22 attributes that are evaluated on a seven-step scale that asks if the customer agree with the suggested question or not.

The SERVQUAL instrument is a customer research tool that researches and compares customers' expected and perceived quality. It aims to an overall quality score, which makes it a good tool for quantitative research; there's a possibility to reveal the working and not working touch points in the service process (Zeithaml et al, 1988). The five determinants would also make a good theoretical framework, a backbone, for qualitative research such as interview, observation or survey. In qualitative research the outcome may not be as "high-score-driven" though but the determinants are useful as they are.

Grönroos (2007, 88-89) also opens up more qualitative method to measure perceived service quality – John Flanagan's Critical Incident Method/Technique that was first introduced in 1954 (Flanagan, 1954). The idea behind critical incident technique is to let the respondents imagine or give a real story about a service gone well or wrong by a certain firm. Then the respondent is asked to go deep into the details of what happened, why it happened and how it changed the course of the customer process. Critical incident technique can be used for either the whole service process or some part of the process. It can be used for multiple fields of research and topics but is extremely suitable for evaluating critical incidents in service processes.

Derived from these mentioned and various other viewpoints, Grönroos (2007, 89-90) has summarized what makes a good service. He calls it the seven criteria of good perceived quality which all must be taken into account when evaluating how service is experienced.

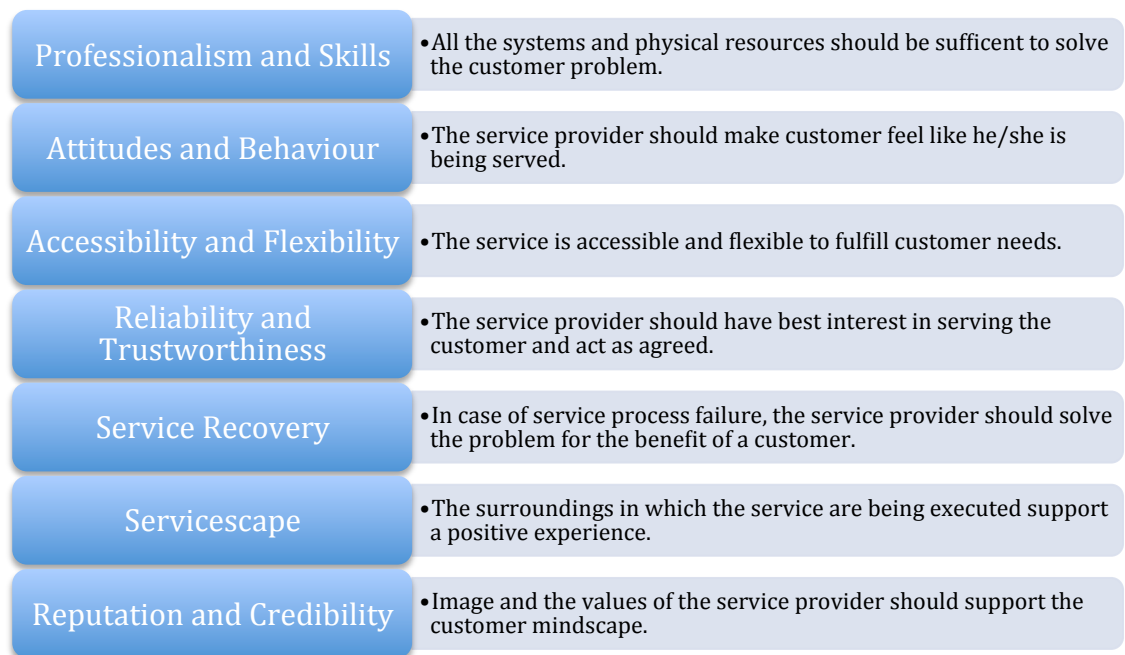


Figure 3. The seven criteria of perceived service quality summarized (Grönroos 2007, 90.).

5 Methodology and Research Process

5.1 Research Methods

Services, having often an intangible nature, can be difficult to measure. It can be hard to evaluate or rate something that is physically not there. Gilmore (2003, 21) writes the following:

Sometimes in service industries there is a tendency to concentrate on the more tangible aspects of the service delivery because they are easier to measure. In doing so, the intangible dimensions may be neglected.

For this research, the main focus is on the more intangible side of the guidance. Signs, maps, monitors and other physical guiding items, the tangibles, that are visible and present at the airport, hold a secondary position. After all, the service as a whole consists of both tangible and intangible aspects and factors. Also, Finnair already collects quantitative data about the customer experience and journey systematically. What is less often gathered and documented, is a direct structured feedback about customer experience and in more detail, about the guidance at the airport, in its actual context. Therefore, a qualitative case study approach to the study was chosen and interviewing with a semi-structured form

the targeted customer segment seemed to be the most suitable option for this type of research.

There are more than a few different ways to explain what is meant by qualitative research. Saaranen-Kauppinen and Puusniekka (2006) give a suggestive summary to qualitative research that it consists of “different traditions, approaches and data collecting and analysis methods” with a goal to understand human behaviour. Flick (2009, 12-16) describes qualitative research being relevant for studying social relations as it has a nature of pluralizing viewpoints and putting them together. Qualitative research studies aim to interpret participants’ knowledge, practices and perceptions in the researched question. Qualitative research “aims in picturing real life” (Hirsjärvi et al 2004, 152).

A case study is considered as researching a single event, defined integrity or an individual in its natural context (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006). A major benefit in case study is not to have an overall picture in the subject but to gain knowledge what can be learnt from a single event or defined series of similar events (Hirsjärvi et al. 2004, 125-126, Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006).

A semi-structured interview can be also called as focused or theme interview. The main characteristics of a semi-structured interview are that the interview is more about larger themes with open questions than specific questions with an expected answer. Semi-structured interviews lack the strict structure and order that is present in structured types of interviews, but the themes hold down the participants in drifting too far from the subject (Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2000, 48). There is a high emphasis on how the participant interprets the theme and there is quite much air to move inside the theme from both the interviewer as well as the interviewee side: a semi-structured interview is meant to be a conversation-like research method on studying how themes are perceived on a personal level. This type of interviewing requires high involvement in the conversation and knowledge about the themes to reach the required depth of answers and how to interpret them. The interviewer is also given freedom and responsibility to interpret other viewpoints of communication than just voice: movement, facial ex-

pressions and other social situation related attributes (Saaranen-Kauppinen & Puusniekka 2006; Hirsjärvi et al 2004, 197-198; Hirsjärvi & Hurme 2000, 47-48; Tuomi & Sarajärvi 2006, 76-78).

The research basis for the interview research in this thesis is the critical incident technique. In other words, the research studies and analyses Finnair guidance at Helsinki Airport using the critical incident technique. Step one is to interview passengers about their customer journey, what could go wrong, what could be the worst thing to happen and on the other hand, what could be a true delight service-wise. Step two is to analyse the results, categorize the found perceptions and to make conclusions on that basis. According to Hughes (2007, 6) Flanagan has noted that there is no strict sample size one must study when using the critical incident technique but the optimum number would be somewhere around 50 to 100 respondents.

Wilhelmsen and Ostrom (2012, 162) write the critical incident method being a relatively easy technique to use but in the same phrase address the fact that it needs “enough participants to attain data saturation point”. This research does not take as much respondents into account due to the limitations of time and resources in University of Applied Sciences’ Bachelor’s thesis, but will be using the method as a model for the study and aims to reaching the saturation point. The main objective of the study is to gather qualitative data on of a specific group of customers, to bring out and identify themes those customers perceive positive and those perceive negative and to give suggestions on how to develop customer service and guidance through the results.

The critical incident method has been used to study interaction, to identify organizational problems and to describe roles and functions in a certain context (Schluter et al. 2008). Even though Schluter et al. studied in the field of nursing they also cited that the field of study or the context is not dependant on the effectiveness of the study (113-114). What has been found in several studies, the technique is well suited in contexts with a process-like nature (Schluter et al, 2008, Wilhelmsen & Ostrom, 2012).

5.2 Research Process

The research process began in February 2015. Most of the preliminary research and written work was done between March and May 2015. The summer months, from June to August were mostly inactive with the research and the process continued in September 2015.

The research interviews were executed from 25th September to 7th October in 2015 at Helsinki Airport. The customer segment in the study being less frequently travelling Finnair passengers, the interviewing timing for departing and passengers in transit was set as before the departure of flights to commonly known destinations with a high percentage of leisure travellers. Among these destinations were cities such as Dubrovnik (Croatia), Chania (Greece), Malaga (Spain) and Gazipasa (Turkey). The arriving passengers were interviewed on arrival of the same or similar kind of leisure-heavy destinations. Passengers were chosen randomly or with a quick look on those who may have been willing to respond to the interview at the proximity of the gate's waiting area from where the flight would be departing or in the arrival hall at the proximity of baggage belt the baggage of the chosen flight would arrive. Both Finnish and English were used as an interview language according to the preference of the interviewed passenger. The interviewees were asked to describe the elements of their customer journey, tell how they feel about the process, how they perceive it and how they would like to experience the journey.

The targeted number of interviews was fifteen. The aim was to interview approximately five of each status of passengers: departing, transiting and arriving. The targeted length of interviews was from five to fifteen minutes. The targeted length was decided to keep the interviews short and effective and not to interfere and disturb the interviewed passengers' journey preparations too much. The structure of the interviews (Appendix 1.) can be seen at appendices section after the references. Especially the themes of the structure were kept as a guideline for the interviews but the exact questions were reacted and tailored during each interview. The assumption was that none of the interviews are similar to each other, so following the structure too closely would have closed the discussions on the theme too early on.

The method seemed to work well for the segment – and for the time of executing the interviews. The interviews were executed mainly early in the morning from 4am to 6am because of the most suitable flights with the most suitable interviewees expected to be in were scheduled to depart or arrive during that period. The reason the interviews were conducted that early, beside the departure and arrival times of the most suitable flights, was not to interfere in the customer journey and disturb passengers during a heavy rush hour at the airport.

The interviews were recorded by an Apple iPhone 4s and transcribed afterwards. This would support the conversation-like nature of a semi-structured interview, when the focus is on the conversation, not in taking and making notes. The interview data was analysed in a qualitative way that will be opened up in the next section.

5.3 Analysis Methods

The analysis method used in this study is phenomenography, phenomenographic analysis. Phenomenography aims to picture a phenomenon through one's point of view, beliefs and interpretations from qualitative data. The philosophy behind the method criticizes finding causalities through different variables and relying too much on a specific theory. However, theory is seen as a vital part of the research process and gaining knowledge in the subject, phenomenography is used best when the analysis is executed with as few presumptions or models as possible. Thus, what the method supports, is an open analysis and construction of how one experiences and understands the action or set of actions and how one pictures or perceives the action (Syrjälä et al. 1994, 121-123).

Phenomenography is a useful method for analysing interviews and letting the voice of interviewed be an important part of the final findings. Phenomenography could not be any more suitable for opening up a semi-structured interview. Syrjälä et al. (1994, 136-141) point out open or semi-structured interviewing as the way to gather the data for a phenomenographic analysis. As this research is a case study with the aim of a better customer understanding, it is important for

the author to be as open to the answers and findings of the study. It is also vital for the author to acknowledge that a subjective, previous knowledge on the subject has a real, unavoidable effect on the research and the outcome (Syrjälä et al 1994, 122; Marton 1988; Salner 1989).

The data was coded by gathering different perceptions on the subject from the interview data, interpreted and the arising perceptions categorized (Syrjälä et al, 1994, 144-147). The raised perceptions were simplified and written on pieces of paper. The pieces of paper were then spread on the floor in a random order. The next step was to group the simplified perceptions with a similar tone and meaning behind them to a number of different groups that seemed to appear. Grouping the simplified perceptions with a similar determining theme then formed categories, which are opened up in the results section.

6 Results

The total number of interviews for this research was 13; seven departing local passengers, three passengers in transit and three arriving passengers. The interviewees were aged in between 25 to approximately 70 years and the man-woman ratio was as equal as it can be: six of the interviewees were men and the rest seven were women. The goal was to gather an equal number of approximately five interviewees from each group of passengers but during the interviewing process it occurred that the departure is the area of customer journey, where airline guidance is most visible and is currently executed actively. Departing passengers were also the most willing ones to give interviews and spend most time with the interview, which made them the most fruitful ones in terms of results. Departing passengers seemed to arrive at the departure gate area well in advance prior to the departure and they were easy to identify and approach. That is why departing passengers are a majority in the total percentage of interviewed passengers. Transit passengers, on the other hand, were not easy to identify and did not have as much time disposable as the departing ones had. Arriving passengers were extremely easy to spot and approach but the difficulty was that they were only willing to give answers before their baggage arrived to the bag-

gage belt in the arrivals hall, so the window to execute the interview was short and tight. It also seemed to feel more comfortable to execute interviews at the gate area than at the arrivals hall for both the interviewer and the passengers interviewed.

The results between departing, transiting and arriving passengers seemed to share the same themes. Therefore, there is no need to separate the results in between passengers in different phases of their journey at the airport unless it is not specifically mentioned.

If not counting one exception, all the interviewed passengers said they are traveling only on leisure purposes, once or twice a year. The exception said to travel at least ten times a year but also for leisure purposes, and though, was at the Helsinki airport for the first time.

6.1 Expectations

The expectations about the airline staff derived from the interviews can be divided into five categories by different themes. The categories are Professional Skills, Individual Passenger Recognition, Reliability/Trustworthiness, Support and Communication. Each category consists of several attributes that occurred in the interviews and were mentioned once or multiple times in the data. The research doesn't answer to the question about the importance order of the categories. There may be same attributes in different categories as some attributes are closely linked to multiple categories.

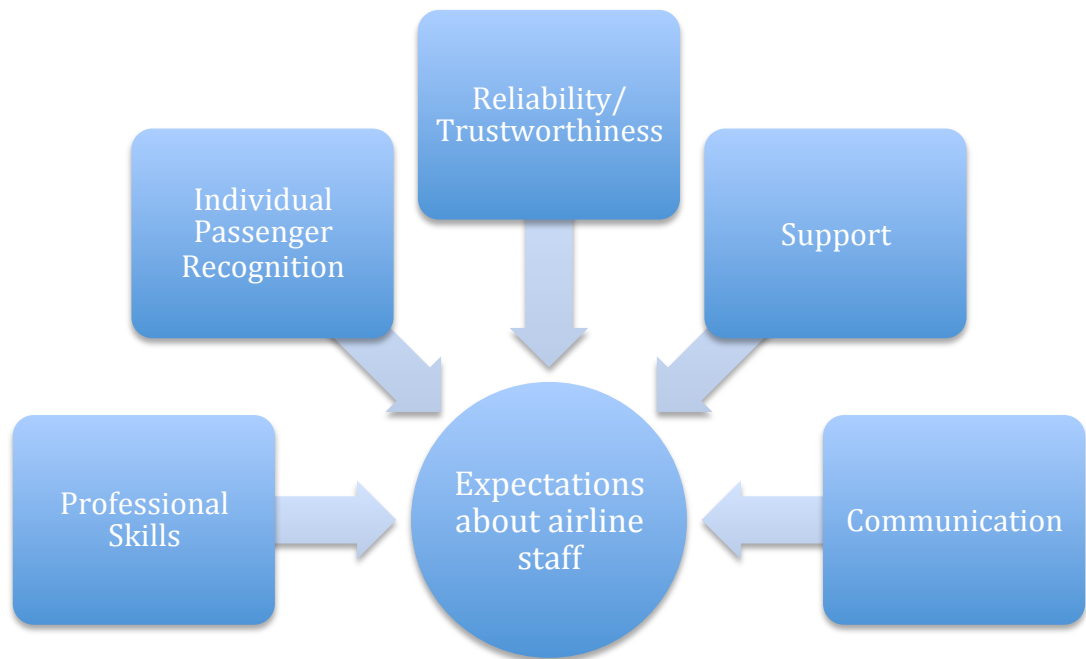


Figure 4. Factors found to affect the Expectations About Airline Staff.

Professional Skills

The interviewed passengers expected airline staff to know the airport and its services. The knowledge is not expected to cover only the airline procedures but also other procedures, locations and directions at the airport. The personnel are expected to have and use tools and equipment needed in the airport processes and to provide smooth operations and actions in normal situations and problem situations. These tools and equipment may be computers and computer programmes, phone numbers, self-service appliances and other airport equipment as well as give first aid if needed. Airline personnel are seen as experts in the airport processes; they know how the processes and actions should go and they do it in a correct way. They are contacted in the first place if help is needed. Airline personnel are expected to solve occurring problems at the airport and provide understandable information and instructions.

Individual Passenger Recognition

The interviewed ones had a common assumption that airline staff are there to serve them and to make their journey possible to begin, continue and end smoothly. Airline personnel are expected to have customer in the centre of their actions and give an individual customer individual service at least when it is re-

quested. The interviewed passengers understood that they are not alone at the airport in terms of other passengers but valued personal service. Targeted friendliness, smile and willingness to serve for an individual passenger or a certain group of passengers were considered as good service. It was also noted several times by the interviewed passengers, that there is a high emphasis on the approachability and contacting of the personnel and ease of executing the processes – the airline personnel must serve the passenger's ease of use.

I was greeted by a polite, smiling staff member, who came to help me immediately when I needed advice (Interviewee A).

Another major factor in expected service was to provide service in passenger's mother tongue or best possible common language.

Reliability/Trustworthiness

The personnel are also seen as a securing element in the process. The passenger expectation is that the personnel are confident and professional in their actions, have the knowledge needed for serving passengers and are separated from the passengers and other crowd with uniforms, communication appliances and/or other items sporting airline brand logos or other signs. The interviewees assumed uniforms to tell the person wearing it makes every effort his/hers journey will be successful, they will tell the truth and do not try to fool a passenger – uniforms, therefore personnel, can be trusted.

Support

The interviewees say there has to be someone to ask for information and a person is preferred instead of a machine or equivalent. Especially when discussed about self-service procedures and interruptions in the customer journey, human help is demanded. The proper, sufficient amount of personnel to get attention, support, care and helpfulness is asked. In situations where help is much needed, the interviewees value calming and patient but effective support from the personnel. Passengers want to get their questions and problems listened and reacted; this means that the airline personnel must be very attentive, easily approachable and present in the conversation. Once again, also language skills and understanding can be seen as expected factors.

Communication

Keeping the passengers informed and guided about the matters concerning the journey is an important factor for the interviewed passengers. Being uninformed is seen as a huge creator of stress and is so far away from a calm, fluent flow of the journey. Giving both verbal and gestured instructions and guidance can be expected from the airline personnel in situations help is needed, is highly valued. Especially on self-service touch points, showing an example or giving instructions is expected but as traveling is not an everyday event for the interviewees, much attention on informing the passengers about the journey and directions to continue is expected from the airline personnel. Being notified by one's own mother tongue or the best common language is preferred but being understood is felt satisfactory. It seemed that some of the interviewed passengers also desired to practice a little small talk with the personnel.

6.2 Perceived Customer Experience

Likewise in the previous chapter about expectations, it turned out that there are also five major themed categories found about the actual experience at the airport. These categories are Surroundings, Personnel, Self-Service, Own Journey and Fears and Irritating Factors.

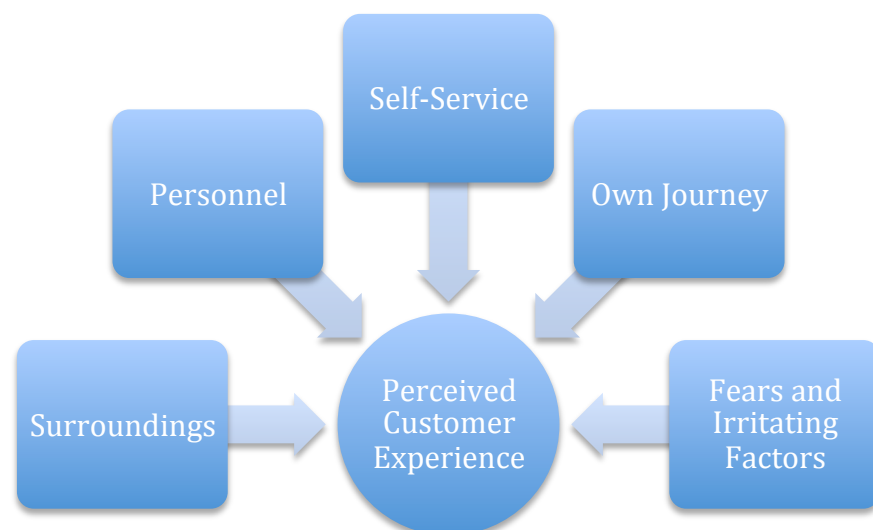


Figure 5. Factors found to affect the Perceived Customer Experience

Surroundings

Many of the respondents said the airport is a familiar place from previous journeys and it has a “certain feeling”. This “certain feeling” was not easily explained but phrases like “there’s a certain feeling of holiday” and “it feels like departing” would explain that airport can be a promise of vacation for the respondents. The surroundings at Helsinki Airport were found simple, fast and clear. It was seen as an airport where services are easy to spot and procedures easy to execute. The majority of the interviewees said the simple, straightforward architecture of Helsinki Airport supports that there is a very small chance in getting lost or not finding the right places. Some criticism was given though to arriving at Helsinki Airport. Some of the respondents found it confusing to arrive to the same area where there are departing passengers as well. In this situation the arriving passengers found it best to follow the signs or follow fellow passengers rather than asking the way. All of the arriving respondents cited though that they did not see or saw only few personnel members along the way from the arrival gate to the bag belt area.

The signs at Helsinki Airport were found large, clear, yellow and visible. In terms of navigating to correct places, the interviewees found it easy and clear to navigate when following the signs and preferred signs before asking the nearest staff member for the way.

Personnel

The personnel are thought as an authority that knows the airport, its operations and systems better than passengers. The personnel will give passengers the correct navigating instructions. The personnel were found polite, friendly, attentive and patient. The presence of the personnel was found good at the departure area and that there were enough personnel to serve the passengers. Transit and arriving passengers, on the other hand, were more relying on signs and other passengers. Especially transit passengers found it preferable that there would be someone to support, help and guide them where they are instead of being forced to find the closest personnel.

I think there's still a problem, because the service desk is stable. I just can find it at that point but if I need help and my position is far from there I can't find the person as soon as possible. I'd prefer a roaming agent or maybe an application (Interviewee B).

In the main departure procedures, check-in and bag drop, a verbal guidance was preferred instead of written instructions. It was also desired that there would be someone to give support and to reduce the amount of stress. This was found out to be especially the case in self-service operations. All in all, the interviewees did not feel they were left without any help from the personnel at any situation and help was within reach if/when it was needed.

Self-Service

It eases, speeds up, requires certain preparedness and skills from the customer. But I strongly believe there'll be personnel to help out if I would find it difficult to use (Interviewee A).

The interviewed passengers acknowledge self-service check-in as a familiar procedure. They do it either online before arriving at the airport or at the check-in kiosks at the airport. They would prefer if someone would do it for them but are satisfied when a little help is given if in need. Dropping the baggage is desired to be done in the old-fashioned way on the desk where the airline personnel tags and registers the baggage and sends them forward. The self-service bag drop was found useful when or if there would be long queues to the traditional bag drop desk. Some were confused on the purpose of self-service appliances if there were plenty of personnel working and short queues or no queues to the bag drop desks. Many of the interviewees had not tried the self-service bag drop machines, but said they would use them if the personnel would advice them to do so and showed them how to use them. The interviewees' perception on self-service machines and kiosks were that they feel difficult to use and better instructions to use them are needed.

One's Own Journey

Passenger perceptions on their own journey were that the journey is a vacation and it is planned long before the departure. Information about their own journey was cited as extremely important and any possible irregularities in their journey

must be known as soon as possible. The passengers felt important that only information about their journey was given to them and some of the interviewees felt it confusing if too much information and announcements were given. When asked about their perceptions on the minimal number of announcements at Helsinki Airport and given information about the concept of silent airport, the interviewees felt it good in terms of atmosphere at the airport but were also worried about being at the departure gate on time and worried they would miss a flight if there are no announcements of last call for boarding for example.

Fears and Irritating Factors

Fears and irritating factors found in the interviews can be divided into three subcategories; Fears and irritation on journey flow related matters, fears and irritation on technology and fears and irritation on personal capability. Technology and a personal capability can be thought as subcategories for journey flow as it is the main theme behind them but there was perceptions rising for journey flow to be thought as one of the three categories and not the defining topic of the two other categories.

The journey flow factors are more or less linked to the airline rather than the passenger itself. Factors sparking fear or irritating that were linked to journey flow are

- cancellation of the flight,
- interruption in the journey,
- delay of the flight,
- missing the flight by being late at gate or by airline overbooking situation,
- having to pay extra for something at the airport and
- a fear of not finding any supporting personnel.

The second subcategory is fears and irritation on technology. Interviewees thought that human surveillance is needed in case of possible failure in the technological systems. The distrust in the technological devices, machines and other appliances is apparent. For example, Interviewee C felt that

*-- if one makes a single mistake with a computer or a machine, it's all **finito**.*

The self-service appliances are the ones generating distrust the most so it can be thought that behind the fear of technology is distrust in one's own capability of executing the procedure. And that brings us to the third category.

Distrust in one's own capability can be linked to fear of technological procedures. What if something goes wrong? Can it be fixed and can I still get on the flight? If there's someone to serve who already knows how to execute the procedure, why should I do it? Then there is the fear of being in the right place. What if I can't find the right place to be? And more importantly, what if I can't find the right place in time? If the signs are not accurate and understandable enough, will I find the right place? And of course, it creates a lot of stress if travel documents such as the passport, boarding pass or other important documents would get lost.

7 Conclusion and Discussion

The objective of the research was to study the expectations and experiences of less frequently traveling Finnair customers about their customer journey at Helsinki Airport. It can be said that even though the expectations and perceptions about the customer journey and guidance were in focus, it was the service quality and how it could be improved for a certain customer segment that were the significant themes behind the study. A qualitative approach to the study was chosen because the aim was to gather as authentic data as possible in the actual context of the actions – in the points of departure or arrival at the airport. Passengers are not so often directly interviewed about their experience at the airport. Therefore, often real, impulsive reactions and opinions that are not already rounded from the edges stay within the passengers' minds.

Due to the trend in the industry towards simpler processes (IATA, Simplifying the Business), the whole airline industry is under a renovation and so are the roles of airline personnel in the customer experience. Every passenger, every single customer experience is different and subjective but the fact is that the air-

line personnel are the ones supporting the creation of the customer experience and reflecting to their expectations and perceptions on site. As the amount of self-service gets up in the industry, and in society, it gets more familiar for the people, but since self-service is not a commodity in the airline industry yet, but a new solution, it takes time for passengers to get used to changed service concepts.

The quantitative approach is often used in getting generalizable results and it is easier to collect a larger number of respondents in the study. Why not to incorporate a quantitative approach in the study then? Would it not have been more fruitful in getting more viewpoints from a larger number of passengers and would a quantitative approach generate more reliable results? It may be so, but that was not the purpose of this study. The purpose was to give a qualitative approach a try and to get close to the passengers and their thoughts. This was also the reason for using the semi-structured interview to gather data. A conversation-like interview around the main themes of the customer experience at the airport was an attempt to get deeper into the real thoughts of the passengers.

In terms of validity, it must be noted, that there is an assumption the interviewees may have been affected by short sleeping hours or early wake up. If a quantitative questionnaire or survey would have been given to the customers to fill in, the results could have been more unrealistic. An interview seemed to be a great way to engage the interviewee in the subject and to dig into the perceptions and experiences about the customer journey at the moment. A case study like this cannot be easily generalized for a larger group of passengers but it gave an interesting cross section on a certain type of passengers with some themes to keep in mind, to study further and to help in the service development.

The critical incident technique worked well for the purpose but it must also be addressed that the number of interviewees should have been larger than the gathered total number, 13, to employ the critical incident technique in its full potential as a research method as it is cited earlier in the work as well. The depth and quality of the data that was collected varied from very morning sleepy interviewees to extremely sharp and detailed interviewees. With a larger sample of

passengers some of the results may have been polarised to one way or another; some of the occurred themes of the expectations and experiences would have been found to dominate other themes for example. The content of the answers was found to repeat itself quite soon and the themes introduced in the results section of this thesis can be found throughout the collected data, in majority of the interviews. All in all, if a similar kind of research was to be executed in a much larger scale, it might be even a better tool for developing the services in this context. The research gives loads of useful, analysable and on-site data about the customer journey and experience as well as about the expectations and attitudes.

Discussing the Results

The Grönroos' (2000, 67) model of total perceived quality played a major role in clarifying what makes a good service and how to develop it even better. Passengers' expectations and experiences were used as larger topics when determining the research questions and also when analysing the data and introducing the results. Furthermore, similar kinds of themes arose from the data. They are attributes in the Grönroos' (Op.cit. p. 90) seven criteria of perceived service quality. The intention was not to structure the results directly based on the Grönroos' theories, especially not the seven criteria of perceived service quality theory, but it is fascinating to find out the similarity in between the findings and the theories.

To summarize what the interviewees expected and needed from the service, the interviewees' thoughts are on "a succeeded vacation". To the destination for a vacation and back with an unbreakable flow is the main thing. The secondary thing is to get value for their money and their vacation supported by professionals; they want to be recognized as valuable customers who are supported in the total flow of their personal journey. They think that airline personnel have the professional qualities and can be trusted in delivering the passengers to the destination to start enjoying their vacation. Special attention to reducing the stress and supporting in airport processes is requested and required from the airline personnel. From the airline personnel point-of-view, a total successful vacation of the passenger must be kept in mind when serving and guiding the passenger.

The interviewed passengers perceived the customer journey at Helsinki airport effortless to go through. Navigation was found easy when following the signs and getting lost was not experienced and not even thought possible. If any problems occurred, the airline personnel or the closest personnel helped with verbal instructions. The passengers felt appreciated and recognized. The concept of self-service was identified and the reasons to implement self-service in the journey were understood but “the traditional service” and how the, familiar, way “service has always been” was preferred. Self-service appliances were understood to ease and shorten the customer journey but the appliances as such were found difficult to use if help from the airline personnel was not received. Security and awareness of one’s own journey was in a high priority position in passengers’ perceptions.

To sum up the passengers’ experiences, the biggest threats of the journey were the journey flow, trust in technology and believing in their own capability of executing a smooth journey. New and strange things may be difficult to face, but the interviewees felt that the airline personnel was there to help, support and guide them. As Grönroos (2009, 104; 2000, 66) suggested, the experienced functional quality is the key to a successful service. In case the technical quality fails somehow, and the expectations must be topped and upgraded by the experiences, it seems that the interviewed passengers experienced successful service from the Finnair personnel.

Benefits of the Research and Future Research

At their simplest function, airports are transportation stations where passengers and other goods are moved from the point A to the point B. The main objective of the airline personnel at the airport, ground service personnel in specific, is to send the passengers to their journey as smoothly and safely as it is possible to do. As a case study, one of the main findings of the study was to raise awareness of the importance of guidance; a human touch and customer flow as part of airline customer experience. The sampling for the study was far too tiny to be valid enough to act as a basis in creating, for example, a complete service concept around the airline guidance for a certain customer segment but the findings showed that there were still fears and threats shadowing the customer journey.

Attention on the importance of guidance shall not be overridden – especially when the amount of self-service in the processes climbs up.

Guiding is often a spontaneous act of giving advice to someone where knowing the customer and learning to read the customers and their expectations and needs are the key factors in tailoring the guidance for an individual customer. The ability to approach different kinds of customers is a daily work and part of the professional skills for the airline agents but the things that are familiar to some may not be as familiar or easily understood to others, and the way how the guiding takes place plays a major role in customer experience. To be able to react to the customers real needs is the catch. To clarify themes that spark stress and distrust in their customers is vital in eliminating these themes or factors. Reducing the stress when it is possible by knowing how to approach the customers with the relevant information the way the customers feel pleasant, personal and calming will have a smoothing effect on their journey – that is already an upgrade in guiding as well as in the total perceived service.

The themes found in the results would make an interesting basis for a larger, possibly a quantitative study with an aim in conceptualising or re-conceptualising the guiding roles. At this point, blueprinting the passenger journey could work as an effective tool. Placing the themes of distrust and fears or other expectations found in this study into the blueprinted customer journey would make a good basis for this kind of larger study. The research could include various identified customer segments at various airports where Finnair operates. Again, referring to the more and more automatizing processes at the airport, the potential of guiding roles and other innovative guiding solutions are yet to be discovered. The most up-to-date airports have their own mobile applications in which the passenger can look for urgent help, there may be “digital agent kiosks” or anything where only the sky’s the limit but talking of the less frequently travelling passengers a human touch is the only way to ease their journey.

At some airports, there are already “roaming agents” with technical equipment such as tablets and smartphones to support the passenger “where the passengers are”. But is a wandering, fully iPad-equipped airline agent the climax of a guiding

role? A service design project on how the knowledge about customers, customer expectations and needs, the freshest technology and professional knowledge of the airline agents could be formed in to a new guiding role concept, which would be something to look forward to a future research around the topic. How a digital footprint and other CRM data as well as other big data could be harnessed for guides to react to the customers in real-time, in personal and unique ways?

Moreover, not only in the commercial aviation industry, but in service industry overall, a hot topic in the industry seems to be ancillary sales. In automatized processes many points of sales may be lost on some customer segments. Take for example a passenger who does not check out his or hers email prior to the departure neither uses his or hers mobile phone for travel information purposes, uses self-service appliances and kiosks to check in and has the only human interaction with the airline at the gate prior to boarding.

When does the airline sell ancillary products, upgrades or other services to this kind of passenger? At the gate? What if the gate service agent does not have extra time for things considered less important in terms of the flight leaving on time? How about ancillary sales after arriving to the airport? Could there be a guide-like salesperson to sell and guide a safe ride home, after-journey snack, giving information about the next possible journey or frequent flyer programme or something else that might be needed after the journey? Research about the opportunities for ancillary sales for, for example, less frequently travelling passengers as well as service design and conceptualization on guides as salespersons could be realised.

As it was found in this thesis, some passengers did not have any interaction with the airline staff at the terminal disregarding boarding, even though there still, clearly, is a need for human interaction in the processes. A vaster study on how guiding affects the brand image could also be full of interesting findings. Who knows, guiding may be one of the most important differentiating factors in the future of airline industry.

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Appendices

Appendix 1. The basis form for the interview

Basic knowledge about the interviewee

1. Local, transit or arriving?
2. Flight?
3. How often do you travel?

Local passengers (interview at the gate)

1. Arriving to the airport

- 1.1. How would you describe the way you were prepared yourself for the airport?
- 1.2. Describe the arriving to the airport.
- 1.3. Imagine/tell if something went wrong/exceptionally well, describe the situation?
 - 1.3.1. Additional questions

2. Check-in

- 2.1. How and where did you do the check-in? Why?
- 2.2. Describe what you saw at the check-in area. / Describe the airline personnel at the check-in area.
- 2.3. How do you feel about the check-in process? Did you find the check-in easy to execute? Why? What did you find easy and what not? Accessibility!
 - 2.3.1. If you encountered any problems or irritating factors during check-in, how did you solve them? (How the airline personnel took part in your check-in process? Did they / did they not and why do you think they didn't?) Service recovery!
 - 2.3.2. Imagine/tell if something went wrong/exceptionally well, describe what was the factor?
 - 2.3.3. Additional questions

3. Bag drop

3.1. Continue your journey from check-in to bag drop. Describe the bag drop situation.

3.1.1. Imagine/tell if something went wrong/exceptionally well, describe what was the factor?

3.1.2. Additional questions

3.2. How did you feel about the situation at the bag drop? Why?

4. At the gate

4.1. Describe what happened after the security control.

4.2. Tell me, how did you navigate your way to the correct gate? How did you feel about the navigating?

4.2.1. Imagine/tell if something went wrong/exceptionally well, describe what was the factor?

4.2.2. Additional questions

4.3. Describe what happened at the gate.

4.4. How would you evaluate the service at the gate?

4.4.1. Imagine/tell if something went wrong/exceptionally well, describe what was the factor?

4.4.2. Additional questions

Transit passengers (interview at the gate)

1. From gate to gate

1.1. Describe your journey from arrival gate to the departure gate.

1.1.1. What is the best or worst-case scenario that you think can happen when transferring from arrival gate to departure gate?

2. Transit service

2.1. If you needed to visit the Transit service desk, why was that? Describe what happened at the Transit Service.

2.1.1. Imagine/tell if something went wrong/exceptionally well, describe what was the factor?

2.1.2. Additional questions

3. At the gate

- 3.1. Describe the situation at the departure gate.
- 3.2. How would you evaluate the process at the gate?
 - 3.2.1. Imagine/tell if something went wrong/exceptionally well, describe what was the factor?
 - 3.2.2. Additional questions

Arriving passengers (interview at the arrival hall)

1. Arriving to the airport

- 1.1. Describe your journey from the arrival gate to the arrival hall (bag belt area).
- 1.2. How did you find your way to the right baggage belt?
- 1.3. Describe the worst-case scenario, which could happen in your opinion on arrival.

2. Arrival service

- 2.1. In case you needed to contact the arrival service (desk), describe what happened there.
 - 2.1.1. Additional questions

3. From the arrivals hall to leaving the airport

- 3.1. How would you describe the arrival process?
- 3.2. How would your describe your whole journey?