Understanding the strategy used by leading airlines

A case study of Qatar Airways
Abstract

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A case study of Qatar Airways

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Abstract

The current competitive business environment require continuous improvement to remain either on top of other rivals or to cope with the rising demands. One of the areas that international industry focus on is the marketing strategies across the globe. These marketing strategies can be studied from the leading and fast growing international business. For this project, the researcher selected airlines as the benchmark due to the volatility and the importance of the industry to other international business. Moreover, a case study of Qatar Airways was ideal since the firm ranked best and was still fast growing compared to all other leading airlines. Two research questions were identified in this study. The first one was the investigation of the most pronounced marketing strategy that has facilitated the aggressive growth of Qatar Airways. The second was how the consumers responded to Qatar Airways’ schemes to enhance its recognition as a fast-growing network connecting people to important destinations. The results from the case analysis have addressed these questions adequately. They indicate that Qatar Airways has majored on three strategies to facilitate its aggressive global expansion. The first one is the acquisition of stakes in airlines and airline groups. The other aspect is a new focus on the African market. Qatar Airways also capitalizes on word-of-mouth advertising, sponsorships, advertising through ordinary people, social media marketing, and generating publicity with regards to having a superior corporate image among consumers.

Keywords

Marketing strategies, Qatar Airways, global consumer recognition
## Contents

1 INTRODUCTION ................................................................................................................................. 5
  1.1 About Qatar Airways ....................................................................................................................... 5
  1.2 Objectives ....................................................................................................................................... 7
  1.3 Research Questions ......................................................................................................................... 7
  1.4 Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................................... 7
    1.4.1 SWOT Analysis ......................................................................................................................... 7
    1.4.2 Porter’s Five Forces Analysis .................................................................................................... 8
    1.4.3 Brand Promotion and Image Creation ....................................................................................... 8

2 LITERATURE REVIEW ....................................................................................................................... 9
  2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review ............................................................................................. 9
  2.2 Marketing Strategies, Opportunities, and Challenges ................................................................. 9
    2.2.1 Marketing Strategies ............................................................................................................... 9
    2.2.2 Opportunities from the Recent Trends in the Aviation Industry .......................................... 11
    2.2.3 Challenges Facing International Airlines .............................................................................. 13
  2.3 Brand Development and Recognition ............................................................................................. 14
    2.3.1 Brand Development in the Aviation Sector ............................................................................ 14
    2.3.2 Brand Recognition in the Aviation Sector ............................................................................. 16
    2.3.3 The Case of Qatar Airways ..................................................................................................... 17
  2.4 Trends in Aviation Industry ............................................................................................................. 17
    2.4.1 The New Passenger and Building the “Social” Pace ............................................................. 17
    2.4.2 Maneuvering between the Online and Offline Customer ..................................................... 18
    2.4.3 Analytics ................................................................................................................................... 19
    2.4.4 Changing Revenue Generation Course .................................................................................. 20
    2.4.5 Rising Focus on the Standardization and Regulation Route ................................................ 20
  2.5 Summary of the Literature Review and Research Gap .................................................................... 21

3 METHODOLOGY ................................................................................................................................... 22

4 RESULTS, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION ....................................................................................... 23
  4.1 The strategies that have facilitated the aggressive global expansion of Qatar Airways .................. 23
    4.1.1 Acquiring Stakes in Airlines and Airline Groups ...................................................................... 23
    4.1.2 Targeting the African Market .................................................................................................... 24
    4.1.3 Venturing in the East ................................................................................................................. 25
  4.2 The schemes that Qatar Airways have followed to enhance its global consumer recognition as a fast-growing network connecting people to essential destinations ................................................. 26
4.3 The international marketing strategies embraced at Qatar Airways to maintain a superior corporate image among consumers.................................................................27
4.3.1 Word-of-Mouth Advertising ...................................................................27
4.3.2 Sponsorships............................................................................................27
4.3.3 Advertising for Us and The Stars...............................................................27
4.3.4 Social Media............................................................................................28
4.3.5 Generating Publicity..................................................................................28

5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.........................................................29
5.1 Conclusion ..................................................................................................29
5.2 Recommendations ......................................................................................32

6 References .....................................................................................................33
1 INTRODUCTION

The current competitive business environment requires continuous improvement to remain either on top of other rivals or to cope with the rising demands. One of the areas that international industry focuses on is the marketing strategies across the globe. These marketing strategies can be studied from the leading and fast-growing international business. For this project, the researcher has selected airlines as the benchmark due to the volatility and the importance of the industry to other international businesses. Moreover, a case study of Qatar Airways is ideal since the firm ranks best and is still fast-growing compared to all other leading airlines.

1.1 About Qatar Airways

Qatar Airways was instigated in 1993 but it began operations a year later in 1994. It is a national airline of Qatar and has emerged as one of the best airlines in the world. In 2017, Qatar Airlines had over 150 aircrafts flying to different destinations across the globe (Ali 2013). From its headquarters in Doha International Airport, Qatar Airways operates international flights on all the continents. Although the Airline has established operations in more than 150 destinations, it still endeavors to open operations in many more new countries (Qatar Airways 2021). The expansion program is informed by the rapid growth that the firm has experienced lately due to quality services and robust marketing strategies.

The progress of Qatar Airways can be traced from the year it began its operations formally. It started as a diminutive local transportation system. By 1997, His Highness, The Emir Sheikh Hammad receptacle Khalifa Al Thaani, showed interest in revamping the Airline. His vision was to renovate Qatar Airways to become a major global carrier with the highest levels of sophistication in terms of astounding gauges of magnificence and administration (Qatar Airways 2021). The implementation of the vision began under the dynamic leadership of His Excellency Mr. Akbar Al Baker in 1996. During this period, the Airline developed into an award-winning carrier and acquired international recognition (Ali 2013). Mr. Al Baker's management style and overall stewardship have steered the Airline to mature into a principal force in both regional and global aviation.

Qatar Airways’ visionary statement encapsulates all strategies to turn it into a superlative carrier and cargo service provider. Sustaining this strategic plan has made the Airline focus on three factors for value creation. They include enhancing reliability of the product, improving the quality of the product, and consistent expansion of world-class networks (Qatar Airways 2021). Qatar
Airways covers destinations in Europe, North America, South America, the Middle East, Africa, South Asia, and Asia Pacific. By 1997, Qatar Airways had four aircrafts. By December 2003, the number of aircrafts had grown to 28. Three years later, the firm had doubled the number of aircrafts (Ali 2013). This trend shows the rapid growth that Qatar Airways experienced due to the management’s commitment to make the vision a reality. Today, the Airline has become the standard for other industry players.

Qatar Airways flight attendants are young, attractive and courteous individuals from over 105 countries across the world. The airlines high standard of customer service can be seen in the manner through which the flight attendants don themselves and their communication to customers. They wear stylish burgundy uniforms and hats during take-off and landing sessions. In the remaining period of mid-air flight sessions, these attendants put on black serving jackets for mealtime (Qatar Airways 2021). The firm emphasized on high-level of customer service to meet the rising customer expectations.

Having become an industry leader, Qatar Airways and its subsidiaries have striven to lead the charge towards responding adequately to environmental sustainability and corporate social responsibility (CSR). This scheme has made the Airline to be a leading force in the research regarding new-generation fuel research. It also gives back to the communities through the varied programs targeting children and the poor within the regions it serves (Ali 2013). Qatar Airways has made effective efforts to ensure that it creates a sustainable business not only for itself but also for its staff and neighborhoods. For instance, in 2012, Qatar Airways made a world partnership with Educate a Child (EAC). EAC is a global education program that Her Highness Sheikha Moza bint Nasser of Qatar launched to respond to the plight of 61 million out-of-school children in different parts of the world (Ali 2013). The organizations provide opportunity for the children to access quality primary education despite their poor family background. This program and others have enhanced the reputation of the Airline internationally.

Moreover, Qatar Airlines has embraced the highest standards of ethical behavior that are not limited to the provisions of codes of conduct and corporate regulations. Aware of its global and iconic figure, Qatar Airways has set challenging goals. The management and staff pay attention to the details while conducting daily operations and activities. Additionally, professionalism and responsibility have become a core principle in the firm. The values that are highly esteemed in the firm include loyalty, social responsiveness, cooperation with all stakeholders, and environmental awareness. It also conducts all its business operations with vitality, decisiveness, and motivation in creating better and innovative solutions that surpass clients’ expectations (Qatar
Airways 2021). These attractive features in business operations makes Qatar Airways a good case in the analysis of marketing strategies in international business domains.

1.2 Objectives

- To investigate the strategies that have facilitated the aggressive global expansion of Qatar Airways.
- To find out the schemes that Qatar Airways have followed to enhance its global consumer recognition as a fast-growing network connecting people to important destinations.
- To explore the international marketing strategies embraced at Qatar Airways to maintain superior corporate image among consumers.

1.3 Research Questions

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What is the most pronounced marketing strategy that have facilitated the aggressive global growth of Qatar Airways?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How are consumers responding to the schemes that Qatar Airways follow to enhance its recognition as a fast-growing network connecting people to important destinations?

1.4 Theoretical Framework

This study is a case-based research. In this regard, the researcher focused on the specific features within the selected firm, Qatar Airways. As an exploratory case study, this paper majored on the situations and interventions which were not yet clear in the public domains. Moreover, it investigated phenomena as well as the real-life situations that promoted the rising profile of Qatar Airways. As such, the theoretical framework covered the following aspects: SWOT analysis, Porter’s five forces analysis, and brand promotion for image creation.

1.4.1 SWOT Analysis

Most leading organizations have engaged in strategic planning to enhance productivity and guide accurate allocation of resources to achieve specific goals. SWOT analysis is a phase of strategic management process that involve the internal and external analysis of an organization (Gürel and Tat 2017). Conducting an external analysis help in identifying the critical threats and opportunities that an organization faces in a competitive business environment. On the other
hand, internal analysis helps an organization identify its strengths and weaknesses. SWOT analysis is useful for identification of sources of competitive advantage (Gürel & Tat 2017). With SWOT analysis of Qatar Airways, the study will identify the appropriate strategies that makes the firm thrive in the global scope.

1.4.2 Porter’s Five Forces Analysis

Porter’s Five Forces analysis was developed in 1979 by Michael E. Porter of Harvard Business School. It was developed as a simple framework for assessing and evaluating the competitive strength and position of a business organization (Chartered Global Management Accountant 2013). This analysis will be useful in assessment of the position of Qatar Airways in the global aviation market.

1.4.3 Brand Promotion and Image Creation

This aspect was useful in identifying the causal combination of social media usage and management that had contributed to Qatar Airways’ brand awareness, reputation, and customer loyalty. These aspects were further explored in the recent and past publications and research work in the literature review section before they were implemented in this study.
2 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction to the Literature Review

This section covers the studies on marketing strategies in both global and domestic domains. It explores publications such as books, articles, journals, reports, and news bulletins available in online libraries. The sub-section of interest and relevance to the case study includes the marketing strategies, opportunities and challenges, brand development and recognition, and the rising trends in the aviation industry. The chapter concludes with identification of the research gap and its application to the case study of Qatar Airways.

2.2 Marketing Strategies, Opportunities, and Challenges

2.2.1 Marketing Strategies

The aviation industry is highly competitive. It requires robust marketing strategies for value creation and opportunity identification. The nature of services offered in the aviation industry in the form of transportation, facilities, amenities, concessions, and relaxations is encompassing, fascinating, and alluring (Muninarayanappa & Ravikumar 2014). Clients get both tangible and intangible benefits offered by different airline services sector firms. Some of these firms have aligned themselves to specific segment or target customers based on their capabilities and market dominance. According to Muninarayanappa & Ravikumar (2014), the industry players have applied several marketing mix to meet the demands of their target clientele. This diversification has enabled the industry to grow exponentially, horizontally, and vertically. Among the recognizable growth indicators include increase in number of passengers due to privatization of national airlines and introduction of low cost carriers. The increase trade links and technological advancements have also enhanced the growth of the industry.

However, the notable growth in the aviation industry has also been affected by global economic slowdown and increased competition. Most industry players have resorted to revamping their marketing strategies to secure their dominance in the global market. Based on the applied marketing strategies and efficiency in operations and customer services, some firms have emerged on top as others have been forced to close due to unsustainability of business enterprise (Muninarayanappa & Ravikumar 2014). Remaining productive in the aviation industry requires constant evaluation of the marketing mix to respond to the barriers and customer demands in the
current aviation market. The 7 Ps considered in the marketing mix of airline services includes product, price, place, promotion, people, processes, and physical evidence.

The airline product is complex. It involves provision of a temporary contract involving use of airline seats alongside other tangible products such as food items, clothes, among others (Muninarayanappa & Ravikumar 2014). Additional, the aviation firms provide ground services and inflight services to their clients. Some of the ground services are adequate and convenient parking spaces, duty-free shopping, efficient and quick checking of luggage, proper customer relations at the reservation counter, and transport services to and from the airport (Muninarayanappa & Ravikumar 2014). On the other hand, the in-facility services are sitting configuration within the aircraft seat, food and refreshments, entertainment, and all personal interactions with the polite, warm, and courteous air-hostesses. The marketing strategy based on the products focus on improving the quality of the respective services for the entire operation when a clients’ temporary contract is active.

According to Muninarayanappa and Ravikumar (2014), the aviation industry in India has thrived by focusing on the product details and quality. For example, “the airline firms have introduced product differentiation through innovations such as in-flight movies, advanced seating arrangement, air to ground telephone services, sleeping compartment, hot showers and cooked-to-order breakfast, tele check-in and web-in” (Muninarayanappa & Ravikumar 2014, p.7900). More research is necessary to determine the extent of impact of a marketing strategy based on product on a global scale.

Pricing strategy is also a tool of success in the airline industry. Most firms have applied the concept of fair pricing to give their customers value for their money. The factors that are paramount in considering fair pricing include premiums, value for money pricing, demand-based and supply-based pricing, low-cost pricing, competition-based pricing, among other strategies (Muninarayanappa & Ravikumar 2014). The success of the aviation firms depend on the methods they use to attract and maintain their customers through appropriate pricing technique.

Moreover, promotion forms an essential part of marketing mix. Most of the international airlines advertise their service through print and electronic media, the Internet, and other avenues including sponsoring events and exhibitions (Muninarayanappa and Ravikumar 2014). Abdelhady, Fayed, and Fawzy (2018) postulate that promotion, as one of the marketing mix, affect the passengers’ decision-making while choosing the Airline to board. The Airline that portray themselves as low cost-carriers (LCCs) are best positioned to thrive in the highly competitive aviation
industry. Travel agencies also partner with the airlines to facilitate easy and seamless services offerings to the clients. In this regard, the travel agencies perform most of the promotions through the support of the respective airlines.

The concept of people in the marketing mix also plays a pivotal role as a marketing strategy in the aviation industry. The people performing critical roles in the industry include flight crews, attendants, and in-flight security personnel (Muninarayanappa & Ravikumar 2014). Other personnel forming the ground-crew team include airframe and power plant technicians, avionics technicians, dispatchers, baggage handlers, gate agents, ticket agents, passengers’ services agents and reservation agents. Top performing airlines have established structures to support all the people involved in the service delivery. Processes as marketing mix include all procedures and mechanisms that determine the flow of activities in the firms. The last aspect of the marketing mix, physical evidence are the built and natural environment, the quality of the aircraft appearance, staff uniform, logo, booking office furniture, social amenities, and the sophistication of the waiting lounge (Muninarayanappa & Ravikumar 2014). These 7 Ps keep evolving as the airlines seek for sustainability and value creation. It implies that the leading airlines, such as Qatar Airways, must keep evaluating and implementing latest and most appropriate strategies to stay competitive in the aviation industry and establish a global brand.

The analysis of the effectiveness of the marketing strategies depends on the firms’ approach to customer services. In their study of the Indian aviation industry, (Muninarayanappa and Ravikumar (2014) observed that a firm’s reputation and trustworthiness were essential for sustainable business operation. The contemporary consumers are looking for indications that their choice of Airline will have the minimal or no risks as long as the temporary contract is active. The competitive pressures also prompt airline companies to engage the services of marketers in design manufacturing and creation of other value-related decision at the initial stages of marketing strategy development. These are the factors that the current study will focus on to establish the impact of marketing strategies on passengers’ choice of Airline. A case study of Qatar Airways will be essential in determine the research gaps on both domestic and international preferences.

2.2.2 Opportunities from the Recent Trends in the Aviation Industry

With the emergence of the new digital passenger, airlines should leverage social media communications to reach the huge number of customers that have made social media a part of their lives. Besides using these platforms to interact with customers, they should also use them to
establish long-lasting relationships with them, increasing the number of return customers. Most importantly, airlines should regard social media as a robust and crucial resource pool to respond to customer tweets, posts, complaints, and queries. Rather than building their social media platforms from scratch, they should partner with existing social media providers to reach the high number of users already registered on the sites.

Airlines should embrace the online transformation while still streamlining their offline operations as airline customers are both online and offline. They should continue using social media platforms, company websites, and online agents to target the high number of individuals that are adopting online transactions. Irrespective of the strength of the online channel, airlines should also retain exceptional customer service personnel at their customer care offices to respond to specific queries and address concerns that AI cannot handle. Besides, they should also retain these individuals to ensure the continued existence of the "personal touch" to customers that prefer talking to human agents rather than chatbots and robots.

Regarding the analytics trend, airlines can leverage the huge opportunity presented by big data analytics in collecting vast amounts of customer data from social media sites and analyzing them to derive meaningful conclusions. They should regard the massive amounts of customer data from customers’ online profiles on social media as a gold mine to customize their offerings to meet specific customer needs, preferences, and choices. They should also use the information to eliminate unwanted service offerings from their service portfolio. The marketing and customer service department can also use this data to develop effective strategies for interacting with customers to enhance the customer experience.

Airlines should identify alternative revenue streams using existing resources rather than continually complaining about the bad economic times, high competition, and rising fuel prices. This would allow them to change the course of generating revenue from the conventional approach to the contemporary model of providing auxiliary products and services to customers. Charging for preferred seats, Wi-Fi connectivity, and requiring customers to pay for checked baggage are some ancillary services that airlines can provide to customers to change the course of revenue. In the quest to increase profitability, airlines should also adopt the total revenue integrity route to minimize or stop revenue leakage.

It is no doubt that aviation boards and governments will continue to issue directives on standardizations and regulations, especially on passenger safety and emissions. In the wake of the covid-19 pandemic, airlines should adopt innovative ways of cleaning their fleet of aircrafts, like
UV cleaning, to contain the virus's spread. Besides, airlines should operate aircrafts that meet the latest safety standards to avoid paying substantial fines in the event of an accident. They should also acquire aircrafts that meet the current emissions regulations to avoid paying the costly fines of contravening the regulations. Although aviation regulations and standards are a bottleneck to their operations, they are necessary to the smooth operation of an airline.

2.2.3 Challenges Facing International Airlines

The key challenges that affect international airlines are high competition, fuel, overcapacity, labor unrest, and low-cost carriers. The emergence of new airlines has raised the competition levels for existing carriers, thus eliciting the need for adopting unique strategies that would differentiate them from other carriers (Babić, Tatalović & Bajić 2017). The high competition has left strategic alliances and cooperation as an essential tool in the growth and sustainability of airline operations. The cooperation will help the airlines carry almost full capacity without integrating their operations with other carriers.

International airlines are also facing the fuel factor, especially rising fuel prices. As the biggest concern raised by airlines worldwide, some carriers have decided to impose the additional cost on customers. The ever-rising prices for aviation fuel have also adversely affected the bottom lines of airlines (Morrison et al. 2010). Bad economic times caused by poor financial decisions like the 2008 economic crisis and the current pandemic exacerbate the issue, forcing most airlines to ground their operations. However, airlines can still manage this challenge by reconfiguring their fleet to have fuel-efficient aircraft, limiting domestic flights, and increasing the efficiency of ground and flight operations.

Overcapacity is the other challenge that international airlines face. Overcapacity arises when the available aircraft capacity exceeds the demand (Wensveen 2010). Although one would argue that increasing ticket prices would offset the empty seats, airlines cannot use this strategy because they would risk losing their market share to rivals offering competitive ticket prices. The continuous ordering of new aircrafts and the less than proportionate scrapping of old aircrafts has been primarily responsible for this problem. International airlines continue acquiring new aircrafts while selling their old aircrafts to start-ups, second-tier, and third-tier airlines. The strategy retains capacity in the system, thus culminating in the problem of overcapacity. While customers enjoy the competitive fares that airlines have to offer when confronted with overcapacity, they suffer from reduced profits.
Labor unrest, especially pilots and engineers strike, adversely affects the operations of both domestic and international airlines. Undoubtedly, strikes from these professionals would halt all operations, thus compelling the management to incur additional expenses of compensating the striking workforce or hiring new workers to resume operations (Akbar 2001). Airlines respond to this threat by outsourcing low-wage positions such as baggage handlers, cart and wheelchair attendants, and skycaps. However, contracted workers also regularly demonstrate demand for better wages, working conditions, and on-the-job training.

Finally, international airlines are also contending with the outburst of low-cost carriers. As international carriers grapple with high operating costs and labor unrest, some low-cost regional carriers benefit from the moment to reap massively from their passengers. The fact that low-cost carriers tend to fly one type of aircraft and mainly provide economy seats explains why they are profitable. Operating one type of airplane culminates in low maintenance costs, with economy seats allowing them to carry many passengers that often travel regionally (Vidović, Steiner & Babić 2006). On the contrary, international airlines face high maintenance costs because they operate different types of aircrafts that result in high maintenance costs besides facing the other challenges cited above. However, the effective positioning of international airlines in the market would help avoid these challenges, as they would have many passengers and receive enough revenues to offset their wage requirements.

2.3 Brand Development and Recognition

2.3.1 Brand Development in the Aviation Sector

Adopting innovative brand development strategies has become necessary to attract customers and increase sales in the contemporary corporate world. The airline sector has seen the emergence of unique marketing tactics to address the three key issues plaguing the industry: flight delays, significant extra charges, and poor customer service (Desai & Sousa 2015). This contradicts the customer satisfaction objective that airlines have to achieve to retain existing customers and attract new ones. Subsequently, any airline that intends to dominate in the sector should continually strive to address these issues through several innovative brand development strategies examined below.

Building a loyalty program is one of the strategies that players in the aviation sector use to develop their brands. A loyalty program helps the Airline to target new audiences and turn them into potential consumers of its services (Hossain, Kibria & Farhana 2017). The loyalty programs
should allow customers to earn points and redeem them at some point in the future to subsidize ticket prices. The reward points encourage customers to seek a particular airline’s services when traveling, thus improving its popularity in the market and boosting its ticket sales. Aviation companies can also combine the reward points with free airline meals and seat upgrades to enhance their reputation in the sector. Although some could regard this strategy as a costly approach, its dividends would become evident once the airline company succeeds at attracting more customers, as it would witness a rise in ticket sales and subsequent increase in profitability.

Besides the loyalty program, airlines should also implement marketing strategies that would impact customers in the market. Regardless of the Airline’s marketing approach, ensuring that the effect of the strategy holds a unique place in the hearts of consumers is crucial in developing the brand image. Helping society, thereby turning them into loyal customers, is one of the obvious ways of leaving an impact in the hearts of potential customers (Kim, Lee & Roh 2020). For instance, American Airline’s strategy of sending free food packages to people living in New York City has earned the firm substantial interest from society by enhancing people’s interest in its services. The respect turns into trust, which culminates into brand loyalty, as the interested individuals become loyal customers to the Airline. Thus, the Airline should leverage online and offline strategies to reach and impact society to create brand trust and loyalty.

The road to brand development in the aviation sector also involves the use of spectacular social media campaigns. Most people spend most of their time online on social media platforms such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook (Appel et al. 2020). Subsequently, airlines should leverage these platforms to reach their target audiences and build their brand. For instance, an airline can use paid advertising on the three social media platforms to target potential customers in particular locations. However, the company should differentiate its paid ads from those of rivals in the market to stand out because most airlines have also implemented paid advertising to attract customers. The Airline should ensure that its services guarantee value for money and exceptional customer service to stand out from the competition. In the airline sector, just like other industries, the value that the firm offers to its customers translates directly to its profits. Thus, there is a need to ensure that the paid ads provide real value to customers. Real value arises when the company prioritizes the customer’s interests above its objectives to encourage ticket sales. For instance, it could post YouTube videos explaining to customers the critical safety aspects and other steps to travel safely or enjoy the flight. The Airline should refrain from traditional campaigns that focused on directly encouraging them to buy its tickets.
As the Airline implements measures to target new customers, it should not lose its focus on existing customers. It should maintain its focus on existing customers before devising other strategies for targeting potential customers. The main objective of targeting the current customers in developing its brand is that they would advertise its services to potential customers via word of mouth advertising (Kim & Park 2017). In turn, Mouth publicity increases ticket sales as new customers would buy the Airline’s tickets to try out its travel experience for the first time. This elicits the need for ensuring that the existing customers receive the best customer services, such as an exceptional inflight experience characterized by super-fast internet speeds, allowing customers to watch movies and TV shows on flights, and providing mouth-watering meals. The Airline could also offer coupons for the next flight to encourage the existing customers to fly with it next time. They should also ensure that the seats are comfortable enough for the passengers, even when they are flying economy.

Besides, airlines should not disregard "the power of influencers" when developing their brand. Influencer marketing has proved a crucial tool for increasing the Airline’s Return on Investment (ROI) (Kadekova & Holienčinova 2018). Thus, the influencer marketing strategies adopted by the Airline should be effective to boost the business. Influencers have a large fan base that would easily consider traveling using the Airline if they prove that the company in question provides exceptional in-flight experience. The colossal trust that influencers receive from their millions of fans across the globe would translate into the confidence that the Airline would receive from the targeted individuals. They can use the story-telling approach to enhance the awareness of the Airline’s brand to its target customer segments. The Airline should also ensure that its transportation rates and pricing structure are transparent to strengthen customer trust. The Airline should also avoid charging hidden fees as most individuals detest such fees.

2.3.2 Brand Recognition in the Aviation Sector

In the airline sector, brand recognition concerns the customer’s ability to recall the brand and distinguish it among competing brands. Thakshak (2018) noted that brand recognition or awareness in the aviation sector concerns the strength and capacity of the customer to recollect the airline brand. The Airline should have a reputable name to minimize the risk of losing revenue when customers decide to buy tickets from a rival provider of airline services. The brand development strategies mentioned above play a pivotal role in enhancing the recognition of an airline brand. In most instances, achieving the desired brand recognition levels requires substantial financial resources from the airline company. Investing in brand awareness strategies
improves the organization’s brand image and attitude. Positive brand recognition generates brand credibility, thereby enhancing loyalty motives among consumers of the brand’s services. Therefore, the Airline should invest in unique brand features like in-flight customer experience and timeliness to create a positive brand image that would enable positive brand recognition.

2.3.3 The Case of Qatar Airways

Qatar Airways' recognition as "the number one" airline brand across the globe in 2017 by SKYTRAX revealed the significant heights that the Airline has scaled to become a leader in the airline sector. The award, also deemed as "the Oscars of the aviation sector," did not come as a surprise as the Airline had succeeded at positioning itself as an airline of choice among customers traveling to various destinations across the globe (Fetais et al. 2020). Undoubtedly, the Airline adopted many strategies that enhanced its global customer recognition and enabled its rapid global expansion. It developed and maintained a consumer-centric model aimed at offering an exceptional in-flight experience to customers. Superior comfort, in-flight service, and entertainment characterize the Airline's flight experience. Therefore, it is apparent that the Airline had adopted an innovative approach defined by high-quality standards and efficient operations to position itself among the leading players in the sector successfully. Subsequently, it offers vital lessons to academics and managers worldwide that intend to use quality performance as the basis for enhancing a brand’s awareness and reputation.

2.4 Trends in Aviation Industry

As is the case with an aircraft that transport passengers from one point to another by landing on the runway and taking off into the skies, the airline sector is also witnessing lows and highs caused by specific trends. This review identifies five key trends that are shaping the contemporary aviation sector across the world. These are the new passenger and the need for airlines to build the “social” pace, the mandatory ability to maneuver between the online and offline customer, analytics, the changing course for generating revenue, and the rising focus on the standardization and regulation route.

2.4.1 The New Passenger and Building the “Social” Pace

Undoubtedly, airlines have to manage the modern passenger. Several airlines have already embraced the digital age and adopted novel strategies of engaging with the contemporary customer to establish long-lasting relationships. From this bold step, it is no doubt that airlines have
to move out of their comfort zones to adopt the social pace that would allow them to engage directly with the customer. The widespread use of social media by people across the world elicits the need for airlines to embrace this change if they have to keep up with the contemporary customer’s demands (Koch & Tritscher 2017). Although some airlines have already identified the need for this shift in customer engagement, others have not fully embraced it. For instance, Khan (2016) noted that Virgin Atlantic launched a social media campaign dubbed “Looking for Linda” that attracted colossal interest from many people. The interactive contest hooked many customers with its idea. KLM also introduced the “Meet & Seat” service that allows passengers to sit alongside fliers that reflect their mutual interests obtained from their profiles on social media platforms. The “Perfect Days” campaign launched by British Airways is the last case cited in this review that aims to establish intimate ties between customers and the Airline. The Airline expects its customers to share their itinerary and travel wish list using Facebook in the campaign. The innovative campaigns depict the social pace that technology and social media has imposed on airlines.

Airlines have to create a robust resource pool on social media platforms to respond to customer concerns and queries. Social media communication continues to command a large percentage of customer relationship management. The social media sites designed by airlines should be robust enough to respond almost immediately to customers’ posts, tweets, complaints, and queries (Kooyman 2016). Although airlines are already recording high volumes of social media-based communications from existing customers and potential customers, they should expect the volume of such communications to continue rising in the near future. In light of this trend, Qatar Airways should continually learn from mistakes to create robust social media communication systems that can address these requirements while still leaving room for the traditional customer that still values the physical one-on-one communication at the airport or Airline’s office. Partnering with providers is one probable strategy that the Airline could leverage to achieve this objective. The providers will eliminate the hustle of creating a social media platform from scratch by allowing the Airline to use its existing platforms to interact with its customers.

2.4.2 Maneuvering between the Online and Offline Customer

The online medium generates substantial revenues for airlines currently. The internet enables the online medium, with airlines leveraging their websites and online travel agencies to relay their service offerings. Although many customers still purchase their tickets offline, a significant majority book their tickets online, thus eliciting the need for airlines to embrace the digital drive
to satisfy the needs of the 21\textsuperscript{st}-century customer (Silling 2019). Airlines have also leveraged business process automation and e-Commerce to enhance air travel convenience. Web check-in has complemented manual check-ins, thus improving the efficiency of the entire check-in process at the airport. The rising smartphone popularity has also provided additional opportunities for airlines to continue enhancing operational efficiency. With the smartphone's potential in mind, leading airlines like Qatar Airways should continually identify ways of using these devices to manage customer relationships and generate revenue.

However, the rush toward adopting the online channel should not dissuade airlines from enhancing the operational efficiency of their offline channels. For instance, the offline service center will continue to serve as the most critical contact point between the Airline and its customers because of the unique personal experience (Bieger & Wittmer 2011). As is the case with other sectors, airline customers would still prefer speaking with human employees rather than chatbots when confronted with service-related challenges or complaints. Challenges encountered when using debit and credit cards coupled with other constraints such as slow website speeds and technical errors have left many customers craving for physical service agents, especially when they need to book a ticket as fast as possible without moving to the Airline's physical offices. Qatar Airlines should respond to this need by including a "click-to-call button" that connects customers directly to human service agents from its websites to address such challenges.

2.4.3 Analytics

The rise in the number of online channels used by airlines to communicate with customers has resulted in the need for processing large amounts of data. Airlines can leverage this massive pile of customer data to reap "big" from customers, as it contains information such as their profiles, preferences, and choices that can provide the blueprint for delivering customer-centric services (Mikalef et al. 2020). Besides using the information to enhance customer satisfaction, the data can also help the airlines eliminate unfavorable product offerings and monitor customers' constraints to offer customized solutions. The Airline can also analyze the historical data to forecast customer preferences and needs.

However, analyzing these enormous amounts of customer data to derive meaningful information is not an easy task. It requires the acquisition of big data analytics tools and proficiency in using these tools to analyze data. Big data analytics helps extract vital information from large data sets, thereby informing the organization's decision-making process. Social media analytics bears paramount significance to airlines when combined with speech, revenue model, and con-
tact center analytics. Just like an altimeter measures the height of an aircraft relative to the sea level, thereby allowing pilots and the autopilot to control the aircraft to remain aloft, analytics would offer vital customer insights to the Airline’s management to assist in developing strategies that would keep the Airline in the business.

2.4.4 Changing Revenue Generation Course

The revenue-generating model of airlines continually contends with the harsh realities affecting the sector, such as increasing competition, bad economic times, and high fuel prices (Ferguson et al. 2009). The issues, coupled with the decline in the number of travelers caused by the pandemic, are adversely affecting the revenue generation model of airlines. Subsequently, airlines have to identify new ways of generating revenue despite the bottlenecks to remain operational. For instance, they could consider alternative streams for generating revenue like selling secondary products and services or using the total revenue integrity approach to stop revenue leakage. Some of the ancillary services that airlines could use to increase revenue include charging for checked baggage, Wi-Fi connectivity, and requiring customers to pay for preferred seats. They should also use the total revenue integrity approach to minimize revenue leakage in crucial processes like ticket processing, customer relationship management, departure control, and e-ticketing.

2.4.5 Rising Focus on the Standardization and Regulation Route

Airlines have to manage the unending directives and regulations on standardization, particularly in consumer rights, environment, accounting, and finance. Markets are introducing penalties to airlines that violate the latest emissions regulations, thus compelling airlines to continually update their aircraft fleet to meet the new rules (Domingos 2012). It is no doubt that regulations on consumer rights enhance the safety of air travel for customers. However, it also attracts substantial costs, as the Airline has to acquire aircrafts fitted with the latest customer safety standards. Sadly, the Airline has to bear this cost without passing it on to customers as high ticket prices will force them to consider alternative airlines. Although this is a hurdle for airlines, they need to adopt compliance programs that transform operations by optimizing business processes. Most importantly, the Airline should identify partners that will help it achieve its compliance requirements.
2.5 Summary of the Literature Review and Research Gap

Extensive studies have been done to investigate marketing strategies for the major leaders in the aviation industries. However, a case study of the way these major leaders have been resilient and aggressive in the industry based on the current dynamics have not yet been done. A case study of Qatar Airways will be essential in determining the current wave of global expansion and if these strategies can be emulated by other companies. The research gaps also a methodological analysis of the strategies that have facilitated the aggressive global expansion of global airlines. Additionally, the schemes that these airlines have followed to enhance global consumer recognition through a fast-growing network have not received adequate attention. The other aspect identified from the literature review is the need to study the international marketing strategies that global airlines can use to maintain a superior corporate image among consumers. These strategies were studied effectively by focusing on Qatar airways.
3 METHODOLOGY

This research applies the exploratory case study because there are no single set of outcomes. The researcher seeks to unravel the unique attributes from the selected company to come up with deductions that explain the current phenomenon in the firm. Case studies are essential when creating theoretical constructs, propositions, or midrange theories from evidence-based findings (Tellis 1997). They are used to develop a conceptual framework of interlinked concepts that provide a comprehensive understanding of the research inquiries. In this case, the researcher analyzes the marketing strategies and business performance of Qatar Airways to generate interpretations and understanding of the concepts and determine if they can be replicated in other firms. The assumption is that exploring the research questions within the natural context can differ from the theoretical frameworks.

As an exploratory case study, the methodology adopted considers a prelude to social research based on past publications. The researcher relies on pilot projects and existing literature to examine the causal factors vis-à-vis the observed outcomes (Tellis 1997). The answers to the research questions have been determined through analysis of recent publications addressing the investigated phenomena. The protocol followed also captures the entire set of procedures involved in the interpretation of empirical material. The study has skipped the steps of primary data collection. Instead, the focus has been shifted to gathering evidence, empirical material analysis, and case study reporting. This study adopts a “story-like” writing to assist in case and relationship descriptions in the reporting phase.

The sources of information in this case study have been selected based on a criterion. The method used to identify the most relevant publications for the study is a thematic search of studies and news reports about Qatar Airways. The analysis of the findings from these studies has been conducted based on a reporting protocol. However, the researcher has focused on responding to the two research questions identified in the introduction section.
4 RESULTS, ANALYSIS, AND DISCUSSION

4.1 The strategies that have facilitated the aggressive global expansion of Qatar Airways

4.1.1 Acquiring Stakes in Airlines and Airline Groups

Taking stakes in different airline groups and airlines is one of the strategies identified in the airline’s annual reports that has played a colossal role in its aggressive global expansion. The report revealed that in 2015, the airline invested massively in the International Airlines Group (IAG), the parent company for airlines like Iberia and British Airways. The deal, which exceeded $1.7 billion, gave Qatar Airways a 9.99% stake in the group (Turner 2015). Rather than stopping at that level, the airline stepped ahead to increase its stake to 21.43%, as revealed in the annual report. Besides IAG, the airline also invested in LATAM Airline Group, subsequently acquiring a 10% stake (AP 2016). Investing in the South American airline group just a few months after investing in the European airline group portrays the airline’s decision to conquer the global airline sector.

In November 2017, the report further reveals that the airline further ventured into China’s airline market by venturing into Cathay Pacific, a Hong Kong-based carrier. Further still, the company invested in Meridian, currently known as Air Italy, and now owns a 49% stake in the airline. However, it started with acquiring a 9.6% stake in the airline (BBC 2017). At the time of this acquisition, Alisarda was Air Italy’s majority owner. The rapid expansion of Air Italy into the North American market and the significant stake that Qatar Airways had acquired in the airline raised eyebrows among rival airlines in North America. They accused the airline of capitalizing on the acquisition to maneuver its Open Skies plan in the United States. In January 2019, the company made its latest acquisition investment by acquiring a 5% ownership in China Southern Airlines (Bailey 2019). It is no doubt that the airline has invested massively in almost all airline markets, except for Africa. Despite its sluggishness in investing in the market, it is apparent that the airline has identified a different opportunity in the market.
4.1.2 Targeting the African Market

An examination of the airline’s 2016 annual report indicates that it gave considerable attention to the African market. In the report, the airline’s management acknowledged that the African market is still developing since national airlines are poorly serving the market (Qatar Airways 2016)). The leadership acknowledged that increasing flights between Africa and other regions would foster economic growth in the region. As a result, it is targeting to invest in specific matur-ing markets on the continent. In particular, it aims to up-gauge its airplanes and add new services in line with the ongoing maturity of the market. Despite the blockage, it is surprising that the airline went ahead to launch new destinations on the continent. Besides launching new destinations, it has also considered other options of investing in the market. For instance, it has decided to target specific markets, like Rwanda, as evidenced by the statement issued by its CEO during the Africa Aviation Summit held in Kigali, Rwanda. In the report, the CEO acknowledged the need to change the continent's current hub dynamics to allow the continent to realize its full aviation potential. The statement shows that the airline has decided to step into the market to revolutionize the aviation sector and foster growth.

Besides Rwanda, the CEO also indicated that the airline would continue to consider other specific markets on the continent to identify and leverage any growth opportunities. Its decision to acquire a 60% stake in Rwanda’s imminent state-of-the-art international airport in Kigali indicates the wide range of investment routes that the airline is ready to embrace to achieve its globalization strategy (Darras 2019). Besides investing in the airport, the airline also revealed interest in working with the national flag carrier, RwandAir. Although investing in developing markets does not give immediate returns, the airline considers this move strategic towards its future growth in the aviation sector. An examination of Deloitte’s report on a “Single African Air Transport Market” revealed that Rwanda’s market could grow by at least 8% for the coming 20 years, implying that the market would double each decade (Deloitte 2018). In response, Qatar Airways resolved to run three direct flights each week between Doha and Kigali rather than continuing to use Entebbe, Uganda, as a stopover airport before advancing to Kigali. The airline’s continued investment in emerging markets reveals its quest to consider all avenues in scaling its global expansion program.
4.1.3 Venturing in the East

It is no doubt from the report that the country is also investing aggressively in the East. In the Asia-Pacific market, Qatar Airways eventually managed to secure a deal with IndiGo after trying for four years. In the reasonably modest codeshare agreement, the flight codes of the airline would only apply to three of IndiGo’s connection flights from Hyderabad, Mumbai, and Delhi to Doha (Qatar Airways 2019). Although this seems a small step, it is a giant leap for the airline as it aligns it perfectly with the long-term objective of acquiring a stake in Asia-Pacific’s low-cost carrier. From the statement issued by the management, the agreement was the first milestone in tightening the relationship between the airline and the Indian carrier. The statement also indicated that the airline looks forward to further harnessing the complementary resources and strengths of the two airlines to improve the travel experience for its global passengers.

Besides India, the airline has also targeted Malaysia. October 2019 witnessed the inauguration of the airline’s third route to Malaysia, a gateway to the South East Asia market (Karantzavelou 2019). There is no doubt that the mere launching of a new route to the rising tourist destination was nothing out of the blues. However, the attention accorded to the launch by the airline made its growth ambitions in the market apparent. Besides the airline’s CEO, other top officials from Malaysia and Qatar attended the event, thus achieving the intended objective. In a statement, the CEO acknowledged that Malaysia was an important market for its aviation services and identified the need for discussing how both airlines could benefit mutually from each other. The deal could see Qatar Airways invest in the financially struggling national carrier, Malaysian Airways, to help the government offload the struggling carrier. The airline further extended its codeshare agreement with SriLankan Airlines, which allowed its passengers to book flights to 33 additional destinations across Africa, Europe, and America.
4.2 The schemes that Qatar Airways have followed to enhance its global consumer recognition as a fast-growing network connecting people to essential destinations

From the reports, it is clear that venturing in the East, acquiring stakes in airlines and airline groups, and investing in the African market are the three key strategies that the airline has used to expand its global presence. After being on the right track in implementing the international expansion program, examining the airline’s annual strategic reports has also revealed that it engages in other schemes to enhance its global consumer recognition as a fast-growing airline connecting people to essential destinations. First, the airline has invested significantly in sponsoring different events like soccer clubs and leagues (Qatar Airways 2018). In 2019, the airline announced that it would support two leagues in Asia: The all Nepal Football Association League and the Philippines Football League (Qatar Airways 2019; McCullagh 2019). In the sponsorship, the airline’s logo would feature on the shirts of all club players and officials. Besides, the logo would also feature on the stadium flags, perimeter boards, online digital content, and LED screens. There is no doubt that the strategy would enhance its global consumer recognition.

Besides, the airline plans to expand its hub, Hamad International Airport, to build its brand image. In 2018, 34.5 million passengers passed through the airport. However, the airline intends to increase the number of passengers handled by the airport to 60 million per year (Qatar Airways 2019). The fact that Qatar will host the 2022 World Cup tournament is the primary reason for the airline’s decision almost to double the airport’s capacity before that year. This is necessary since the tournament is always associated with a rapid increase in tourist numbers. For instance, the 2014 FIFA World Cup tournament in Brazil increased tourist numbers by 78% to about 6.4 million tourists (Armstrong 2015). Despite the labor rights controversy attached to the upcoming tournament, it is no doubt that the airline should brace for a rapid influx in passenger numbers handled by the airport. Subsequently, it is appropriate to prepare for this to increase revenues and avoid straining the airport’s existing resources.
4.3 The international marketing strategies embraced at Qatar Airways to maintain a superior corporate image among consumers

4.3.1 Word-of-Mouth Advertising

Like other industry players, Qatar Airways has embraced word-of-mouth advertising to communicate its corporate image to consumers. The company's provision of exceptional customer service at competitive prices is a marketing tool in itself since peers, fellow travelers, and past customers communicate this image to potential customers across the globe. Its synonymity with affordable and quality flying has contributed massively to its global reputation as an airline of choice among customers. Since 2011, the airline asks its customers whether they would recommend Qatar Airways to their family and friends (Seo, Park and Choi 2020). The tremendous positive feedback received from customers indicated the crucial role that word-of-mouth advertising could play in helping it to maintain a superior corporate image among consumers.

4.3.2 Sponsorships

Though mentioned earlier, sponsoring events has emerged as a crucial tool used by the airline to market its brand to consumers worldwide. Surprisingly, the airline managed to sponsor the one club, FC Barcelona, that did not want sponsors. The club had cited numerous historical and sociopolitical reasons for its decision against shirt sponsorships. Subsequently, no commercial or corporate logo had appeared on the club’s famous blue and burgundy outfits. However, accepting the airline as an official jersey sponsor started in 2006 when the club agreed to display the UNICEF logo on its jerseys. Four years later, the Qatar Foundation joined the humanitarian organization, thus finding a way for its placement on the club’s jerseys (Yahoo 2012). In 2013, the club replaced “Qatar Foundation” with “Qatar Airways.” Besides, Qatar Airways has continued to use iconic footballers as advertising models and spokespeople. It is no doubt that becoming the key jersey sponsor of the most popular football club across the globe gained the airline a lot of positive reputation since it accompanied the club whenever it played.

4.3.3 Advertising for Us and The Stars

Rather than featuring prominent Hollywood actors, as is the case with conventional advertising, the airline’s advertising is down-to-earth and focused on passengers. The launch of the “Going
Places Together” campaign that featured ordinary people traveling to Doha, New York, China, and Barcelona attracted considerable media attention, especially on YouTube (Qatar Airways 2017). Featuring FC Barcelona stars like Lionel Messi and Gerard Pique in adverts attracts significant media attention, thereby helping the airline communicate a superior corporate image to its consumers.

4.3.4 Social Media

Besides YouTube, the airline also engages other social media platforms in advertising itself to customers. The 14 social media outlets operated by the airline imply that it has the most extensive and most robust social media presence in the aviation sector (Lysecki 2016). Besides featuring on the typical platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, the airline also features on China’s WeChat and Weibo, and Russia’s VK. Western companies hardly use these social media platforms.

4.3.5 Generating Publicity

Generating the airline’s publicity using juicy quips and quotes has emerged as one of its CEO’s attributes. For instance, the CEO termed the services offered by American carriers as “crap” when the airline intended to expand its operations into the market. Further still, Al Baker termed Delta Airlines as “wicked” after denying a Qatar Airways plane a gate at a U.S. airport (Ben 2016). With journalists craving for such statements, the CEO has managed to generate positive publicity about Qatar Airways.
5 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Conclusion

Two research questions were identified in this study. The first one was the investigation of the most pronounced marketing strategy that had facilitated the aggressive growth of Qatar Airways. The second was how the consumers responded to Qatar Airways’ schemes to enhance its recognition as a fast-growing network connecting people to important destinations. The results from the case analysis have addressed these questions adequately. This section summarizes the findings based on the two research questions.

Qatar Airways has majored on three strategies to facilitate its aggressive global expansion. The first one is the acquisition of stakes in airlines and airline groups. Taking stakes in different airline groups and airlines is one of the strategies identified in the Airline’s annual reports that have played a colossal role in its aggressive global expansion. Qatar Airways has invested massively in the International Airlines Group (IAG), the parent company for airlines like Iberia and British Airways. The deal, which exceeded $1.7 billion, gave Qatar Airways a 9.99% stake in the group. The Airline has gone ahead to increase this investment to a stake of 21.43%.

Moreover, Qatar Airways has invested in LATAM Airline Group, thereby accumulating a 10% stake in the group. Other global investment ventures that the Airline has exploited include the South American Airline Group, Cathay Pacific in China’s airline market, Air Italy, and China Southern Airlines. These investments have facilitated the firm’s growth in global stature.

The other aspect is a new focus on the African market. An examination of the Airline’s 2016 annual report indicates that it gave considerable attention to the African market. In the report, the Airline’s management acknowledged that the African market is still developing since national airlines are poorly serving the market. Upon identifying the untapped potential in Africa, Qatar Airways has launched new destinations in Africa and considered other investment options in the African markets. Among the African countries where the Airline has made significant investments include Rwanda and Uganda. The Airline’s continued investment in emerging markets reveals its quest to consider all avenues in scaling its global expansion program.

The study also reveals that Qatar Airways’ expansion to a global scale has been facilitated through venturing in the East. The Airline has penetrated the Asia-Pacific market by partnering with the existing airlines in the region. Among them include IndiGo and other airlines in Malaysia. Some of these approaches have been facilitated through the growth of the tourism sector in
Asian countries. These dynamics have opened new destinations, thereby enhancing the firm’s growth eastwards. The Airline has also invested in the Asian airlines to harness the local airlines’ complementary resources and strengths to improve the travel experience for its global passengers. Thus, a mutual agreement between the global giant and local airlines has been one of the strategies that enhance Qatar Airways’ growth.

Notably, the study indicates that Qatar Airways has adopted several schemes to enhance its global consumer recognition. From the reports, it is clear that venturing in the East, acquiring stakes in airlines and airline groups, and investing in the African market are the three key strategies that the Airline has used to expand its global recognition. The Airline has invested significantly in sponsoring different events like soccer clubs and leagues. Examples include Nepal Football Association League, the Philippines Football League, and Barcelona Football Club. The Airline has also expanded its marketing strategy and brand-building approaches by having a hub in Hamad International Airport. With the expected rise in the tourism sector during sporting activities in 2022, the firm is likely to get wider global exposure. The management is making preparations to enhance the brand image and enhance its global consumer recognition further.

Qatar Airways capitalizes on word-of-mouth advertising, sponsorships, advertising through ordinary people, social media marketing, and generating publicity with regards to having a superior corporate image among consumers. Like other industry players, Qatar Airways has embraced word-of-mouth advertising to communicate its corporate image to consumers. The company’s provision of exceptional customer service at competitive prices is a marketing tool in itself since peers, fellow travelers, and past customers communicate this image to potential customers across the globe. Additionally, sponsoring events has emerged as a crucial tool used by the Airline to market its brand to consumers worldwide. The unique approach of using ordinary people alongside star figures in advertising also shows how the firm focuses on all passengers. Some of the campaigns supporting such approaches include “Going Places Together,” which attracted considerable media attention.

Besides YouTube, the Airline also engages other social media platforms in advertising itself to customers. The 14 social media outlets operated by the Airline imply that it has the most extensive and most robust social media presence in the aviation sector. The firm also generates the Airline’s publicity using juicy quips and quotes courtesy of its CEO’s attributes. Journalists tend to crave statements from prominent leaders, and the fact that Qatar Airline’s CEO is making such quotes enhances the mention of the Airline in many media outlets. These quotes have also helped in enhancing positive publicity about Qatar Airways.
5.2 Recommendations

Most of Qatar Airways’ strategies have paid off in terms of growth in global recognition and customer loyalty. Maintaining the growth trajectory will demand that the company enhances the following marketing strategies.

Foster strong partnership with local airlines in the unexploited markets in Africa and Asia.

Qatar Airlines should leverage social media communications to reach the huge number of customers that have made social media a part of their lives. Besides using these platforms to interact with customers, they should also use them to establish long-lasting relationships with them, increasing the number of return customers.

The marketing and customer service department can also use big data analytics to develop effective strategies for interacting with customers to enhance the customer experience.

Qatar Airlines should identify alternative revenue streams using existing resources rather than continually complaining about the bad economic times, high competition, and rising fuel prices.

Qatar Airways should continue building positive brand recognition to generate brand credibility, thereby enhancing loyalty motives among consumers of the brand’s services.
6 References


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