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AIRLINE REPUTATION: CUSTOMER
SERVICE IN CRISIS

By
Mary Catherine DeMarco

A Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
of the Master of Arts Degree
of
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At Rowan University
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Approved by

Date Approved

July 24, 2000

ABSTRACT

Mary Catherine DeMarco

AIRLINE REPUTATION: CUSTOMER SERVICE IN CRISIS

2000

Dr. Suzanne Sparks

Public Relations

The goal of this study is to show that listening to customer concerns can improve the reputation of the airline industry. The results show through quantitative and qualitative research that the airlines are experiencing a decline in customer service and may be on the verge of a reputation crisis.

A content analysis of articles from *The New York Times* and *USA Today* was done to show the type of message the media is sending to the public. Results show that the media is reporting on the airline industry in a negative light. The media is warning that the decline in customer service, concerns for safety and, security in the industry will cause massive regulation by the government.

A survey of 198 flyers revealed that 49.5 percent of the flying public believe the airlines do not consider their concerns a priority. The main concern of the 198 flyers surveyed was safety and cancelled flights. Sixty-two percent of the flyers surveyed said they would view the airline more positively if the airlines addressed these concerns. Seventy-seven percent said they believed it was very important to them that the airlines keep them informed of cancellations and delays, and 66 percent said it was very important that the airlines train personal in customer service techniques.

By listening to the concerns of customers and the media and using public relations auditing techniques, the industry could avoid the impending regulation to its industry.

MINI-ABSTRACT

Mary Catherine DeMarco

AIRLINE REPUTATION: CUSTOMER SERVICE IN CRISIS

2000

Dr. Suzanne Sparks

Public Relations

The goal of this study is to show that listening to customer concerns can improve the reputation of the airline industry. Forty-nine and one half percent of the flying public believes the airlines do not consider their concerns a priority. Using a communications audit of all of their publics will help the airlines to make operational changes necessary to avoid impending government regulation legislation.

Chapter 1

Background

Since the time Charles Lindbergh's *Spirit of St. Louis* made history with the first New York to Paris transatlantic flight in 1927, the world has been fascinated by flight. According to the *Economist* (1997), "No modern invention has inspired such a perverse mixture of gratitude and terror as the jet liner." By 1958, the jetliner replaced the ocean liner as the premier carrier over the Atlantic, carrying 1 million passengers that year. Airline travel within the continental United States expanded in the 1960s and reached 27 million passengers by 1970.

Worldwide, an estimated 500 airlines engage in passenger and cargo operations. The United States operates the largest scheduled fleet of aircraft with more than 4,000 large jet aircraft, carrying almost half a billion passengers a year. According to the office of Assistant Secretary for Aviation and International Affairs, air transportation is now an \$80 billion U.S. industry employing half a million Americans. Over the next decade, America's airlines are expected to increase passenger load by 50 percent to 1 billion a year.

Today there are 10 major carriers in the United States. They are Alaska Airlines, American Airlines, America West, Continental, Delta, Northwest, Southwest,

TransWorld, United, and US Airways. The airline industry has remained relatively stable until deregulation in 1978, with Pan AM, Trans World, United, and American Airlines functioning as the major carriers.

Deregulation dramatically changed the structure of the industry. By 1990, Pan Am had declared bankruptcy, and TWA was on the verge of filing for bankruptcy. Profits were affected by higher fuel costs and a recession. In an effort to remain profitable, airlines slashed ticket prices. The battle for revenue resulted in an often confusing and unfair structure for ticket pricing.

The airline industry in the last 10 years has seen a steady rise in consumer complaints and negative media coverage. Passenger complaints have risen from 3,681 in 1989 to 6,582 by September of 1999. Every aspect of the industry from safety to the quality of its food has been discussed and scrutinized in the mainstream media.

The Airline Quality Rating Scores reveal that consumer complaints are up overall for the 10 major carriers, no matter how the airline scored. There are so many individual horror stories of lost luggage, delayed flights, and discourteous treatment by airline personnel that at least two Web sites are devoted to posting consumer complaints.

Untied.com claims to have been started by a disgruntled United passenger. The author of the site chronicles his customer relations encounters with United. The site contains all his written correspondence with United and their replies or lack thereof. This former passenger invites all other passengers who have negative experiences with United to write in and share them on his site. The author includes newspaper articles written about the airlines and also posts the AQR scores.

Another site, Passengerrights.com, started in April of 1999 and has generated 3,000 complaints, 86 percent of them about airlines. The Department of Transportation received 1,151 grievances against the 10 major United States carriers in May, an increase of 531 a year. Passengerrights.com generated 431 of them.

Debates over predatory practices, unfair competition, and consumer rights have instigated legislation in an effort to force the airlines to deal with the huge number of customer complaints. The industry reluctantly said it would try only after the legislation was tabled for the moment. Consumers and especially business travelers are becoming more active and organized in their efforts to force the industry's hand. The airlines may find themselves forced to deal with the public in a way that will be out of their control if they do not initiate a plan.

Travel correspondent Brancatelli says, "If your best customers hate you, there must be something wrong with how you are running your business." Brancatelli relates this in his column after also reporting that even though the airlines are experiencing record profits, their stock prices are the lowest they have been in two years (Brancatelli, 1999).

One of the most frequent passenger concerns is being lied to, or at least kept in the dark. In a letter to the editor in *The New York Times* (1999), Ira Polly writes, "Too often, airlines do not report a flight as delayed until after the time the flight was scheduled to depart."

The public is not only disgruntled, it is downright angry and the industry is experiencing a rise in disruptive passenger behavior (air rage). Professor Helen Muir, a

passenger safety expert in the UK has suggested a study to diagnose and possibly solve this situation, but so far she has not been able to find a source to fund her research.

The Problem Statement

The airlines continually try to cure their problems with a Band-Aid when surgery may be necessary. The industry refuses to submit itself for a diagnosis. In a discussion about safety, International Air Transport Assistant Director General Pierre J. Jeannot urged airlines to follow the model of other public institutions by allowing outsiders to be a part of the industry (Jeannot, 1996). Jeannot argued, "Very few airlines have a safety officer on their board." According to Jeannot, the advantage would be that outside safety inspectors could focus on this one aspect instead of taking time away from already busy managers. After many talks with airline executives, he decided to reveal his suggestions to the public.

Dean Headley, one of the authors of the Airline Quality Rating scores (Bowen & Headley, 1999) says, "The real concern for me is the airline industry's seeming lack of concern for the consumer. It is common to hear comments from consumers about the airlines disregard for consumer schedules, comfort, frustration and questions. Basically, I feel the airlines are not doing themselves any favors in the management of customer relations."

This is a no-win situation for the airlines. Passenger rights activists are screaming the same message to their representatives in government. Only under the threat of law did the airline industry agree to improve customer relations.

It may not be too late. The real job of a public relations practitioner is to evaluate the problem internally and externally by means of research and to counsel the company

as to the techniques that it could use to regain its reputation with its external and internal publics. This researcher expects this study to uncover public relations techniques the airline industry can use to improve its reputation with its public.

Delimitations

This researcher will not examine the procedures the airlines currently use except to point out those that are woefully failing. The entire United States will not be surveyed, and only flying passengers will be questioned.

Purpose

Examining the current reputation of the airline industry with its public will help to diagnose the industry's illness. By listening to its best customers' suggestions and complaints and accepting an honest assessment of its strengths and weaknesses, the industry could institute positive measures to restore its reputation. Many experts who watch the industry have already made good suggestions. One of the goals of this study is to organize those consumer suggestions to present a cohesive and workable plan of action, which each airline could draw upon.

The airlines carry passengers for business and pleasure. It is not always a luxury, but the means by which the public travels to compete in business, visit relatives, and enjoy its leisure time. An intimate relationship exists between the airlines and their public. Few other industries require publics to relinquish life to its care, as does the airline industry. According to the *Economist (How safe is your airline? 1997)*, "There are

few passengers who do not silently make a prayer every time that they enter an airplane, or do not glance up nervously at least once from behind their newspaper during the safety demonstration.” By understanding the nature of the relationship the passenger has with the industry through two-way symmetrical communication, the airlines can begin a public awareness campaign to regain credibility with its publics.

The researcher believes the results of this study will reveal that the airlines suffer from a tarnished reputation. This researcher also believes that the airlines will also suffer financially if they do not address the needs of their best customers. The results of customer questionnaires will reveal the major concerns of the flying public and will indicate the steps the public would accept to restore airline reputation.

By beginning an honest two-way symmetrical communication with their public and an audit of the internal and external public relations policies, the airlines would be able to restore their reputation.

Hypothesis # 1: It is expected that the flying public views the airline industry in a negative light.

Evidence of customer dissatisfaction with the airline industry abounds. *The Wall Street Journal* reported that the results of the AQR for 1998 showed customer satisfaction has deteriorated significantly (US Airways Ranks best; United Worst In a Study of 1998 complaint Data, 1999). Two Web sites, Untied.com and passengerrights.com, are devoted to customer complaints and suggestions. The airlines’ customer base is the present flying public and the potential customer. According to Dean Headly, (Bowen & Headley, 1999),

customers are becoming more organized and vocal in their protest of poor service.

Political pressure is being applied to force airlines to comply with passengers' requests.

Hypothesis II: It is expected that the airline industry will avoid issues of importance to its publics.

Joe Brancatelli is a columnist for *bizTRAVELER*, a travel journal that maintains a Web site with updated fare specials and travel deals. In a September 1999 column, he accuses the airlines of being "hated by their best customers." He finishes his commentary by saying; "We know that the executives that control the nation's airlines don't listen to their best customers when we complain about high fares and poor service. It will be interesting to see how they react now that the market has turned against them too (Brancatelli, 1999)."

Ramon A. Villa, professor of marketing and director of Ball State University's Professional Selling Institute warned, "When it comes to poor customer service, expect more bad experiences in the airline industry." Villa says, " We are witnessing the death of customer service in this country." Villa says at least one survey reveals that a disgruntled customer will relate a negative comment to 72 people, and that six outstanding events must take place to overcome the one bad experience. " The service in this country is terrible and corporate America knows it. And they refuse to do anything about it," he commented (USA Today, 1999).

Commenting about the United's plan to drop its 3-year old "Rising" campaign, Business Travel Coalition Chairman Kevin Mitchell says, " It would be a tacit admission

that the message is not resonating. They (United) had a limited idea of how deep the frustration is among road warriors. That's what's rising," says Mitchell.

Hypothesis 3: The public would view the airline industry more positively if the industry addressed issues that were important to it.

BizTRAVEL columnist Jeff Gainer spends \$30,000 a year on airline travel for business. In an article containing his complaint letter to United Airlines he says, "I will fly United again, but only on those rare occasions when I cannot find connections with one of your competitors. Unless I am miraculously convinced to do so, otherwise, I will do everything possible to direct my business to Delta's flights, their more generous upgrade policies, their Crown Rooms, and all-important on-time performance" (Gainer, 1999).

Leo Mullin, Delta Airlines CEO, believes it is important to bring the airline into alignment with its customers. "There was a breaking of the covenant that said this airline would be run with customer service as its paramount aim," he says, "Cutbacks may have saved the company, but our tremendous and loyal cadre of passengers suffered themselves during some of those difficult days" (Field, 1999). By putting customers first, Delta has worked to improve on-time flights. They rose from the bottom tier in 1997 to the third best in 1998.

Hypothesis # 4: It is expected that if airlines used certain public relations techniques they could improve their reputation with their publics.

The airline industry has two bottom lines it must satisfy. One is the public it carries to its destinations every day and the other is the employee public. The CEO sitting in his/her ivory tower can improve the bottom line with cutbacks, longer working hours, layoffs or whatever works to make the financial bottom line stay out of the red. But the relationship between the two publics will decide its ultimate fate.

Delta CEO Mullin believes he has two bottom lines to satisfy. One is the financial bottom line and the other is the public relations bottom line. Employees and the customer make up the public for Mullin.

America West is trying to repair its reputation among travelers and William Franke is already being accused of putting “cost over product, service and operations,” according to Bill McGlashen, president of Council 66 of the Association of Flight Attendants (*Woodyard, 1999*).

By neglecting the concerns of the public, the airlines are losing the respect of their customer base. When it comes to such concerns as safety, Ralph Nader and Paul Hudson (1999) comment, “Neglecting air safety is like stretching a rubber band. At a certain point, the rubber band snaps.” Safety is just one of the many subjects the airlines can discuss with their public to improve their reputation. This researcher intends to find those customer relations techniques the public believes would improve airline reputation.

Procedure

A content analysis was performed on *The New York Times* and *USA Today* newspaper articles for the six-month period of June 1 through November 30 of 1999. This researcher coded each article to determine whether a positive, negative, or neutral tone existed. This researcher also coded what aspect of the airline industry was being discussed: airline regulatory agencies, mechanical problems, accidents/mishaps, manufacturers, specific airlines, and safety. Three people coded, including this researcher. This researcher also coded for the section of the newspaper article where the article appeared, such as money, leisure, business, travel, or news section. This researcher also conducted intercept interviews at the Philadelphia International Airport. A sample size of 198 of the flying public was surveyed.

Terminology

The terms *airline industry* and *air industry* are used interchangeably to refer to the top 10 American carriers. The terms *passengers*, *consumers*, and *customers* are used to refer to that public who are presently engaged in air travel for business and pleasure.

Chapter 2

To locate relevant information about the airline industry and its image, this researcher used Library, the online catalog system, and databases, Proquest, ABI/Inform, and Lexus/Nexus. This researcher located articles in various aviation industry journals and in public relations journals using the keywords “aviation,” “safety,” “customer service,” and “public relations.”

This researcher used journal articles written from 1989 to 1999 that discuss airlines’ operational and customer service concerns and panel discussions on C-SPAN. This researcher also used articles written by aviation industry watch persons who follow the business and financial aspects of the airline industry and those who report for travel magazines on customer service. This researcher used the World Wide Web to locate industry-related sites reporting on the airline industry and written communication to those who are the “gatekeepers” of the public good and the airline industry.

Building an Agenda

Grunig and Hunt (1984), say when it comes to setting public agenda, newspapers seem to set the agenda for public opinion more than television . Even though television may introduce issues, information does not stay with the public long enough “to affix them on the public agenda; newspapers do.” Sociologists Kurt and Gladys Lang (1984) believe the media “build” an agenda rather than “set” it. When organizations or news sources release information about an industry matter, an issue does not result unless journalists create the agenda. Once a journalist begins reporting about an organization or responds to an organization’s statement or news source, it becomes an issue. As other journalists and news sources interact, a media agenda is built.

A media agenda then begins to affect the attitudes of the public at large once the public realizes the issue affects them in some way: either positive or negative. Since the print media will stay with an issue they deem important, the issue can stay in the public’s eye long enough to influence attitudes, which can change behaviors.

In September 1991, AT&T experienced a disruption in long-distance service that went unnoticed by the company for almost 6 hours. The disruption in service affected service at three major northeast metropolitan area airports. According to Benoit and Brinson (1994), “The effects on AT&T’s reputation, heightened by the substantial attention devoted by the media to this episode, were substantial. *The Chicago Tribune* reported that industry experts ... said Tuesday’s events will damage AT&T’s reputation”

for reliability and cause more customers to protectively switch at least part of their phone service to competitors.

The Airline Industry Image

According to Crow (1996), "If you don't define yourself, someone else will do it for you." Negative reporting of an industry's problems can tarnish the image of an industry or company in the public's mind. According to Bernstein (1984), "... in the corporate realm, image may be defined as a representation of the reality of a company's performance, and is constructed by both the public and the company. Face, image or reputation is an extremely important commodity. Benoit and Brinson report in *Communication Quarterly* (1994), "Since the early 1970s, organizations have become more aware of their responsibility for contributing to society in economic, social, environmental and political ways." Brody (1991) states that "organizations are being held to new standards of accountability." As a result, say Benoit and Brinson (1994), "Corporations must be concerned about their image in the public eye."

According to Flint (1999), the airline industry is held to a different standard in the court of public opinion than other industries. In January 1999, 4,500 passengers on as many as 30 jets were stranded on a runway at Detroit's Metropolitan airport for up to 8 hours during a blizzard.

Passengers were forced to remain on the jets with no food or water and with toilets overflowing. The national attention the Detroit incident received was heralded in the media as proof of airline incompetence and arrogance. By comparison, in November 1998, automobile traffic in and around the Washington, D.C. metropolitan area was held at a standstill from the afternoon rush well into the evening hours. The Washington

incident, even though it affected more people, was soon forgotten and resulted in no response by the media.

McKenna (1998) says media reporters on the aviation beat do not trust the aviation industry. They are professional skeptics who lead the public and political frenzy after the latest crash. McKenna states that the aviation industry is not straight with the media. In regard to issues of safety, for example, the aviation industry has adopted the FAA's three-pronged approach to dealing with public safety questions: deny, defend, and deflect.

The Detroit incident gave birth to several pieces of federal legislation aimed at the airline industry. While some of the proposals in the legislation are reasonable, Flint says many go well beyond the scope for what airlines should be held accountable. Flint warns that this is a major step toward re-regulation. The industry is negligent and may self-destruct if it continues to behave as though it does not need to take into account how the mainstream media reports its actions, or lack of action.

Increasingly, issues that could be settled within the industry are being brought to a public forum. International Air Transport Association Director General Pierre J. Jeannot (1996) became frustrated with senior airline executives. After months of private conversations to initiate safety measures common to other industries producing no results, he decided to bring up the subject more publicly.

Headley and Bowen (1999) observe: "Consumer concern regarding safety and security has not been sufficiently addressed. Recommendations from safety commissions and reports from recent disasters are not being adequately communicated and

implemented. It appears to the flying public that we are awaiting another disaster to strike before further action will result.”

The *Economist* (How safe is your airline? 1997) says the next decade will see “worries about safety” become the industry’s “biggest headache.” From 1960 to 1980 with the introduction of the jet engine, the rate of fatal accidents per im landing went from 50 to 2. For the past 10 years the rate has been 1.5 fatal accidents per im departures. There has been no improvement in safety statistics in the last 10 years. Even though there is no way to make air travel completely safe, experts warn by the year 2010 we will see one major airline crash a week, every week of the year.

McKenna (Don’t Keep Air Safety Data From Public, 1998) warns that the industry’s disclosure of safety information must come from the industry itself. Shielding this information from the public may someday allow for the leak of detailed and embarrassing information to the public. Mckenna reminds the industry that disclosure of safety information should also include the operational changes the airline companies intend to make to change the situation.

The solution is “openness and information (How safe is your airline? 1997).” Consumers will want to know which airlines are the safest. Ideally the airlines should provide that information directly. The statistics are already collected by air safety authorities, but are kept secret. Since consumers already have their own ideas about which airlines are safest, forthright information would allow consumers to make rational decisions about which airlines they fly.

McKenna (Don’t Keep Air Safety Data From Public, 1998) reminds the industry that the public pays for the system that certifies, moves and monitors its aircraft.

The industry belongs to the public. Safety information, just one aspect of customer concerns, is theirs. The communication approach should be a shared partnership.

Consumer Action

Headley and Bowen (1999), also observe that the industry is declining in service to its customers:

“Declining industry quality in 1998 gives reasonable cause for Congress to pass the Airline Passenger Fair Treatment Initiative, commonly called the Airline Passenger Bill of rights. This consumer-oriented measure would require airlines to provide accurate and timely information to consumers about problems and flight delays, increase reporting requirements regarding consumer complaints, increase airline liability regarding lost or damaged luggage, and increase penalties for involuntary denied boardings.”

Headley and Bowen (1999) believe the airlines are beginning to “initiate anti-consumer oriented rules.” The rules “seem designed” to “manage” passengers rather than serve the customer. Limiting carry-on baggage, limiting pre-boarding with children and then requiring them to sit in the back of the aircraft, and blocking out window and aisle seats based on ticket price are a few of the examples that serve industry needs rather than consumer needs. Soon, observe Headley and Bowen (1999), “Consumers will become driven by price and schedule only and regard airline loyalty as having no tangible value.”

As mega-carrier relationship agreements continue to increase, Headley and Bowen (1999) believe, “It appears that quality customer service is being replaced with attitudes of domination and desires to service all routes, profitable or not. This approach will certainly make some carriers stronger but leave others in troubled relationships, facing potential bankruptcy or merger.”

In his book, *Building Your Company's Good Name*, David Young (1999) says organizations need to need to pay attention to communications planning to enhance reputation. Young says companies need to:

“... confront serious issues, not merely paper over cracks in your reputation foundation with cosmetic solutions. This admonition is important to emphasize because we live in a time when numerous business managers talk of wanting to “PR it” that is, buy into cosmetic communications. It represents a mentality that says it is okay to pollute the community if your company also plants trees. A former government relations official for a major chemical company says, ‘for years, the big chemical companies planted trees.’ Today these same companies understand that good reputations start when they *stop* polluting communities.”

In response to the threat of regulation, the largest United States airlines announced what commitments they are making to improve customer service.

David Field (1999) reports in interviews with three frequent flyers that the commitments are “too little too late” and “they seem to be promising what they should be doing already.”

Image Restoration

Public relations practitioners advise companies “that people will form opinions of what organizations do whether or not those organizations try to interpret their own activity” (Fulginiti, 1988). Pat Jackson (1988) says, “... when companies act in the public interest they act in their own interest at the same time. Public relations practitioners remind companies that they have two bottom lines to satisfy. The first is to please their publics.” Benoit & Brinson (1994) say, “Research indicates corporations may at times take an indirect or preventive approach designed to cope with general

negative feelings toward the company.” Heath and Nelson (1996) “asserted the importance of managing an issue before it becomes controversial and threatens public perception of the company.”

Summary

From this researcher’s secondary research, the airlines are suffering an attack on their reputations. The media is bringing issues of safety and customer service to the forefront of the American public. Frustrated with the industry’s speed at dealing with safety, aviation experts are bringing concerns for safety to the forefront of the American agenda.

Consumer advocacy groups and researchers who score industry performance are calling on Congress to step in and act on behalf of consumers. The airline industry needs to honestly assess their situation and make improvements before regulations are forced on them by congressional legislation.

This researcher hopes to determine through primary research what are the main areas of concern among the flying public and what media the agenda is setting. Through primary research, this researcher hopes to offer information and solutions the airline industry can use to improve its customer satisfaction.

Chapter 3

The goal of this study is to show that the airline industry suffers from declining public opinion, and to reveal public relations techniques it can use to revive its tarnished image. Secondary research from industry journals written in the years 1985 through 1999 revealed that the industry's regulatory agencies are increasingly under scrutiny by its publics. According to the Department of Transportation, consumer complaints are up 100% over the last 10 years. Passengers claim airline personnel are discourteous, flights are delayed, luggage is lost, and flights are cancelled with little concern for passenger schedules. Families of victims of airline accidents claim they are kept waiting to get information about loved ones believed to be on the doomed flight. There is no end to the type and number of consumer complaints.

In addition to passengers, consumer advocates such as Ralph Nader criticize the industry for being slow to act on industry problems. In a 1999 byline for *The New York Times*, Nader says a center fuel tank problem caused the fatal Value Jet crash over the Florida Everglades. Nader says the findings have not produced any action, even though the manufacturers, the FAA and the airlines themselves know the tanks are dangerously hot for 30 percent of the time. Employees also have important concerns that they are making public (Nader & Hudson, 1999).

According to Pilot Lauren Paine in a 1999 *USA Today* article, crew fatigue was the cause of the June 3 American Airlines accident in Little Rock, Arkansas. “Fatigue is the enemy of good judgment” says Paine, “Were it earlier in the pilot’s duty day, he probably would not have made the decision to land in bad weather. But after being on duty for 13 hours, the pilot’s judgment probably was impaired” (Paine, 1999). In a C-Span (1999) interview with Dr. Russell Rayman, executive director for the Aerospace Medical Association, airline employees called in to voice their concerns. A flight attendant whose husband is a pilot wanted to know why more attention isn’t paid to crew duty and crew rest. She said the fatigue issue is the “industry’s dirty little secret.”

The mainstream media such as *The New York Times* and *USA Today* rarely have a week go by without an article assessing the state of the industry. Articles appear in the News, Money, and Business sections. Every aspect of the industry is being scrutinized. The public does not differentiate between regulatory agencies, airline manufacturing companies or a particular airline company when it comes to an airline crash. Whether it is a mechanical, regulatory or pilot error, the public inevitably blames the carrier.

This researcher wanted to determine the public’s perception of the airline industry, what the public would like to see the airlines do to improve their image and the public relations techniques that would help enhance their reputation. The research methods chosen were a content analysis and intercept interviews.

Content Analysis

Secondary research revealed that the airlines suffered from a negative image. The public believes the airlines consider its concerns a low priority. Customers feel the airlines are not really listening to what they want and are implementing plans without

customer input. To determine the concerns of the public as reflected in the media coverage of the airlines, a content analysis was performed on articles from *The New York Times* and *USA Today* for the period of May 1999 through November 1999. *The New York Times* and *USA Today* were selected, as they are two of the major national newspapers for the United States. Much of what appears in *The New York Times* sets the standard for issues in the United States even though it is a New York City publication. *USA Today* was chosen because it represents the entire United States and not one particular region. During the time period selected, a major airline crash occurred.

Articles covering the entire industry were selected. Articles discussing the FAA and its regulation of the airlines, articles about the airlines themselves, and articles discussing airplane manufacturers were analyzed because the average passenger holds the airline directly responsible for the maintenance of its planes, competence of its staff and airline performance records.

Thirty-four articles were coded for positive, neutral, and negative tone. The subjects selected were determined by studying secondary research and examining customer concerns most often mentioned. The articles were examined for subject categories: luggage handling, on-time arrivals and departures, carry-on baggage, safety, cancelled flights, and security. The results were cross-tabulated to reveal the major customer concerns and if they appeared positively, neutrally, or negatively toward the airline industry.

Three individuals coded the 60 articles to verify reliability and validity of the study. According to Weber (1990), intercoder reliability produces the same results when

more than one coder codes the same text. The directions given to the coders are listed in Appendix A.

Intercept Interviews

Intercept interviews were conducted at the Philadelphia International Airport in January 2000. Passengers waiting for flights in the airport were chosen. One hundred ninety eight respondents were selected to provide an error rate of no more than $\pm 7\%$. Passengers were asked five Likert scale questions. Four questions identified how they felt the airlines viewed their concerns and what were their major concerns. They were asked to rank their answers. One question identified three proposed public relations techniques the airlines could use.

Summary

The statistical data obtained from the content analysis and the intercept interviews revealed that the media holds a negative image of the airlines and reports with a negative slant on the industry. The data did not support the hypothesis that the public views the industry in a negative light. The data suggests the public believes the airlines do address some of their concerns.

The data showed, however, that almost half of the public surveyed is concerned that the airline industry does not consider its concerns a priority.

Chapter 4

As previously discussed, to test the hypotheses in this study, a content analysis, an intercept survey and intercept interviews were conducted. The content analyses of 34 articles from *USA Today* and *The New York Times* were performed. The articles revealed the tone of media covering the airline industry. The intercept interview survey revealed the publics' main areas of concern. The survey also produced information about public perception of the airlines attitude toward their concerns as well as techniques the public believed the airlines could use to help their image. Intercept interviews with survey participants produced general information the public wanted to share about their concerns and experiences with the airline industry.

The participants felt the airlines considered their concerns a priority, even though the media does not think so. The main areas of concern to the public were determined through categories used by the Department of Transportation to record and review customer concerns. They are:

- Safety
- Cancelled flights
- Security
- Flight delays

- Carry-on baggage

Participants in the intercept survey also answered and shared comments and stories of their experiences with the airline industry. Participants said they believed the airlines considered their concerns a priority. Some participants included comments stating they did not think the airlines acted as though they considered customer concerns a priority.

The content analyses revealed that the media negatively slants its coverage of the airline industry. Eighteen out of 34 articles analyzed revealed problems the industry faces. Cancelled flights, safety, and security were the issues discussed most frequently. The print media calls for the public to demand legislation to force the industry to treat customers fairly.

The content analyses provided a quantitative measurement of the media coverage. The intercept interviews provided a qualitative analysis of the public perception of the industry's customer service to them. The purpose of the intercept interviews and the survey was to determine to what extent the media and the public agree, and to what extent the public feels negatively about the airlines.

Hypothesis I :It is expected that the flying public views the airline industry in a negative light.

The respondents were asked if they thought the airlines considered their concerns a priority. Fifty and one-half percent said they believed the airlines considered their concerns a priority, while 49.05% believed the airlines did not think their concerns were a priority or were not sure if the airlines considered their concerns a priority.

Table 1

Frequencies of respondents for question: Do you think the airlines consider customer concerns a priority?

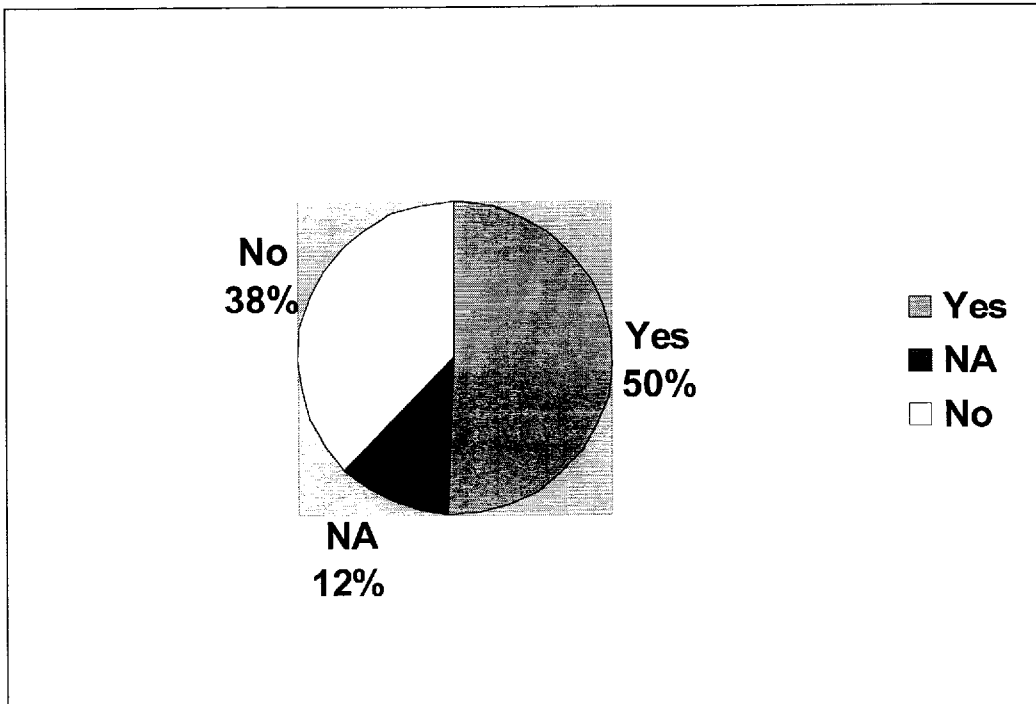
	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulate percent
Valid 1=yes	100	50.5	50.5	50.5
3= no	75	37.9	37.9	85.4
5=NA	23	11.6	11.6	100.0
Total	198	100.0	100.0	

Table 1 shows half of the public thinks the airlines consider their concerns a priority, while the other half thinks no or was not able to decide.

A pie chart in Figure 1 shows that the flying public is divided in its opinion of the airlines priority of their concerns. Fifty and one-half percent of the flying public believes the airlines consider their concerns a priority

Figure 1

Percentage of respondents for question: Do you think the airlines consider customer concerns a priority?



In additional comments the respondents made to this researcher, they revealed that they often felt the airlines did not behave as if they considered their concerns a priority. Forty-nine and one-half percent of the flying public said "no" or that they were not sure if the airlines considered their concerns a priority. This is a significant

number of flyers who are dissatisfied, and the media is working to convince the other half that the industry is not addressing their concerns.

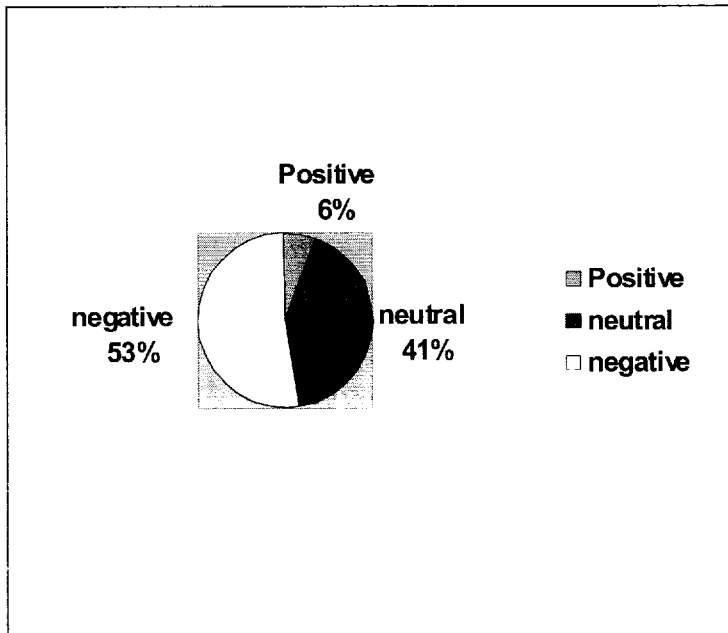
In additional comments to this researcher, customers said they thought money or concern for scheduling was what the airlines considered their priority. Those respondents who told this researcher they did not believe the airlines considered customer concerns a priority also related experiences with cancelled flights, delayed flights, lost luggage, or other negative experiences that proved to them the airlines were not concerned with their needs. A woman and her husband interviewed contacted Delta Airlines after having a piece of luggage fall from an overhead compartment on the wife. The airlines said they had not called the woman as they were waiting to hear from her lawyer. The woman said she did not want to sue; she just wanted an apology from the airlines. This type of experience alienates the customer from the airlines.

A woman business flyer had called the airlines to confirm her flight. The airlines assured her that her flight was on schedule. By the time she reached the airport her flight was cancelled. The woman felt she had been lied to.

A content analysis of *The New York Times* and the *USA Today* revealed that 53 percent of the 34 articles studied were written with a negative slant, 41 percent were neutral, and 6 percent were positively slanted toward the industry. Thirty percent of the articles were located in the money section, and 30% were located in the business section of the papers. Twenty-five percent were located in the news section; 6 percent in the travel section, and 9 percent in the opinion/editorial section.

Figure 2

Percentages of 34 articles



Hypothesis II: It is expected that the airline industry will avoid issues of importance to its publics.

Participants believed the airlines considered their concerns a priority although they expressed confusion over how the airlines showed that concern. Some of the participants were not able to give an answer and said they thought the airlines were somewhat concerned or the participants said they were not sure if the airlines considered their concerns a priority. Participants were most concerned with the issue of safety. Participants were least concerned with carry-on baggage.

Participants were most concerned that the airlines keep customers informed concerning cancelled flights and delays.

Customer complaints are increasing, and maintenance of a company’s image is the most crucial element to retaining customer loyalty. Telling the truth to customers is the basis for a good reputation. Reputation is paramount for company profitability. Correcting operational problems is necessary with a tarnished image.

Table 2

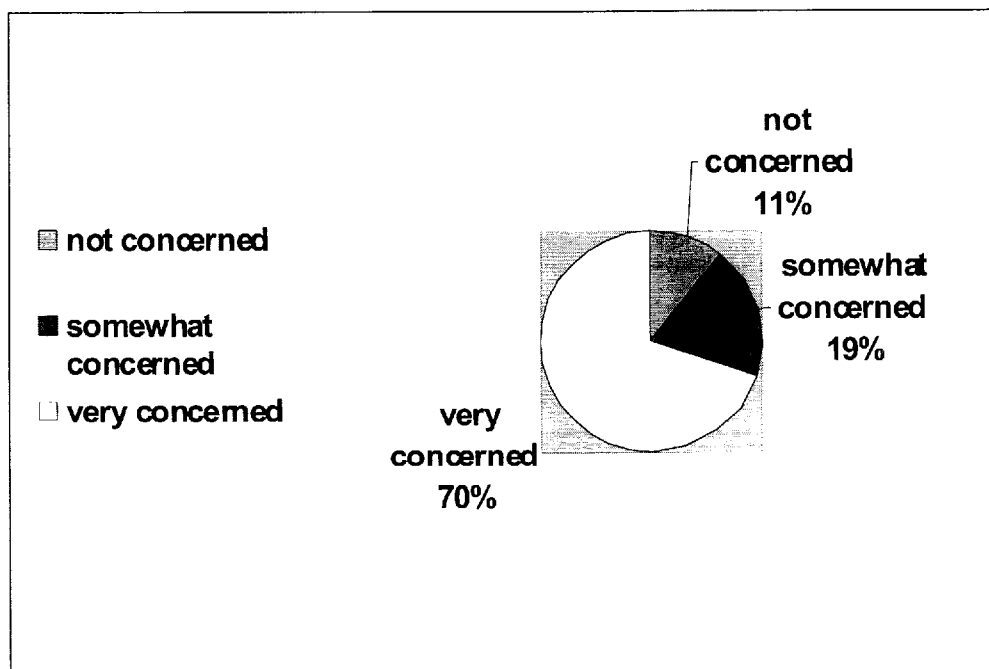
Frequencies and Percent of Participants Safety Ranking

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1= not concerned	22	11.1	11.1	11.1
2= somewhat concerned	38	19.2	19.2	30.3
3= very concerned	138	69.7	69.7	100.0
Total	198	100.0	100.0	

Sixty-nine percent of participants said they were very concerned with safety. Milton (1999) says that risks to the public’s safety and health can create a crisis and some companies don’t survive a major blow to their reputation. Airlines need to assess their particular situation on the issue of safety. Since many other industries realize the importance of a pro-active approach to averting potential crisis, Milton advises that each industry should “further recognize that all of the steps taken by other companies to identify such risks and plan responses in advance may be raising the bar in your industry of what you should be doing for your company.”

Figure 3

Percent of Participants Safety Ranking



Fifty-six percent of participants are very concerned with cancelled flights. Participants told this researcher that they often do not know that a flight is cancelled until it is time for departure.

Table 3

Percentage of participants: Do you think the airlines address any of your concerns?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulate percent
Valid 1=yes	114	57.6	57.6	57.6
3=no	45	22.7	22.7	80.3
5=NA	39	19.7	19.7	100.0
Total	198	100.0	100.0	

Fifty-seven percent of participants believe the airlines address their concerns. Forty-two percent do not think the airlines address their concerns or are not sure if the airlines address their concerns.

Hypothesis III: It is expected that the public would view the airlines more positively if the industry addressed issues that were important to them.

Participants indicated to this researcher that even though they thought the airlines addressed some of their concerns, they recognized that many concerns were not addressed. Sixty-two percent of participants said they would view the airlines more positively if the airlines addressed their concerns.

Table 4

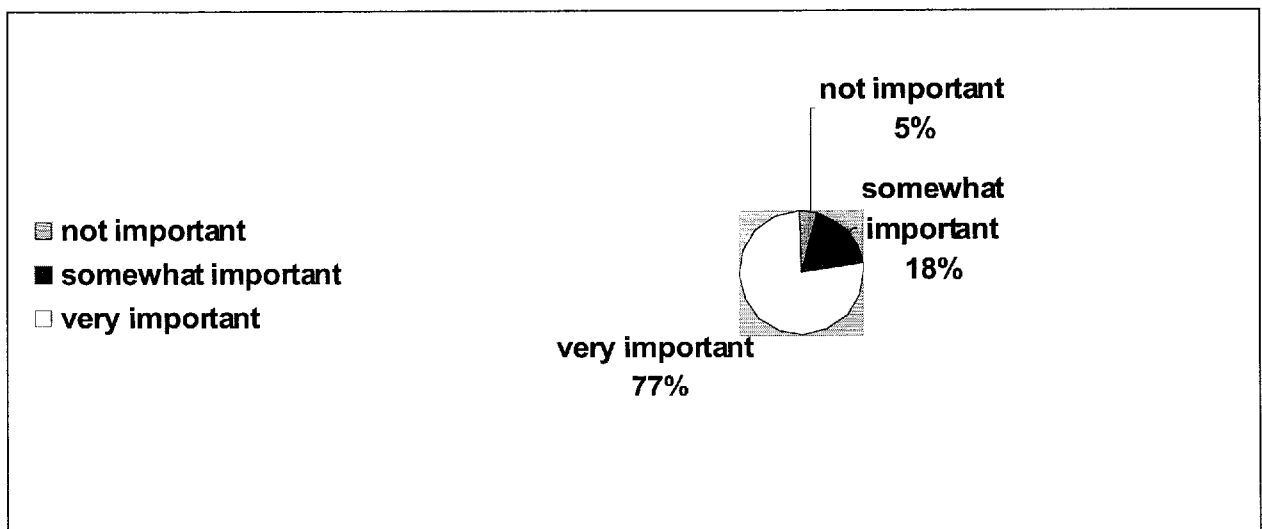
Percentage of participants: Would you view the airlines more positively if they addressed your concerns?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
1=yes	124	62.6	62.6	62.6
3=no	5	2.5	2.5	65.2
5=NA	39	19.7	34.8	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Hypothesis IV: It is expected that if airlines used certain public relations techniques they could improve their image with their publics.

Figure 4

Percentage of participants: Keep passengers informed concerning delays and cancellations



Seventy-seven percent of participants said they wanted the airlines to keep them informed of cancellations and delays. Participants commented that they were often lied to about delays and cancellations. They also indicated that they were not kept informed by announcements from airline staff when their flights were delayed or cancelled.

Table 5

Percentage of participants: Train personnel in customer service techniques.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
1=not important	11	5.6	5.6	5.6
3=somewhat important	55	27.8	27.8	33.3
5=very important	131	66.2	66.2	99.5
Total	198	100.0	100.0	100.0

Sixty-six percent of participants said their image of the airlines would improve if airlines trained personnel in customer service techniques. The participants added that they feel the airlines train personnel in basic customer service techniques, but additional training is necessary. Some participants commented that when there is a problem, customer service is poor.

Summary

The content analyses showed that the media reports on the airline industry with a negative slant. The media presents the issues of delays, cancellations, and safety as the major concern of consumers. The intercept surveys showed that the data did not support the hypothesis that the public views the industry in a negative light. The surveys did not support the hypothesis that the airlines avoid topics of concern to the public. The content analysis and the surveys supported the hypotheses that the public would view the airlines more positively if they addressed topics of concern to them. Research also supported the use of certain public relations techniques to improve the airlines' image.

The results of this study show there is a very narrow margin between a negative and positive image of the airlines and the public's perception of them. The media is working hard to convince the public the airlines are not concerned with their needs

Chapter 5

The goal of this study was to investigate the attitude of the media and the public toward airline customer service. The media clearly seemed to indicate that the public is fed up with poor customer service. The authors of the Airline Quality Rating scores reported an increase for 1998; the AQR scores for 1999 were reported during the researching of this thesis, revealing an increase for 1999. In an e-mail from one of the authors of the study, Dean Headley expressed concern that the airlines are in danger of re-regulation. In an e-mail from *bizTravel* columnist, Joe Brancatelli expressed concern that consumers dislike and distrust the airlines. Brancatelli says the business travelers are upset because they pay the most for their tickets and get the least service. Business travelers know that they cannot treat their customers as poorly as they feel the airlines treat them and still stay in business.

Leisure travelers, says Brancatelli, dislike the airlines because they are confused and don't know what a seat costs. Since leisure travelers can fly off season or plan ahead, they often get great bargains.

So with all the negative coverage from the media and from industry watchers, why does the flying public still think the airlines care about their concerns?

The Flying Public's View of the Industry

This researcher expected the public to overwhelmingly view the airlines negatively. The secondary research indicated public complaints doubling every year. Web sites dedicated to consumer concerns for safety and customer complaints increase with each accident and poor customer service experience.

This researcher found a discrepancy between how the public answered the questions and the experience of consumers. Those participants who answered they did not think the airlines viewed their concerns as a priority reported experiencing cancellations, delays, and poor customer service. These participants did not trust the airlines to keep them informed about delays and cancellations. Participants told this researcher they had called the airlines before they left home or from hotels to ask if the planes were delayed, and were told they were not, only to get to the airport and find out they were lied to.

Participants were also concerned that they were not informed about delays and cancellations in a timely fashion. Consumers are kept waiting for information and often did not find out their flight was cancelled until it was time to board. They felt airline personnel should have told them about delays and cancellations as soon as they knew. This researcher believes from comments such as these that consumers were reluctant to believe the industry did not care about their safety and schedules, even though they were often treated without concern for their needs. These same flying customers are consistently voicing their complaints in writing, and the Department of Transportation records an increase for 1999.

Even the participants who said they felt the airlines considered their concerns a priority still admitted the airlines did not always act as if they did. As this researcher was interviewing two business travelers who were already delayed 2 hours, the airline ticketing agent asked all passengers from the delayed flight to leave the counter, where they were checking in. Other flyers on a flight that was closer to taking off needed to check in. The two business flyers said that the airlines considered their concerns a priority. As the announcement was made, this researcher asked them if they would put up with this type of service at DisneyWorld. They answered no.

This researcher found that many participants were willing to put up with inconveniences and poor service that they would not tolerate from another industry.

Avoiding Topics of Concern

This researcher spoke to David Castleveter, the media relations representative from US Airways. Castleveter drew this researcher's attention to the customer commitment his airline was implementing. The commitment is on the company's Web page. Johnston (1999) says,

“one indication of how seriously each airline regards its promises of improved customer service maybe how the policies are treated on their Web sites. Aloha, Continental, Northwest, United and TWA put a link on their home page to their new policies. To find US Airways plan, you have to click on “Travel Information”; on ATA's home page, you got “About ATA,” and for Delta's you click on “The Gateway.” American and Hawaiian posted their new promises in places where few passengers are likely to look; on Web pages with corporate information for shareholders or journalists.”

This researcher observed in the demeanor of the participants a reluctance to believe the airlines do not consider their concerns important. They seem unsure of what they should require of an industry that holds their lives in its hands.

Addressing Customer Concerns

Customers revealed their major concern is safety. There is no way for the participants to know if the airlines are addressing this concern. That may be one reason the media is watching the industry so closely. In an interview with a flight attendant for US Airways, this researcher asked the attendant if she was nervous about flying following a fatal crash. The attendant told me that when the accident first happens, the industry investigators do not know the exact cause of the accident. By the time the results are revealed, she has forgotten about the incident.

This researcher thinks the attendant's attitude is in line with public opinion. The public is not concerned with how the industry is addressing the concern of safety unless they are following the issue the way victims' families do. Ralph Nader (1999) has reported that in the case of the Value Jet crash, poorly located center fuel tanks are to blame. Nader says there has been no correction of the problem. Nader (1999) also reports that in the case of the Swiss Air fatality in 1998, the cause was fire, related to faulty wiring. Industry experts have suggested systems to detect faulty wiring, but no plans to use the testing system have been implemented.

Participants were also concerned with cancellations and delays. The industry doctors these statistics by considering departure from gate as the "time" of departure.

Sitting on the tarmac is not considered into the equation. Statistics can be misleading to the public.

Public Relation Techniques

Since 50 percent of the public still believes the airlines consider their concerns a priority, the industry should take advantage of that public trust and examine themselves. In the prodromal or preparatory stage of crisis management, companies look around to see if there are any warning signs of impending crisis. Re-regulation is surely on the horizon for the airline industry if it does not make operational changes. Interference by government agencies will put some airlines out of business.

A communication audit of all its publics --customers, shareholders and employees-- is necessary. The industry needs to address employee concerns and provide an avenue for observations and complaints without fear of retribution.

The industry needs to survey its customers to find out how they feel about their experiences and then honestly evaluate the results. This researcher has never been asked by an airline to fill out a customer satisfaction evaluation

Conclusion

The survey results show that the public is divided about its view of the airlines' image. While 50 percent think the airlines consider their concerns a priority, it means they view the industry positively. Only two of the participants this researcher interviewed mentioned any of the airlines in particular. Participants were not concerned with

considering all the airlines as a whole. There does not seem to be any customer loyalty, but rather flyers choose the company according to price and route.

A frequent flyer participant said he did not consider his bonus miles when flying for business, but rather put his schedule first. He did know some business flyers who flew on airlines on which they collected miles.

If the industry cares about customer loyalty, it will have to understand the consumer issues and closely watch the media's messages. The survey reveals that there is a window of opportunity for the airlines to do the right thing. Young says, "Try as hard as you can never to be placed in a position where you are asked the single toughest question any business person will ever face: "Why didn't you do the right thing?"

Contributions to the Field

The airline industry is a unique industry. Its employees spend long periods of time with their customers. The minimum a crewmember could spend with a customer is 1 hour. This is a service industry that is also a necessity. It is not a luxury to fly. Today it is the way the public travels for business, pleasure, school, and family reasons. The public is at the mercy of the airlines. Will the airlines be socially responsible to deal with the safety issues before them? Or will they spend their time and efforts increasing airport gates and increasing their routes and partnerships?

The airlines may be able to avert impending regulation by taking control of their situation. McKenna (Don't Keep Air Safety Data From Public, 1998) says to the airline industry, " You must share with the public through the media the data on each potential

safety problem and the specifics of what you're doing to address them. Don't try to sell the public or the media on safety gains. Make them partners in the effort.”

Future Research

The subject of brand loyalty in the airline industry would be an area for further research. Is it possible to produce a loyal customer base in the airline industry? Or do airline customers choose by convenience and price?

Case studies of an airline such as Southwest, reported to have good customer service and contrasted with an airline that receives a high number of customer complaints would provide an area of future research. Is it possible to provide quality care to customers or to build a loyal customer base in the airline industry? Or will the passenger always decide an airline based on price and locality?

A quantitative proportionate survey of the flying public would yield information about the flying public that has not been collected as far as this researcher can tell. While each airline may collect information from their own questionnaires and the Department of Transportation records customer complaints, there has not been a survey of the general flying public.

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Appendix A

To: Andrea Streitfeld

Carol Giordano

From: Mary Catherine DeMarco

Date: December 20, 1999

Subject: Content Analysis

Thank you for coding my content analysis. These articles are about some aspect of the airline industry. The airline industry includes the airline companies, regulatory agencies such as the FAA and the NTSB, the manufacturer of airplanes, such as Boeing. The public does not differentiate, but holds the airline accountable for performance.

Please place a check mark by any of the other categories listed, if the article discusses any of the categories. Please code each article for its basic slant. Does the article present a positive, neutral or negative impression of the airline industry? An article would be considered positive if its goal is to impress the reader with the benefits of the industry to its public. An article is neutral if it leaves the slant to the reader to decide. An article is negative if it presents the industry's problems and criticizes the industry.

Mechanical problems would include anything that relates to the design function of the physical airplane. Airline accidents would include crashes, runway collisions, etc. Safety would be anything that presents a potential concern for passenger safety, which could include mechanical. A misguided plane on a runway would be a safety issue, and a poorly designed center fuel tank would be both, safety and mechanical. Security refers to the possibility of illegal persons or objects access to airplanes.

Please code the articles for the section of the paper where they are located, for instance; news, money, business, travel or editorials. If you are unsure, place the selection in the news section.

Please return your results to me by January 30 at the latest.

Thank you for your help!

Appendix B

1.) Do you think the airlines consider customer concerns a priority?

Yes _____ No _____

2.) What are your major concerns?

Please rank on a scale of 1 to 3.

1= **not concerned** 2= **somewhat concerned** 3= **very concerned**

1. **Lost luggage** _____

2. **on-time arrivals/departures** _____

3. **Safety** _____

4. **Security** _____

5. **Carry-on baggage** _____

6. **Flight delays** _____

7. **Cancelled flights** _____

3.) Do you feel the airlines address any of these concerns?

Yes _____ **No** _____

4.) Would you view the airlines more positively if they addressed these concerns?

Yes _____ **No** _____

5.) Which of the following should the airlines do to gain your respect?

Please rank on a scale of 1 to 3.

1= **not important** 2= **somewhat important** 3= **very important**

1. Train personnel in customer service techniques _____

2. Keep passengers informed concerning delays and cancellations _____

3. Provide more personnel to handle customer needs _____

Male _____ Female _____ Business _____ Pleasure _____

Appendix C

Table 1

Frequencies of respondents for question: Do you think the airlines consider customer concerns a priority?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid percent	Cumulate percent
Valid 1=yes	100	50.5	50.5	50.5
3= no	75	37.9	37.9	85.4
5=NA	23	11.6	11.6	100.0
Total	198	100.0	100.0	

Figure 1

Percentage of respondents for question: Do you think the airlines consider customer concerns a priority?

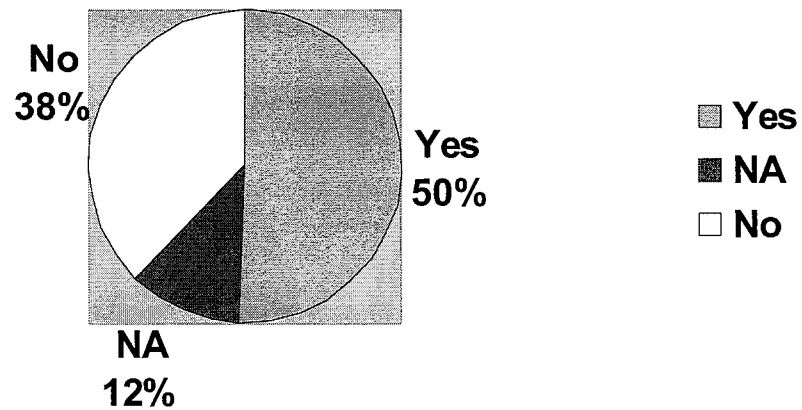


Table 2

Frequencies and Percent of Participants Safety Ranking

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid 1= not concerned	22	11.1	11.1	11.1
2= somewhat concerned	38	19.2	19.2	30.3
3= very concerned	138	69.7	69.7	100.0
Total	198	100.0	100.0	

Figure 2

Percent of Participants Safety Ranking

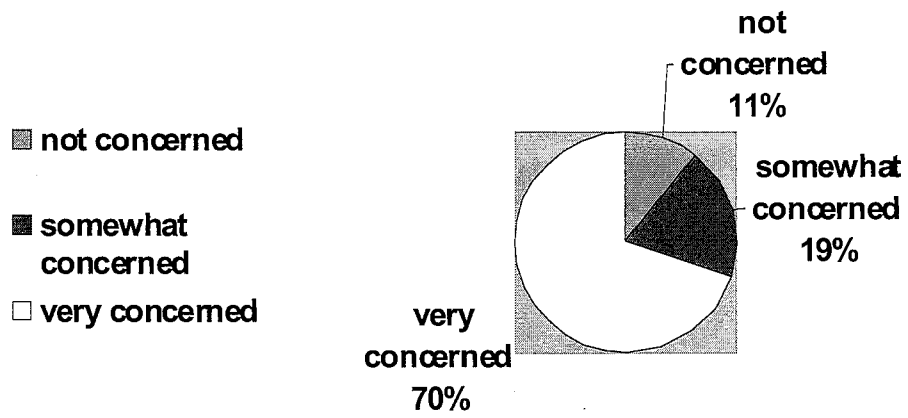


Figure 3

Percent of Participants Safety Ranking

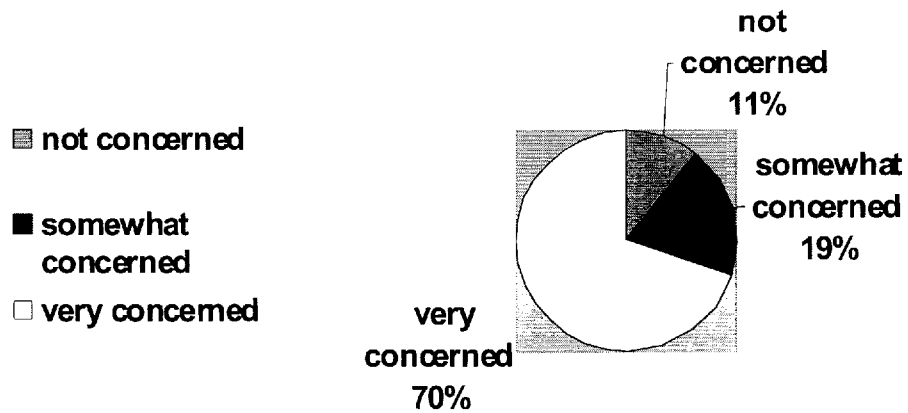


Table 3

Percentage of participants: Do you think the airlines address any of your concerns?

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3=no	45	22.7	22.7	80.3
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Total	198	100.0	100.0	

Table 4

Percentage of participants: Would you view the airlines more positively if they addressed your concerns?

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid				
1=yes	124	62.6	62.6	62.6
3=no	5	2.5	2.5	65.2
5=NA	39	19.7	34.8	100.0
Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Figure 4

Percentage of participants: Keep passengers informed concerning delays and cancellations

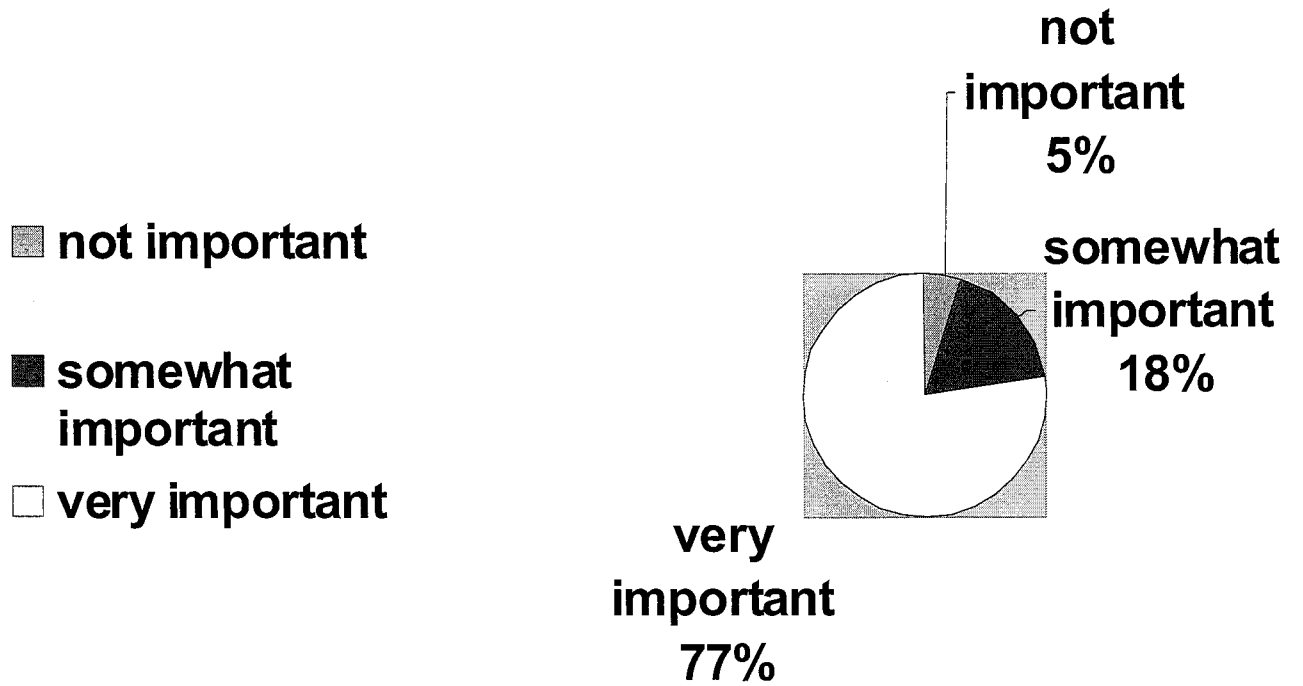


Table 5

Percentage of participants: Train personnel in customer service techniques.

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
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3=somewhat important	55	27.8	27.8	33.3
5=very important	131	66.2	66.2	99.5
Total	198	100.0	100.0	100.0

