INTERNATIONAL AFRICAN TRAVELERS AND BRAND LOYALTY OF NATIONAL AIRLINES

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Abstract

National carriers often appeal to the moral obligation of their citizens to use the airline that bears the flag of their countries. An empirical study of African travelers was conducted to examine the validity of this strategy to create brand loyalty in the airline industry. Results show that national affiliation with the airline used by African travelers does not translate into significant higher level of brand loyalty to the national carrier. Managerial implications of these results are discussed.

Key words: Brand loyalty; Marketing national airlines; African travelers.

Introduction

As noted by Ramamurti and Sarathy (1997), the airline industry, by way of international travels, "has shrunk the world physically" (p. 395). Despite its growing importance however, the industry is not without its problems. With the exception of a few firms for example, Prokesch (1995, p. 101) noted: "the world airline industry has racked up billions of dollars in losses in the last five years," and described the industry as "brutally competitive". Likewise, Appiah-Adu, Fyall and Singh (1999, p. 49) remarked that deregulation and liberalization have rendered the airline industry "highly dynamic and competitive". The tragic event of September 11, 2001 in the USA with its ripple effects around the world, has only worsened this situation (Ford, 2002). In view of this situation within the industry, individual airlines are faced with the challenge of getting and keeping passengers. One of the most effective ways of keeping customers is by creating in them brand loyalty. Brand loyalty could ensure repeat purchases/patronage, and reduced costs of marketing to loyal consumers (Rosenberg and Czepiel, 1983; Haywood, 1989; Datta, 2003; Thorbjonsen, and Supphellen, 2004). One way by which airlines that are the flag bearers of their countries attempt to create brand loyalty in consumers is to appeal to the "moral obligations" of the citizens of their countries to fly with them (Etter, 1981, p. 538). Is this marketing strategy effective, especially among African international travelers? This is the question that is examined in this paper by way of an empirical study of some national carriers and their passengers in an African setting.

Literature

The concept of brand loyalty in marketing has a long history. It goes back to Copeland's (1923) study of what he termed "brand insistence". By the 1950's, the term "brand loyalty" has become part of the vocabularies in the marketing literature (e.g., Brown, 1952; Cunningham, 1956). As to what determine consumer brand loyalty, several have been reported in the literature including: ethnicity (Sheth, Mittal, and Newman, 1999); age (Schiffman and Kanuk, 1997); consumer ethnocentrism (Supphellen and Gronhaug, 2004); long history of brand usage (Sheth, Mittal, and Newman, 1999); emotional attachment (Montoya, 2003); product performance, customer satisfaction, and level of risk and involvement of the consumer (Datta, 2003). All along however, most of the studies on brand loyalty have focused on physical goods as against services. To this end, Oppermann (2000, p. 78-79) noted: "In the wider area of tourism, hospitality, recreation, and leisure, loyalty research is a much more recent phenomenon, dating back about 10 years." Oppermann (2000) himself studied brand loyalty to tourism destinations rather than choice of airlines. Another study by Wu (2001) examined brand loyalty to choice of airlines, but not in an African setting. Wu (2001) examined brand loyalty on the Taiwan to Singapore air route. The study found that learning and interval boarding time were the important factors in brand loyalty to airlines on the Taiwan-

Singapore air route. National affiliation was not a focus of the study as is the case in this paper. An area of study that has received some attention in the loyalty literature is the frequent flyer programs. The use of frequent flyer programs to encourage customer loyalty is widespread among airlines in the developed world (Yi and Jeon, 2003; Riley, 2004). Studies however have indicated that the programs are fraught with problems. They are said to cost more than they worth (Kearney, 1989, 1990); lead to spurious or false loyalty whereby allegiance is to the reward rather than to the airline (Whyte, 2002); give rise to a form of commercial bribery in the case of business travelers whose trips are paid for by their companies (Arnesen and Fleanor, 1997); and encourage polygamous behavior wherein consumers belong to two or more frequent flyer programs (Beaver, 1996).

With regards to measuring brand loyalty, several methods have been proposed in the literature. In their review, Jacoby and Chestnut (1978) summarized all the proposed measurements that they examined into three main categories which are (i) behavioral measures, (ii) attitudinal measures, and (iii) composite measures (combination of behavioral and attitudinal). The behavioral measures deal with actual purchase of a brand by the consumers (Bloemer and Kasper, 1995), while the attitudinal measures deal with consumers' commitment, or emotional attachment to a brand (Oliver, 1997). Two-dimensional composite measures, involving both the behavioral and the attitudinal components of loyalty, are held in the literature to be more accurate than just a unidimensional measure (Yi and Jeon, 2003). One behavioral measure that has been used successfully by other authors (e.g., Brown, 1952; Lipstein, 1959) is proportion of purchase. That is the proportion of purchase of a particular brand compared to all purchases in a product class during a given time period. Likewise, an attitudinal measure that has been used with success is purchase intention (e.g., Juster, 1966; Ostrowski, O'Brien, and Gordon, 1993). In view of their practicality and ease of data gathering, these two measures were the ones adopted for this study.

Hypotheses

The interest of this study is focused on determining whether the level of brand loyalty of African international travelers is influenced by their national affiliation with the airline used. As discussed above, brand loyalty is measured by way of (i) past purchase behavior, and (ii) future repurchase intention. The following hypotheses were tested to examine this relationship:

H1: Passengers of the same national origin as the airline company used will have greater past purchase proportion than the other passengers.

H2: Passengers of the same national origin as the airline company used will have a higher level of repurchase intention than the other passengers.

Methodology

Data for this study were collected by means of questionnaires administered to arriving passengers at an African international airport. The passengers flew in from the European capital city aboard two airlines that are the flag bearers of their respective nations. One was the national airline of an African country, and the other was of European nation. The managements of the two airlines requested anonymity to secure their cooperation with the study. Hence, they will be referred to as African airline A, and European airline B respectively in this paper. Questionnaires were distributed to the passengers while waiting for their luggage in the arrival hall the airport. In addition to asking the respondents their nationality and the airline that they traveled with, the questionnaire also asked three questions aimed at measuring brand loyalty. Respondents were asked (i) how many times they had traveled by plane in the past twelve months; (ii) how many of these times was by the national airline that they just traveled with, and (iii) the probability (on a scale of 1-5) that they would use the same airline on their next trip from the European capital city to the African country, or vice versa.

The first two questions were used to measure brand loyalty via past purchase proportions (the behavioral dimension). This was done by computing the proportion of total past air travels that is made up of travels with the national airline currently used. The score on this measure will range from 0 to 1. Next, the third question measures brand loyalty through repurchase intention (the attitudinal dimension). Respondents indicated the strength of their repurchase intention by checking one of the followings: 1, definitely not; 2, might or might not; 3, probably; 4, very likely; and 5, definitely yes. The scores on this scale will range from 1 to 5.

Results

Of the 261 respondents who filled out the questionnaire, 172 were of the same nationality as the African airline A, and 41 were of the same nationality as the European airline B.

In order to test the hypotheses of this study, an analysis of variance was carried out. Table 1 below gives the mean past purchase proportion scores of the qualified respondents. The respondents numbered 213. As the table shows, respondents of the same nationality as that of the African airline A, and who traveled with the airline, have a mean score of 0.70. On the other hand, respondents of African nationality but who traveled with the European airline B have a mean score of 0.74. Likewise, respondents of the same nationality as the European airline B, and that traveled with that airline have a mean score of 0.51. On the other hand, those of European nationality that traveled with the African airline A have a mean score of 0.64.

The calculated F value of the analysis of variance was of 1.93 with 1, and 209 degrees of freedom. This value is not significant at the 0.05 level. It was concluded therefore that hypothesis 1 above is not supported by the data of this survey.

Table 1

Mean Scores of Brand Loyalty (Past Purchase Proportion)

Respondents' Nationality	African Airline A	European Airline B
African	0.70	0.74
European	0.64	0.51

$F_{1, 209} = 1.93$

Table 2 presents the mean scores of repurchase intention of the qualified respondents. As before, they numbered 213 of which 172 were of African nationality as airline A, and 41 were of European nationality as airline B. The respondents of African nationality as that of airline A and who traveled with that company have a mean repurchase intention score of 2.83, while those of them that traveled with the European airline B company have a score of 3.68. Likewise, the respondents of European nationality as that of airline B and who traveled with the airline have a mean score of repurchase intention of 4.12, while those of them that traveled with the African airline A have a mean score of 3.20. The calculated F value of the analysis of variance used to test hypothesis 2 was 0.02 with 1, and 209 degrees of freedom. This value is not significant at the 0.05 level. In the light of this result it was concluded that the hypothesis 2 is not supported by the data of this study.

Table 2

Mean Scores of Brand Loyalty (Repurchase Intention)

Respondents' Nationality	African Airline A	European Airline B
African	2.83	3.68
European	3.20	4.12

$F_{1, 209} = 0.02$

Managerial Implications

The results of this research have some managerial implications, especially in the area of promotional strategies of national airline companies. As the two hypotheses tested could not be accepted, it has been demonstrated that the mere fact that an airline company is of the same national origin as the consumer does not automatically translate into a higher level of brand loyalty among African international travelers. Thus rather than appealing to a "moral obligation" to fly the national carrier, it would be more prudent if an African airline company first to establish by research the benefits of airline services that are very important to African travelers and then to emphasize these in its advertising campaigns.

The advertisement of TWA (Trans World Airlines), reproduced in part below, seems to go in the direction of this recommendation. It reads as follows:

> "TWA LANCE Airport Express:
>
> The record of speed in the airports.
>
> Finished the waiting at the registration counters.
>
> With Airport Express only TWA delivers you all your boarding pass at the time of the purchase of your ticket, on every flight TWA toward USA and inside USA"
>
> ("*The Echoes*", Wednesday October 22, 1990, page 7)

As could be noted here, emphasis is placed on the check-in registration service in this advertisement. Since people generally hate waiting in lines for extended period of time, the benefit of fast check-in would definitely appeal to most travelers. It is urgent that national airlines in Africa find alternative means of creating brand loyalty in their own people in view of the growing survival problems now facing many African national airlines (Ford, 2002; Air Transport World, 2002; African Business, 2003). Thriving national airlines, coupled with operative airports would be a winning combination to boost tourism for economic development in the continent (Hall, 2003).

Limitations and Conclusion

Some of the limitations of this study should be borne in mind. For one thing, due to limited resources, only 213 respondents provided the data for this study. A larger sample would have been better. Likewise, only one African nationality was analyzed. A survey of several African nationalities, along with their national airlines would have been more representative of the African international travelers. By the same token, only one air route was used in the study. Different air routes, of different flight durations might have provided more robust results. Finally, although as indicated above, the measures of brand loyalty that were used in this study have been used before by other authors, they have not been without criticisms. For example, with regards to repurchase intention it has been argued that: "intent and actual repurchase may be two completely different sides of a coin" (Oppermann 2000, p. 79-80). Notwithstanding these limitations however, this exploratory study gives us some insights into the possible disillusionment that may accompany the common practice among national carriers to appeal to the "moral obligation" on the part of travelers to patronize the airlines of their countries. If ever used, this appeal should be secondary to those that allude to tangible or intangible benefits that are known to be of great importance to the international African travelers.

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