
SHOULD WE DIFFERENTIATE BETWEEN BUSINESS AND PRIVATE CUSTOMERS?

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Abstract

The literature on how customers make their service-provider choices largely distinguishes between private and business customers, and companies' offerings have been separated accordingly. This study takes a closer look at the possible differences between these two customer categories. The results are explorative and based on both qualitative and quantitative studies focusing on customers' actual behavior. The findings show that it is not only job-related aspects such as "being able to work" that influence business travel, and that private matters such as "time with the family" are clearly of equal significance in the choice situation. Price perception is important, but only when it is set against the appropriate social costs. The contradiction appears in the airlines' offers to these customers, which are generally specifically job related. The results of the present study show that most business customers are, in fact, "private customers".

Keywords: air travel, customer relationships, business-to-business relationships, preferences, choice, service

1. INTRODUCTION

It is imperative for providers in the air-travel industry to understand business customers' real traveling behavior. Business customers matter because of their frequent and stable travel needs and compressed time schedules. Indeed, they comprise a major customer category in the air industry. However, their choice behavior and preferences are simplified in the literature to fit business-strategy models, and individuals' preferences and behaviors are neglected (Davies and Harré, 1990; Mantere and Vaara, 2008).

The question we pose in this paper concerns how similar or different private and business customers are in reality. These two groups potentially differ in several ways. It can be assumed that private customers are generally more free to make their own choices based on what best fits their needs, whereas the business customer may have more limits and may be restricted by company policies and contracts in selecting a service provider (Van Weele, 2005; Svahn and Westerlund, 2009; Van der Valk and Rozemeijer, 2009). The context we have chosen for this study is air travel. It is relevant in that both business and private customers make similar choices: they need to go from one location to another.

At first glance business-strategy models (Van Weele, 2005; Svahn and Westerlund, 2009; Van der Valk and Rozemeijer, 2009) and models of private-customer choice (Srinivasan, 1987; Nedungadi, 1990; Heide and Weiss, 1995; Grewal et al. 1999) are very different. A closer look, however, gives a very different picture of the choice maker in the consideration sets constituting the theoretical basis for understanding how private customers choose between competing alternatives. Whereas private customers are assumed to make their choices as individuals, included in the models as choice preferences, business customers have to comply with the strategy of the company they represent and therefore implicitly abandon their own in favor of the companies' needs and preferences.

In other words, the identified theoretical gap concerns the link between models of company strategy and models of private (individual) customer choice. The former lack the aspect of individual choice with regard to effectiveness, price and other factors and their subcategories. The underlying assumption is that the actors perform in accordance with the strategy models and only the company strategy drives the behavior. On the other hand, individual preferences in customer-choice models interact with other choice possibilities (competitors), which are neglected in the company-strategy models. The implication is that airline companies build their programs on premises that do not apply to business customers.

There are different ways of finding out what matters to customers when they choose their way of traveling. From the service provider's perspective they are seen and evaluated in terms of volume or frequency of use, whereas they may consider other things important. A small Swedish airport (The Airport) wanted to know how it could increase loyalty among its business customers. In other words it wanted to know what its customers considered so important that they and their companies choose and stay loyal to the airline service instead of traveling by train, taking the car or even using other airports.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the processes leading to the choice of whether or not to use the Airport given the other travel choices. A secondary aim was to find out whether customers perceived the Airport and airline travel as a bunched or a separate service offering in competitive comparison with rail travel, using other airports, and traveling by car.

2. THE PROCESS OF CHOICE AMONG PRIVATE AND BUSINESS CUSTOMERS

Private customers' decision processes

The literature on service choice offers definitions and explanations of consideration sets (Srinivasan, 1987; Nedungadi, 1990; Heide and Weiss, 1995; Grewal et al. 1999). Choices are seen from a customer perspective, i.e. the private customer. For example, when airport customers choose other ways of traveling these alternatives are included in their consideration sets. With regard to The Airport, its position in the set is

weakened if airports are disregarded. The updating process has not functioned, which means that other alternatives have forced it out of the set. One way of understanding these processes is to include business customers in a private-customer theory, or consideration set, and if this is not applicable to establish the possible differences. Customer choice of a particular service within a set of different kinds of service is seen as brand evaluation (Nedungadi, 1990).

Baysian decision theory has traditionally been used to predict customer choice (Kotler, 1988), but it does not separate the probability of choosing within the consideration set from choosing a combination of sets. According to Nedungadi (1990), the customer is able to evaluate brands only when he or she has the consideration set in mind. He found that brand evaluation did not affect the consideration set, and that the choice of preferred brands did not have an effect on purchase intentions. Therefore, a primary condition for a customer having a particular service provider in mind seems to be relatively frequent visits, otherwise there is the risk that it is dropped from the consideration set. An airport has to attract people in order to get customers for the flying service. Accordingly, the airport and the airline-travel service should be perceived as a bunched offering in order to become a first choice for customers. The first challenge is therefore for the airport to find out whether this is the case, and if so, why.

A second challenge is to understand the constantly changing consideration set, in other words the fact that in terms of composition it is likely to feature the constant inclusion and exclusion of alternative processes. The outcome could take the form of interesting customer-perceived alternatives in their choice processes (Turley and LeBlanc, 1995).

Nedungadi (1990) and Grewal et al. (1999) write about sets of choices from which customers actively choose, whereas Srinivasan (1987) and Heide and Weiss (1995) refer to the consideration set as being constantly updated from the memory in combination with choice perception. Srinivasan (1987) points to the need to understand the process of being included in a consideration set, the main criteria for inclusion being elusive, however. East et al. (1995) identified unconscious processing in the updating, whereas Woodside and Trappey III (1996) recommend a technique based on intended behavior for identifying the factors included in the process.

Echoing the thoughts of East et al. (1995), but with a focus on behavior in practice, studies on actual switching behavior have also identified unconscious processes going on when customers switch (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007). These processes operate outside of their consideration sets, and customers therefore have difficulties arguing for the best choice. Those who choose from within the set are clear in their arguments. This clearly reflects the way active and passive customers justify their switching.

The results of Roos and Gustafsson's (2007) study show that active and passive customers appear to have different kinds of switching processes. In other words, different factors are involved when they make their

respective switching decisions and thereby choose new/alternative providers. Fournier and Yao (1997); Riley et al. (1997) encourage researchers to take new approaches to already researched phenomena in order to deepen the understanding. Business customers' choice situations have been neglected in the abundant literature on private customers, the assumption being that they constitute clearly different categories. In an attempt to narrow this gap in the literature a switching-behavior approach is adopted here.

3. BUSINESS CUSTOMERS' PLANNED DECISION-MAKING

Companies' offerings to business customers

A recent article by Mantere and Vaara (2008) investigates companies' strategy work, focusing on the possible factors that both impede and promote the flow of strategy implementation. It covers problems that arise during the planning in attracting organizational support for the strategy, involving social and hierarchical issues, and other group-dynamic matters related to both interaction and possessed knowledge. In other words it covers what participants are expected to do, can do, or cannot do (Davies and Harré, 1990).

When the strategy work is successful the strategy is fully implemented. Do companies know their customers' preferences? For example, a selling strategy involves offering service or products to customers, who may or may not buy them. What are the customers' perceptions of why they do or do not buy? The reason why such perceptions should be of interest to companies is that the strategy design and implementation should start there and not from the process. Most business-strategy models include an implementation stage (see the next section), but lack consideration of the origin or basis of the stages. In other words, the first stage is missing and the models are built without including the customer as a basis. In terms of private customers it is a question of consideration sets: why is a product excluded or included? In addressing this question it would be useful to establish the difference between what business customers intend to choose in accordance with and related to their companies' strategies, and what they actually choose when they are free to do so.

Business customers' choices as components of company strategies

Business customers, unlike private customers, use or buy a service but do not pay for it out of their own pockets. Van der Valk and Rozemeijer (2009) define business customers as customers buying a service in an exchange between organizations or companies. Does the company strategy affect their choices, and if so, how? Van der Valk and Rozemeijer (2009) describe a typical business-customer purchasing process as comprising different stages such as specifying, selecting, contracting, ordering, expediting and evaluating. Van Weele (2005) extends this model by including requesting information and making a detailed specification, which fit between the specifying and selecting stages.

In another strategy model Svahn and Westerlund (2009) identify different purchasing strategies in supply nets. Their focus is on relationship complexity and purchasing goals. Efficiency and effectiveness are sub-categories of the latter, whereas transactional exchange and relational partnerships, and collaborative networks are sub-categories of relationship complexity. Of relevance here is the fact that in this model as in several others (Porter, 1985; Gadde and Håkansson, 2001; Glenn and Wheeler, 2004) the ultimate focus is on strategy goals, price, and effectiveness from the company perspective. The business customer is assumed to be at one with the company's strategies. However, "the real business customer" is absent from the models. The real choice situation, reflecting the role of the customer as a person with his or her own context affecting "work life", is not taken into consideration at all in models of business strategy.

Inspired by the encouragement of Fournier and Yao (1997) and Riley et al. (1997), we decided to take an atypical approach to choice situations and to focus on actual behavior. Our approach is described in the following section.

4. METHOD

The empirical methodology reflected the purpose of the study. We wanted to enhance understanding of the premises on which business customers base their travel choices, with specific regard to The Airport. Three stages of empirical investigation emerged, all of which included an explorative stage although the second step yielded quantitative results. Quantitative results were included in order to demonstrate the widespread nature of the phenomenon.

The empirical study

First two interviews were conducted in order to shed light on the phenomenon of business traveling in the geographical area in which The Airport is located. A questionnaire was developed based on the interviews, and this formed the basis of the quantitative study. The third stage was based on the quantitative results. We wanted to know the exact roles of the factors the business customers had ranked as important for their travel choices. The business context comprised different airline companies in competition with other alternatives such as using other airports and traveling by train or car. The Airport wanted to know exactly why fewer customers were using it.

On the theoretical level we followed the exploratory research process described by Routio (2005), the aim being to enhance understanding of the fictive phenomenon "differences between private and business customers". We expressed these differences as viewpoints and incorporated three stages of the exploratory study into them (see Figure 1). Only viewpoints A, B and C are considered here.

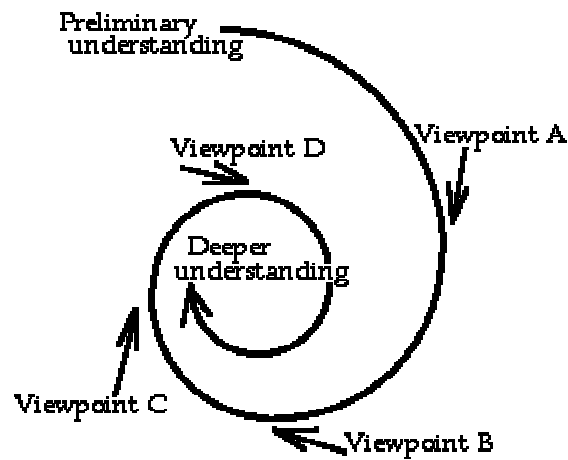


FIGURE 1 - THE EXPLORATORY RESEARCH PROCESS (ROUTIO, 2005)

Viewpoint A: The qualitative interviews, with the subsequent quantification based on the information received from the first study, started the empirical study. The interviewees were two contact persons, one at a travel agency and the other at American Express. Two students conducted the interviews, both working on their Master's thesis for a degree in Marketing at Karlstad University in Sweden.

Viewpoint B: The same students designed the quantitative study and analyzed it together with one of the researchers. The questionnaire was sent to 32 informants, and all of them responded.

Viewpoint C: The third stage of the empirical study involved conducting 25 new interviews with business customers other than those interviewed during the first stage. The Airport provided contact information on about 50 persons and companies that had frequently used it as a point of departure for business travel but now only rarely used it. A student, who was also working on her Master's thesis in Marketing at Karlstad University, interviewed these customers, transcribed the interviews and gave the transcriptions to the researchers. The researchers conducted the analysis, compared the results and agreed on the categories.

Our aims were (1) to reveal the switching processes and (2) to look at the customer-expressed factors, focusing on order of priority in terms of loyalty. We used the SPAT (Roos, 1999) technique in the interviewing and analysis. SPAT describes the switching process, and includes both process factors, defined as customer-perceived switching reasons, and trigger factors, defined as what makes customers sensitive to switching. The focus in SPAT analysis is on both the trigger and the process, the aim being to identify the triggers and to establish the customer's expressed reasons for switching. In other words, it describes the configuration of influencing factors. The point of departure for the analysis is the outcome (actual switching behavior). When the customer's perceived reason for switching belongs to the process part (switching determinant) it concerns the question "What is your switching reason?" and when the trigger is suggested it

concerns the question "Why did you mention that particular switching reason?" Triggers harboring sensitivity to both perceptions and behavior (Roos and Gustafsson, 2007) are thus likely to play an important role in identifying differences in perceptions of the relationships.

5. RESULTS

The outcome of several studies hint at the fact that business customers are not as bound by company policies as first thought. Our findings indicate a partially different decision-making process in that private costs in terms of family and personal needs turned out to be the most significant aspects of the relationship between business customers and the airport service and flights. It seems that as far as companies are concerned, the mode of travel is dependent not only on job issues such as "being able to work" but also and equally on clearly private aspects in the choice situation such as "time with the family". Time is thus an important asset for business customers, which is assumed, but it is not time in the context of the company's time-related strategies or programs but pure private time that matters when departure and arrival are included in the business traveler's weekly work schedule.

Price was found to be important, but not as important as being able to work or spending time with the family. The implication is that on the theoretical level the function of the consideration sets (Srinivasan, 1987; Nedungadi, 1990; Heide and Weiss, 1995; Grewal et al. 1999) of private and business customers appears to be the same, and that only the features differ. In comparison with the complex process models of service purchasing (Van der Valk and Rozemeijer, 2009) in the literature on business relationships, in this case the procedure was not always so structured or in accordance with company strategies.

First stage – two initial interviews

The first step was to conduct a qualitative study comprising interviews conducted by students with a travel agent in Sweden and an American Express representative. Despite the exploratory nature of the study and the small sample, the results are interesting.

The first interviewee was from the company-travel department of the Karlstad travel agent. The questions asked covered the work and what customers focused on when they wanted to travel. It seems that price is the most important factor, as it has been since the 1980s. The price should be fair compared to what you get, a reasonable price for a reasonable quality.

According to the informant, the train had a big advantage in the sector and had taken the lead in terms of business travel. The cheaper tickets had recently become more flexible, allowing rescheduling, and this was something that made the price even more important. Nowadays customers can buy a cheaper ticket and still have flexibility.

Another significant factor is convenience. Trains and cars can take you directly to your destination, even where you want to go within it (cars in particular). Airports, on the other hand, are usually located outside cities and travelers have to use another method of transport to get to the center. This also affects the price. In the interviewee's opinion the airline business's biggest advantage was related to early-morning meetings in that in most cases the train would not arrive in time. Obviously air transport has a big advantage because of the short travel time over longer distances and to destinations abroad (excluding Norway). With regard to environmental issues it was doubted that they were seriously considered, merely seen as a bonus for using the cheapest method - a company-strategy reason. The environmental aspect was not as important as price and travel time: the train was priced fairly with regard to quality and time, and there were also some environmental benefits that gave it extra credits.

The American Express representative worked at the Gothenburg office and the information she gave enhanced understanding of business travel in general. It seems that the organization's travel policy controls the decisions on three conditions: it has to be distinct, employees have to be willing to follow it, and it has to be followed up. Otherwise individuals have the control and the power to be creative enough to sidestep the rules. There was a clear trend in more and more organizations to move towards an environmentally friendly travel policy before the financial crisis, but when the crisis came it was all about costs.

Costs include not only the price of the ticket. Customers think about the total cost: if the alternatives are to stay at a hotel overnight or to pay more for a ticket that would get them home late in the evening they would take the latter option, which would be cheaper overall. Bonus systems have no real effect on the decisions, as they usually incorporate most options. AMEX customers know exactly where they want to go and when they have to be at their destination, they mostly want to know the different options, and pick the best price from "the total cost perspective". Smaller organizations are usually more price sensitive and tend to go for the cheapest price without regard for other factors. We are also often told that if there are no direct connections customers choose another alternative, if there is one. As far as the train is concerned it is only "the express variant" that is of interest. Customers would not use an ordinary intercity train. Morning-departure trains and planes are mostly fully booked.

Second stage - quantification

A questionnaire based on the results of the qualitative study was designed in order to further explore the preferences of business customers in choosing how they travel. The questionnaire comprised 22 items assessed on a scale ranging from one to five.

The 32 business customers in the sample usually traveled between Stockholm and their hometown and rarely took connecting flights or trains. They seemed to travel more frequently to Copenhagen. Half of the

respondents indicated that they could decide, or at least state a preference, on how they traveled without having to ask the company they worked for, and the figures were the same regarding traveling in business class. The biggest number of customers, 50 percent, had changed their way of traveling five years previously, whereas 41 percent had not used The Airport as much recently. The lack of a direct flight to Copenhagen was thus not the only reason for the change in travel patterns.

The responses regarding travel preferences are summarized in Table 1.

TABLE 1 - THE MOST IMPORTANT FACTORS IN TRAVEL CHOICE

	Factor	Division
1	Travel time	65.6%
2	Reliability	50%
3	Departure/Arrival time	50%
4	Price	28.1%
5	Being able to work	25%

One business customer mentioned the following aspects of their travel choice as being the most important. *"It's the convenience and the service is good. I travel a lot to Stockholm and it's important to be able to work while traveling. I can do that on the train."*

However, the findings reveal a decision process in that a configuration of factors seems to be involved and not only one or two. Together with the choice factors mentioned above, the following "background factors" emerged: New job tasks, Gas prices, Delays, Being able to work during the journey, Environmental considerations, The time aspect (worldwide), Departure times, Arrival times, Control, Freedom, and Business colleagues.

The fact that different combinations of "background factors" and "choice reasons" were found highlighted another aspect of traveling: there is a choice process that the quantitative approach is capable of revealing but not of describing. Furthermore, distinguishing between "free choice" and "reality" highlighted a new aspect, and even more the hint of "a hidden agenda". The need to look at actual behavior was thereby emphasized. Tables 2 and 3 reveal differences in percentage between how customers behave and how they would behave if they had a totally "free choice". Most of them appear to prefer air travel, but the company strategies suggest something else.

TABLE 2 - FREE TRAVEL CHOICE

	Destination	Air	Train	Car
1	Stockholm	0.37	0.45	0.18
2	Copenhagen	0.7	0.22	0.08

TABLE 3 - REALITY REGARDING TRAVEL CHOICE

	Destination	Air	Train	Car
1	Stockholm	0.19	0.51	0.30
2	Copenhagen	0.49	0.43	0.08

In general the results reveal the importance of understanding the whole process with all its factors and their specific roles in the choice in order to find the “real” preferences of the customers.

”I rarely use the train, in fact. If I’m only going to Stockholm I might take it, but when I’m traveling to Europe and making a connection at Arlanda I take the plane from The Airport”

In sum, it is worth mentioning the importance of the two initial interviews in the exploratory quantification because they provided a basis for the questionnaire design. We were able to include factors of significance to business customers in choosing to travel by air and to use The Airport as their point of departure. This, in turn, enabled us to determine the relative importance of these factors in the context of traveling by air, train or road. In order to combine and exclude factors that appeared to be important but were not in reality we categorized the preferences as positive or negative regarding each method of transport. *”I haven’t used the customer-support service actually, but the personnel at The Airport are first-class. In my opinion it’s Sweden’s best airport in terms of service and personnel.”* *”I don’t think The Airport is as good an option for me. I have to take care of two children on some weekends and that decides how I travel.”*

Customers who had switched to the train stated: *”I used to travel more than I do today. In those days it was The Airport and air travel that mattered. Because I don’t travel as much now it’s not as advantageous, I don’t get the extra service either, so I often take the train because I make shorter trips these days.”* *”I use the train. The reason for this is that I find it less expensive and there are a lot of departures to choose from.”*

Customers who had switched to driving the own car stated: *”It became too complicated to go from The Airport. There are few direct flights and so there was a long wait for connecting flights.”* *”Nowadays I take my car to another airport. This one isn’t convenient at all.”*

TABLE 4 - CUSTOMER CATEGORIZATION OF FACTORS OF AIR, RAIL AND ROAD TRAVEL AS POSITIVE OR NEGATIVE

AIR			RAIL			ROAD		
	Factor	Division		Factor	Division		Factor	Division
Positive			Positive			Positive		
1	Travel time	93.8%	1	Being able to work	78.1%	1	Freedom	96.9%
2	Earlier experience	43.8%	2	Environmental influence	53.1%	2	Convenience	75%
2	Reliability	43.8%	3	Convenience	37.5%	3	Reliability	53.1%
4	Flexibility	21.9%	3	Departure/Arrival time	37.5%	4	Flexibility	37.5%
5	Departure/Arrival time	15.6%	5	Price	34.4%	5	Price	12.5%
Negative			Negative			Negative		
1	Environmental influence	43.8%	1	Reliability	43.8%	1	Being able to work	50%
2	Price	25%	2	Travel time	31.5%	2	Environmental influence	31.3%

Tables 2 and 3 show customers with a free choice to travel. When these tables are cross-compared in terms of the positive and negative aspects (Table 4) and further with customers' general travel options in Table 1, it is notable that airplane has three of the top five mentioned in Table 1 as one option of its positive-factor category. Train again shows, regarding customers' general travel options in Table 1, only two and they are in addition all customers' negative assessments. Car is not close to even match the low figures of train. In other words, business customers seem not to take the car as their first choice. Air travel gains and the others lose.

These somewhat inconsistent results given that The Airport was losing customers encouraged us to embark on a third stage in the empirical study. We wondered whether business customers' actual switching processes would offer an explanation.

Third stage – actual behavior

For this qualitative study on actual behavior we interviewed business travelers who had switched from The Airport as their departure point.

The sensitivity factors and customer-expressed switching reasons are presented in detail in Table 5. "Price" seemed to be important, appearing both as a reason for switching as the customers perceived it and as a sensitivity factor leading to switching behavior. In the same way, both "New alliance partner" and "Departure/Arrival time shortens family time" feature on both sides in the table.

TABLE 5 - CHOICE FACTORS WITH REGARD TO SWITCHING

	Triggers	Customer-perceived switching reasons
1	Generally deteriorating service	Company policy
2	New alliance partner	New alliance partner
3	Closure of Copenhagen flight	Price
4	Departure/Arrival time shortens "family time"	Company moved office
5	Insecure future regarding service	Decreased benefits
6	Price	Departure/Arrival time shortens "family time"

The most interesting finding is that "Company policy" is mentioned only as a perceived reason for switching whereas "Departure/Arrival time shortens family time" is a sensitivity factor and a customer-perceived switching reason. In other words, given that only business customers were interviewed, it seems that it is not company policy that determines the switching but the customer's private life in terms of being able to spend more time at home. Other decisive factors include "Price", "Generally deteriorating service" and "Stopping the Copenhagen flight". These results are in line with the earlier analyses (stages 1 and 2), the deeper understanding concerning the role of "Price" and "Departure/Arrival time shortens family time". Both of these factors are significant in terms of the service at this small-town airport.

In the third stage we were able to untangle the process of choosing from among alternatives given the results from the first two stages. Table 5 shows two different kinds of factors in that choice process: those that appear in both categories - triggers and customer-perceived switching reasons - really matter in terms of customer choice. All in all, the most significant result, which emanates from the research process as a whole, is the supremacy of air travel over the train and the car provided that the service is designed and planned from the customers' and not from the companies' point of view (stage two, Tables 2 and 3). The results of the third stage confirmed this.

All in all, it is evident that customers want to travel by air. In reality, business people may take the train or the car as alternatives. Their reasons for doing so are private: business-related reasons do not stand out as the most important in the choice processes. At first glance this might seem very obvious. The truth is, however, that the obvious is not taken into consideration when departure/arrival times are set or when the entire service offering is planned for real business customers.

6. DISCUSSIONS

The first aim of the study was to gain a deeper understanding of why business customers were turning away from The Airport. It appeared from the first empirical stage that price was the most important factor when they chose their form of travel. However, it became obvious at the second stage that more than one factor was involved. The focus in the third stage was on the choice process, and the results also showed that business customers tended to base their traveling on private premises. Price was important but only when it was weighted against social and private factors, which were mostly family-related. Therefore, in the context of planning business travel both the company and the airport must consider the wishes of the travelers in order to achieve a balance between projected and actual behavior. In other words, age and personal circumstances matter.

The deepened understanding also extended to business peoples' preferences regarding traveling by train. According to the travel-company representative, the big advantage of the train was that it was easier for them to do their work. However, it seems from the three-stage empirical study that this may give a somewhat false impression. Business people chose the train over the plane, but only for short trips: air travel was the first choice for those making connections to Europe. The reasons were interesting because being able to work did not compensate for the better "Reliability" and faster "Travel time": it did not seem to make up for the possibility of spending more time with the family. However, there is competition between airports located rather close to each other: The Airport is only two hours by car or train from a bigger airport, which is thus a potential major competitor.

The second aim of the study was to find out whether The Airport was perceived as a bunched service incorporating shops and restaurants, or whether people only considered the traveling in their choices. At all three stages it was found that business customers did not use this small airport as anything other than a departure point and a working space. Shops and other similar service offerings did not seem to attract them. In fact, they did not mention anything other than airline service, the implication being that shops, for example, have a minimal effect on loyalty in a small airport.

The most striking result was that environmental aspects of traveling did not affect business customers' actual behavior. Even at the first stage of the study the company-travel representative said:

"I suspect that environmental considerations are not built into companies' travel policies with the expectation of being followed: they're just a bonus for using the cheapest method. It's a company strategy. The environmental aspect is not that important."

There is thus a need to understand the role of different aspects of traveling in terms of customers' actual behavior. Environmental aspects may feature strongly in the company's strategies but they do not seem to have a decisive impact on business travelers' choice processes.

The final conclusion from the summarized results is that the consideration-set models (Srinivasan, 1987; Nedungadi, 1990; Heide and Weiss, 1995; Grewal et al. 1999) applied to private customers are also mostly suitable for use among business customers. It seems that business travelers, for example, do not fit into company-focused strategy models as actors in the company unit (Van der Valk and Rozemeijer, 2009; Van Weele 2005). One reason may be that "supporting activities" in companies have another role in the implementation of the strategy and therefore also need to be understood as such if the personnel are to follow it.

Implications for management

The implications of the exploratory results of the study are significant and rather clear as far as the design of offerings and marketing to business customers is concerned: listen to the customers and look at their actual behavior. Their private lives seem to be decisive in their travel choice. Companies tend to focus on the implementation process and its success in terms of how it proceeds (Mantere and Vaara, 2008), which indeed is important. However, its origins and what it actually promotes have attracted less attention. The results of this study of business customers traveling by air show that it is not always quite clear what influences the successfulness of the strategies and accordingly what the content should focus on.

Limitations

This study was conducted at an airport serving a rather small geographical area. However, it does give some indication of how business people choose their traveling mode. The Airport may be small, but the travelers' behavior is in line with that of business travelers throughout the country and, indeed, all over the world. Their starting points may differ but they use many of the same big and smaller airports.

It should be borne in mind that this was an exploratory study. The three-stage design of the empirical part was rather complex, although the samples were relatively small. The complex design facilitated a deeper understanding, but given the small sample size it is not possible to statistically establish the results.

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