

COMMUNICATION STRATEGY IN HANDLING BAGGAGE COMPLAINTS AT CITILINK AIRLINE IN AN INDONESIAN INTERNATIONAL AIRPORT

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Abstract

Baggage issues are occasionally unavoidable during air travel. Ideally, airlines should handle baggage complaints well. However, various issues can arise during the handling process, as experienced by Lost & Found officers at Citilink Airline, especially at international airports while serving global passengers. The objective of this research is to identify the challenges in handling damaged and lost baggage and to examine the communication strategy employed by the officers in addressing Citilink passenger complaints. This is a descriptive qualitative research study using primary data obtained from observation and interviews conducted at the Lost & Found Office PT Garuda Angkasa at one of Indonesia's major international airports during February-March 2023. The analysis covered data collection, reduction, display, and conclusion drawing. To enhance trustworthiness, triangulations were employed throughout the research process. The research indicates three primary challenges faced by the officers such as difficulties in identifying the locus of the damage to the baggage, language barriers during servicing international passengers from different cultural and language backgrounds, and passenger expressions of displeasure and anger. To address the complaints regarding baggage handling, the officers have introduced a sound handling strategy. They listen carefully, apologise sincerely, remain calm during interactions, defuse passengers' anger and ensure that each complaint is handled objectively, efficiently gather the necessary passenger details for communication and compensation purposes, and resolve baggage issues promptly to avoid passenger inconvenience.

Keywords: communication strategy, complaint handling, airline, air travel, language barrier

Introduction

The process of baggage handling during air travel is a complex system of procedures and infrastructure designed to ensure the efficient transportation of passengers' baggage from check-in to the destination. It is of the utmost importance that baggage handling is efficient to ensure a smooth travelling experience for airline passengers. In general, airline policies and procedures for baggage handling have been established to promote uniformity within the industry [1]. These comprise procedures, guidelines, or orders regulating the transfer of luggage from the departure to the destination station, which are outlined in the Airport Handling Manual (AHM 810).

In addition to providing the best service, ground handling companies and airlines, including Citilink as the second most popular airline after Garuda among the five airlines chosen by Indonesians according to the Top Brand Index 2022 survey results [2], must be able to provide solutions to the increasing demand of air transport service users. This encompasses the assurance that services and handling are executed to the highest standards to preclude the occurrence of baggage irregularity issues. Despite the best efforts of airlines and airport staff, there are instances where baggage is lost or misplaced during the process. In such instances, airlines implement procedures to trace and reunite passengers with their baggage as expeditiously as possible. This frequently entails utilising tracking systems and databases to identify and redirect misplaced baggage. It is the responsibility of the Lost and Found unit, as a service provider, to handle or overcome cases of baggage irregularities [3]. To address all passenger baggage complaints, particularly those occurring after arrival, effective communication, in this case, handled by the Lost and Found Unit, is of paramount importance to

provide satisfactory service.

Communication is the flow of information, understanding, and knowledge from one source to another [4]. As a result, those who communicate acquire influence and see changes in their behaviour [5]. Communication has at least three functions: conveying information, educating, and entertaining [6]. Furthermore, effective communication requires both parties to understand the message at the same time. It is the most important aspect of developing positive rapport between officers and passengers. Effective communication is required for the conveyance of messages in a way that guarantees their recipients get the intended meaning [7]. Several strategies can be employed to enhance the effectiveness and efficiency of communication, including a) attentively listening to the other person, b) communicating clearly, and c) replying to assertions. The objectives of effective communication within an organisation are to a) foster trust between the company and its customers, b) enhance the quality of its performance, c) prevent and resolve problems, and d) guarantee that information is properly received by the company's customers.

It is to be expected that passengers who experience difficulties with their baggage or other services will expect clear and prompt assistance in resolving their concerns. In the context of international air travel, airports serve as hubs for global travel, accommodating passengers from various linguistic backgrounds. It is evident that foreign languages, particularly English, are essential for airport and airline personnel [8] [9] to communicate effectively and facilitate interactions with international passengers, regardless of their nationality and native language. The ability to communicate in a foreign language, particularly English, also enables staff to comprehend passenger grievances accurately and offer appropriate solutions, thereby enhancing overall customer satisfaction levels. To this end, an effective communication strategy is essential to address air passenger complaints about baggage issues in an appropriate and satisfactory manner.

Complaint handling is a method for responding to passenger complaints in a timely, suitable, and satisfactory way which requires the following skills: (a) patience, (b) communication, (c) knowledge of the complaint area, and (d) language and empathy [10]. The strategies for implementing complaint handling are as follows: (a) customer complaints are a priority, (b) listen carefully to customer complaints and facts, (c) provide reassurance to customers, (d) acknowledge and apologise for any mistakes made, (e) show empathy with customer complaints, (f) remain calm in any situation and not get carried away by emotions, (g) explain the actions that can be taken to deal with the complaint, (h) follow up on complaints and do not delay resolution, (i) ensure that all complaints are processed to completion, (j) be thorough in dealing with customer complaints, and (k) provide a prompt response.

Several studies have been conducted on handling cases of baggage irregularities such as lost baggage and unclaimed baggage for Garuda Indonesia passengers [11], and damaged baggage at Citilink Airlines [12]. The findings focus more on the procedural description of how the operational processes were carried out. In 2019, a study [13] was conducted on the service strategy of L&F officers in baggage handling. The application of complaint management to passenger services for Garuda Indonesia Airlines was investigated [14] which mainly highlighted the forms of complaints and efforts to handle these concerns via electronic media and social media as well as directly to L&F officers. This is similar to [15] research on the communication strategy of the L&F unit, especially in the case of complaints of luggage abandonment by Lion Air. There are still limited research results or information about the obstacles posed by the baggage claim officers during the transactional process and the strategies they communicate in the interaction with the passengers in the context of handling complaints, unexceptionally to global passengers.

The existing literatures do not address the obstacles encountered by baggage claim officers at international airports during the conversational process with global passengers. Furthermore, the

strategies employed by these officers in their interactions with passengers in the context of handling complaints are limited. The objective of this research is to identify the challenges faced by L&F officers when handling damaged and lost baggage in the Citilink Airline and to examine the communication strategy employed by the officers in addressing the passenger complaints.

Methods

This research study employs a qualitative methodology, which enables the exploration and understanding of the meanings individuals or groups ascribe to social or human problems [16]. It is descriptive research aimed to provide an accurate and detailed account of a situation or phenomenon in its natural state [17]. This is tested or measured precisely with descriptive data, employing both primary and secondary data [18]. The research was conducted at the Lost and Found Unit of PT Garuda Indonesia at one of the international airports in Indonesia from February to March 2023.

The primary data was obtained through observation and interviews. A structured observation was conducted and prepared systematically to ascertain the manner in which the handling of baggage issues was carried out by the Lost and Found officer of Citilink Airline PT. Garuda Indonesia. Subsequently, interviews were conducted with respondents [19] to elicit responses directly from the officers regarding their approach to handling baggage complaints, the challenges they encounter, and the strategies they employ. This was achieved through the use of a structured interview, which involved the administration of a list of prepared questions. Both observation sheets and interview guidelines were developed from the Citilink SOP on Baggage Handling and Complaint Handling Theory, with a focus on effective communication [7] [10].

The data analysis covers several stages including data collection, reduction, display, and conclusion withdrawal [18]. To verify the reliability of the data, triangulation techniques were employed by utilising an alternative source of information to verify or compare the data [20]. It was done by employing a dual method approach [17] involving source triangulation to re-examine the trustworthiness of the data through the use of different sources and techniques triangulation to include the use of more than one data collection technique to obtain the same data.

Results and Discussions

Obstacles in handling baggage complaints

1. *Operational process obstacle* – It is challenging for officers to ascertain the precise location of the damage to the baggage. There are numerous potential causes of baggage damage, including the possibility that the damage occurred at the point of origin but that the officer was not sufficiently attentive during the baggage inspection at the check-in counter. Alternatively, the damage could have been caused by an error in the placement of the baggage within the aircraft cabin, resulting in the item falling and sustaining damage. These are forms of complaints experienced by passengers due to the negligence of officers in handling their luggage [21]. Nevertheless, the officer was still able to address passenger concerns and attempted to find a resolution.

2. *Language barrier* – International passengers originate from a diverse range of cultural backgrounds and may possess different communication styles and preferences. A well-developed communication strategy takes into account cultural differences and ensures that messages are conveyed respectfully and effectively. Many passengers from overseas countries were unable to communicate effectively in English, which presents a challenge for officers responsible for the Lost and Found. Communication difficulties impede their ability to fulfill their duties effectively [22]. It is, in fact, the case that both officers and passengers, for example from China, Korea, and India, were unable to communicate in English. The officers continue to strive to locate colleagues who can communicate effectively with these passengers, so that the officers may assist in the resolution of complaints and the identification

of solutions to problems. Effective communication skills are essential in addressing such challenges [23]. As a lingua franca, English plays a significant role [24], for example, to interact or conduct two-way communication with foreigners.

3. Passenger emotional constraint – When passengers discovered that their luggage had been misplaced, they were likely to experience feelings of disappointment and anger towards the officer, particularly if the luggage contained perishable food and the passengers were requesting its prompt retrieval. The officer had his own techniques for dealing with passengers who were initially emotional to calm them and persuade them to follow the officer's instructions. Once the atmosphere had calmed down, the officer negotiated the appropriate compensation, which was acceptable to the passengers. It is a natural response for passengers to complain to an officer when they believe their luggage has been misplaced. This is simply how the officer handles such a situation. In such a situation, the L&F officers tried to maintain composure and strive to provide excellent service to the passengers, avoiding the temptation to be provoked by their emotions. It is crucial for them to regulate their emotions effectively [25]. Emotional regulation plays a significant role in managing stressful situations, such as those encountered during international travel, where passengers may face language barriers and unfamiliar airport procedures [26].

Strategies done by the officers to handle passengers' complaints. Complaints or expressions of displeasure, discomfort, and disappointment should be addressed following the level of service offered by officials. When dealing with complaints, it is desirable for officers to have a number of skills, including patience, communication, understanding of the subject matter of the complaint, and the ability to empathise. In addition, the communication used must be effective. The following outlines the strategies employed by the L&F officers in addressing Citilink passenger complaints regarding damaged and lost luggage at an international airport in Indonesia.

It can be observed that the officers have demonstrated an aptitude for receiving and listening to passenger complaints in a manner that does not interrupt the conversation when passengers voice their concerns. This is evidenced by the fact that the officer was able to reduce the passenger's anger by apologising for the inconvenience, even though it was not necessarily the airline's fault. Furthermore, it can be seen that the officers can deal with each passenger's complaint calmly, not getting carried away by the passenger's emotions. This is demonstrated by the fact that they can maintain composure and remain objective throughout the interaction. The ability of officers to regulate their emotions can prevent escalation in challenging interactions and contribute to a positive customer service experience [27]. The airline and the passengers were able to communicate effectively, ensuring that information was clearly conveyed and received.

The officers requested personal details from passengers, including identification cards, baggage numbers, and ticket numbers, which were entered into the system to facilitate communication and provide further information on problematic baggage. The agent is adept at negotiating the compensation amount to be provided to the passenger.

The officers promptly addressed the baggage issue, thus preventing the passenger from becoming distressed by the extended wait. The officer always expresses gratitude to the passenger after the session, once all issues have been resolved. This is because the passenger has demonstrated a willingness to cooperate with the officer throughout the process.

The efficacy of the system employed to address customer complaints has a significant impact on customer satisfaction, which in turn affects the reputation and image of the company [28]. The implementation of a sound handling strategy is expected to foster a sense of trust between the airline and its passengers, enhance the quality of the company's performance, prevent and overcome issues, and facilitate the effective dissemination of information to passengers, thereby enhancing passenger satisfaction.

Conclusions

Exploring the obstacles faced by baggage handling officers of Lost & Found Office PT. Garuda Indonesia at one of international airports in Indonesia, there are three primary challenges identified such as operational process, language barriers, and passenger emotional constraints in addressing Citilink passenger complaints regarding damaged or lost baggage. First, identifying the exact location of baggage damage is a challenge for officers, with potential causes ranging from negligence during baggage inspection to misplacement in the aircraft cabin. Besides, language problems or barriers between international travellers and airport officers are significant issues that can hinder effective communication and overall travel experiences. Communication is a challenge for officers dealing with international passengers who come from different cultural backgrounds and have varying levels of English proficiency. While English serves as a common language, communication difficulties highlight the need for alternative assistance methods to ensure effective passenger support. Lastly, passengers' disappointment and anger towards the officers can be a source of problems too. The officers use a variety of techniques to calm emotional passengers and negotiate appropriate compensation. Maintaining composure and managing emotions are essential for officers to provide excellent service in the midst of stressful international travel situations. Addressing baggage complaints requires the L&F officers to navigate operational, linguistic, and emotional challenges effectively. Improving language services, training for airport staff, and utilizing technology for translation services can help enhance communication and ensure smoother interactions between travellers and airport personnel. It is also recommended that strategies such as clear communication, cultural sensitivity, and emotional regulation be enhanced, as they play a pivotal role in the resolution of complaints and the assurance of passenger satisfaction.

When dealing with Citilink passengers' complaints about damaged or lost luggage, the L&F officers demonstrate essential skills such as patience, effective communication, and empathy. They listen carefully, apologise sincerely and remain calm during interactions, defusing passengers' anger and ensuring that each complaint is handled objectively. They efficiently gather the necessary passenger details for communication and compensation purposes and resolve baggage issues promptly to avoid passenger inconvenience. Effective communication should be implemented as it can help to reduce anxiety, enhance the passenger experience, and foster positive interactions between officers and passengers. Moreover, the effectiveness of the complaint-handling system will have a significant impact on customer satisfaction, enhances the airline's reputation, and fosters trust between the company and its passengers.

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