RESEARCH AS A CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE
HOW SKYTEAM IS CREATING TRULY CONSUMER-CENTRIC RESEARCH
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BACKGROUND
SkyTeam is an alliance of 20 different airlines – each with their own strategies, processes and cultures. Their network covers over 1,000 airports and their members serve millions of passengers daily. In this complex environment, SkyTeam faced the challenge of trying to keep the customer at the center of their work.

Although customer experience research is high on the agenda of many research departments, it does not always reflect true consumer centricity. Together with SkyTeam, we launched a pilot customer centricity project for SkyPriority, one of their most important products. The pilot project used an innovative approach designed to evoke a feeling of customer centricity through research. By creating the research program, SkyTeam created a new touchpoint to deliver top customer service spanning their complex network.

Following the pilot implementation, we looked back at the impact and found that customers who had participated in the program felt that through the research, they could better collaborate with SkyTeam to improve the customer journey. More importantly they also felt more valued as a customer in comparison with people that did not take part in the program. Airline managers also had a positive perception of the project and had measurably improved the implementation of SkyPriority.

INTRODUCTION
We are in the middle of a Copernican management revolution. Just as Copernicus defended the idea that the sun, not the earth, is the center of our universe, an increasing number of companies understand that customers rather than brands or products should be at the center of a company.

A recent study (van Driest, 2015) demonstrated a clear relationship between the level of consumer centricity in an organization and the degree of business success. In 78% of over-performing companies, customer centricity is fully embraced by all functions while this is only true in 12% of the under-performing companies. It is clear that companies that really care about their consumers are doing better.

Consumer experience research is hence high on the agenda of many research teams and a variety of methodologies and approaches are available to capture the consumer journey. We feel, however, that the domain is on the edge of considerable change.

Customer experience research is typically focused on obtaining an accurate measurement of the experience via long surveys. Although rigorous data collection remains a hygiene factor within our industry, one can debate if the typical, long, likert scale based satisfaction survey is really reaching its purpose. Does it really reflect the ‘voice of the customer’?

Additionally, customer experience research can only reach its goal if it really leads to a change within the company. Customer feedback should be a source of inspiration to trigger action, not an after-the-fact evaluation. Finding insights is only half of the work. Insight activation needs to be planned upfront in the research design.

We felt that it was time for a research approach that demonstrated real customer centricity and that is where our journey with SkyTeam began.
RESEARCH AS A TOUCHPOINT

SkyTeam is one of the “big three” international airline alliances, with 20 member airlines and over 1,000 worldwide destinations. The alliance works to improve the experience for travelers through sharing flight listings (allowing members to share the same flight and list across airline reservation systems), reducing overhead costs, and sharing frequent flyer benefits across airlines.

Most recently, SkyTeam embarked on a mission to create a “seamless experience through operational excellence,” putting the customer in the center.

Among the most important products offered by SkyTeam is “SkyPriority,” a premium customer service offering for high value customers. The SkyPriority services are centered around eight touchpoints throughout the customer’s journey and apply across their network.

Giving high value customers a consistent, premium experience is at the core of what SkyTeam is providing to its members. However, as an association of 20 different companies, SkyTeam faces the daunting task of creating and implementing such services across a group of disparate members, all with unique characteristics, company cultures, languages, and geographies.

SkyTeam sought to bridge the divide between themselves, their members and the end users of their product. To do so, they needed to hear from SkyPriority customers and thus the customer centricity program was born.

SkyTeam did not just want to collect feedback from customers. They wanted to improve the customer experience of SkyPriority through the research itself. On its face, such a concept may seem counter-intuitive – asking a customer to take time out of their life to provide feedback seems to be “work” and should not necessarily improve the customer experience. However, SkyTeam felt the act of auditing could indicate to consumers that they have a stake in the creation of the service. An app to do so would serve as a new touchpoint. On top of all of this, the program also had to be useful and actionable internally.
This paper seeks to examine how successful the program was in improving the customer experience for participants, and whether the program had a positive impact on SkyTeam internally. A mixed quantitative and qualitative approach was used to answer these questions.

The customer centricity program
The research used a novel approach by creating a smartphone app that allowed customers to offer real-time feedback throughout their journey and at all relevant touch points. The app also worked as a key CRM tool, offering app users unique information about SkyTeam and SkyPriority.

A select group of highly valued customers were invited to participate in the program through a wide variety of channels.

FIGURE 3.

The research approach exceeded standard customer satisfaction approaches in three fundamental ways.

From isolation to relevance
Customer experience research is often done in isolation. It comes when the actual experience has already been forgotten. Participants are usually asked to recall their experience at a later date, leading to the well-documented issue of “recall bias.” In the SkyPriority consumer centricity program, sharing impressions becomes part of the journey.

As soon as a participant enters an airport, they are notified on their smartphone that they can offer feedback on their experience. The airport information is automatically loaded when the user begins an ‘audit’ (touchpoint observation). For each touchpoint there is a short list of questions – never more than five – including the always-present “Did you feel like a prioritized customer?” Through the research, customers are reminded that being a prioritized customer is the intention of SkyPriority. (See figure 4.)

From asking to listening
Since the rise of connected research (Comley 2007, Verhaeghe 2008), we have seen an increased focus on establishing an open conversation with research participants and hence not only ask questions but also give people the chance to speak up.

People’s experiences go beyond the constricted fields of a pre-defined survey response. Through the app, the broader narrative of their experience is captured by combining different modes of data collection like pictures and free text. The app design ensured that customer feedback was always in context and was built around their “story”.

![Image](image-url)
From insight to impact.
Each of SkyTeam's member airlines assigns a single manager responsible for the SkyPriority product within their airline. In crafting the research program, SkyTeam aimed to change the heart, minds and actions (De Ruyck 2011) of these SkyPriority managers involved in delivering the services.

- **Hearts:** They needed their stakeholders to believe in the program. SkyTeam wanted to establish a culture of consumer centricity and to create a mind shift throughout the alliance.
- **Minds:** They wanted SkyPriority managers to better understand customer needs to enrich their strategic thinking about the product.
- **Actions:** The program should become a part of their everyday work, helping the SkyPriority managers to sharpen their operational actions.

These three elements are essential in SkyTeam's vision to place the customer in the center of their organization. Once their hearts had been won, they could use the program to understand customer needs and then implement changes through their actions and strategies.

Rather than the traditional feedback loop of days, weeks or months, all 20 SkyPriority managers have access to a customized online dashboard with all response data – survey figures, stories and photos from customer audits. This allows for review whenever is best for the stakeholder. In this way, SkyTeam moved from a ‘push’ to a ‘pull’ approach to deliver research results. Usage statistics indicate that more than two-thirds of SkyPriority managers are now proactively using the dashboard.

The addition of rich visual and textual data allows SkyPriority managers to see exactly what the experience of the product is like for a highly valued customer, increasing empathy with the customer.

Finally, the app triggers a back-end system that immediately notifies relevant stakeholders of critical incidents. Airlines can then address the problem when it is happening. It also incentivizes proactivity instead of reactivity for airline managers. As those implementing SkyPriority become more aware of the customer audits and the product itself, proper implementation comes more naturally. This is then further supplemented by semi-annual workshops where results are discussed and follow-up activities are defined – fueling SkyTeam’s future strategy.
MEASURING THE IMPACT OF OUR CUSTOMER CENTRICITY PROGRAM
Following a six-month pilot of this project, SkyTeam looked back, examining what the impact of the pilot had been both for the customers and for SkyPriority managers.

High value customers were provided an online survey. Five-point scale questions were used to measure two factors of effectiveness. We assessed the satisfaction of customers with the actual service SkyPriority delivers and we investigated to what extent the consumer centricity program itself made people feel more valued and allowed them to collaborate with SkyTeam.

A total of 725 invites were sent to app users, with a total of 197 completions. We benchmarked the results by running the same study among a group of SkyPriority customers that did not take part in the consumer centricity research program. A total of 1,402 invites were sent to these non-users, with a total of 241 completions.

We compared the two groups across several measures. The results were compelling and validating in multiple ways. First, while satisfaction with SkyPriority was high, we did not find statistically significant differences between the two groups across most measures. This was a good indicator of the reliability of our panel. It is often said that people who are part of a dedicated panel or community are not representative as they mostly consist of product or brand fans. By seeing strongly similar measures across those collaborating directly with SkyTeam via the app, and those who did not, we knew we could draw conclusions with confidence from these data and from the panel in general.

SkyPriority managers also completed an online survey. The survey was completed by 90% of the SkyPriority managers. The survey measured to what extent the research changed their hearts, minds and actions.

In addition, we looked at behavioral measures such as ease of recruitment and participation rate on the customer side and dashboard usage among the SkyPriority managers.

IMPACT ON THE SKYPRIORITY CUSTOMERS
The first goal was to ensure consumer enthusiasm for taking part in the research program. Initially, SkyTeam set five targets for defining successful structural roll-out of the pilot project. These were:

- Minimum of 5,000 auditors registered for audit program
- Minimum of 40% of auditors recruited via SkyTeam member channels
- Minimum 5,000 audits completed
- Maximum 30% of audits on SkyTeam hub airports
- Minimum 50% audit coverage of the 60 most important SkyTeam airports

All of the targets were not only met but exceeded. More than 34,000 audits were performed by more than 8,000 panel members across the network. Recruitment and participation was a resounding success.

Secondly, we measured the impact of the program. To understand the impact, we compared those who had taken part in the consumer centricity program and those who hadn't.

One of the objectives of the program was to have an impact on customer experience. Specifically, we wanted participants (i.e. app users) to feel that they were helping to build and improve the SkyPriority experience. Demonstrating this would be a way of bridging the divide among SkyTeam, their member airlines and high value customers.

What we found was that users of the app gave significantly higher scores on measures of collaboration. Participants felt they had an impact on the future of SkyPriority and that SkyTeam truly wanted to learn from their customers. Figure 5 shows the comparison between our two groups on measures of collaboration.
This was compounded by the self-reported “feeling of being a valuable customer,” which was also 9% higher for those who had used the app. The act of participating in the research significantly improved their experience as customers. We were not only able to collect valuable data, but we were able to improve people’s travel experience while doing so – this is a compounded win for SkyTeam.

Across the two groups of customers we tested for ‘non-response bias,’ looking for differences by age, gender and travel profile, among other variables. We found no ‘hidden’ explanations for the differences between the groups, adding confidence that our findings were truly explainable by the customer centricity program.

The numbers indicated that SkyTeam was on the right track. Allowing customers to tell their stories in this easy and innovative way improved their experience. The consumer centricity project successfully achieved a key objective – collaborating with customers and improving customer satisfaction through the act of collaboration.

“Thank you for your trust and for the attempt to put the client at the center. The attempt is good. The hard bit is to make it a reality with real actions undertaken to solve problems we point out. Thank you!” - Male, 43, Spain

“I believe that this is an excellent tool and hope you will continue to listen to your customers.” - Male, 67, Lesotho

From insights to impact
Next, we examined whether the audit project was successful in having an internal impact.
We found that airline managers strongly support the use of the customer centricity program as a way to collaborate with customers and improve their products and services. When asked if they would recommend this program, we found an NPS score of 22. Satisfaction with the app and the on-demand dashboard were also high. On a 10-point satisfaction scale, 72% of managers gave a mark of 8 or above for the app and 80% gave 8 or above for the dashboard. This indicated satisfactory structural implementation and conceptual support for the project.

However, SkyTeam was most concerned with measuring operational impact. They wanted to see that the pilot project was helping their members implement and improve the SkyPriority product. To that end, we found positive results across the board. Usage data indicated that 14 of the 20 members were using the dashboard regularly, with the remaining members relying on reports and workshops. And while there was no benchmark for comparison, there were nearly no negative marks in the survey responses.

"The application is a very easy, friendly and efficient instrument of evaluation and a direct way of changing mentalities, facing the reality and moving things in the correct way, a honest way of increasing the employees’ awareness.” – Alitalia

“We have limited budget to do random checks on (SkyPriority’s) consistency, so we think the customer audit program is very useful to help us know on which parts we still have to make some improvements to give the very best service to our loyal customers…” – Vietnam Airlines

Condensing our various survey questions into our Hearts, Minds, and Action factors, we find strong scores across all three. These factors show SkyPriority managers are consumer-centric, inspired for product development, and taking steps in their daily work to respond to research findings. Additionally, more than three of four SkyPriority managers said the program allowed them to better understand the needs of high value customers, allowed them to better envision the strategy for SkyPriority and allowed them to better execute their roles as SkyPriority managers. An impressive 95% of them said the program provides more relevant data and insights. (See figure 8.)

With the success of the pilot, SkyTeam also motivated airline managers to contribute observations by using the same mobile app. These observations are stored separately to enrich decision making and exclude bias. But surprisingly, the airlines themselves began to request access to the app to use for their internal staff.

"In the most recent Marketing Executive Board (Spring 2016) we took the strategic decision to further roll out this program internally. Every time a co-worker of SkyTeam or one of the 20 airline member flies, we should capitalize on the unique opportunity to observe SkyPriority.” Edu Peek, Director Customer Experience at SkyTeam, said. “The enthusiasm we’ve seen from our members is inspiring. We’re now thinking of new ways to further embed the customer-audit program in our thinking and actions.”

SkyTeam was so convinced of the value that they are now working to officially roll out the app among a wider audience of the member airlines.

These findings are further supported by the customer satisfaction scores themselves which showed improvements across all touchpoints from 2015 to 2016. Although we cannot directly connect these improvements to the consumer centricity program, it is not a huge leap to assume that the program is at least partly responsible for them.
CONCLUSIONS AND LESSONS LEARNED

The success of the pilot project convinced SkyTeam to move ahead with a full production rollout of the customer centricity program. However, several lessons were learned during the course of the pilot – most importantly from the assessment detailed in this paper – and these lessons are being used in the implementation of the project. By the summer of 2016, the app will be available for more than 20,000 users across 16 languages.

Many of the measures described here are baseline measurements. Most salient among these are the scores from airline managers. While largely positive, some measures indeed show room for improvement. A key tool here will be the internal activation workshops where airline managers work together using the data to ensure impact.

The internal rollout of the app is also being used to improve collaboration across airlines. With members directly engaged in auditing their own and other members’ SkyPriority implementation, they can have a greater impact on the product.

Perhaps more importantly, the open-ended questions in the high value customer survey revealed a key area for improvement – communication. During the pilot project, communication to high value customers through the app was generic across all users. But it was clear that users wanted a more tailored, intimate approach to communication. They felt that if they took the time to give a personal account of their journey, then more personal communication from SkyTeam was a reasonable expectation. SkyTeam is now actively exploring options for creating such targeted communication.

Consumer-centered research has shown clear benefits for SkyTeam. It has made the data richer and put SkyTeam’s stakeholders much closer to their customers all while improving customer perceptions. The avenues for continuing such collaboration are promising.

Beyond the benefits for SkyTeam, this program has also reinforced the move toward quick, easy and timely measurements in consumer research more widely. The days of long surveys detached from the act or product they were meant to measure are coming to an end. Context has demonstrated itself to be a more important factor than quantity in future consumer research.
REFERENCES

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