Market Positioning and Organizational Performance in the Airlines Industry in Kenya

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Abstract

Market positioning has long been recognized as a vital tool to confront competitive pressures and improve organizational performance. Firms which position themselves within a particular market place relative to competitors, earn higher rates of return. Competition and profitability pressures mean that firms must be responsive to the market conditions. The study sought to determine the effects of market positioning strategies on organizational performance in the airlines industry in Kenya using Kenya Airways (KQ) as a case. The study covered 215 respondents drawn from a population of 1230 (staff and customers). Questionnaire was used to collect data. Content analysis, descriptive and Pearson's Product Moment of Correlation and regression were used to analyze data. The results revealed that variations in organizational performance are explained by pricing strategies with a confidence level of 95%. The results indicate a P-value of 0.000, less than 0.005 against all the study variables. Pricing strategies had a significant effect on cost strategies, perceived service quality, differentiated benefits, innovation and organizational performance. The study revealed a positive correlation between pricing strategies and perceived service quality with a correlation coefficient of 0.574; an average and positive correlation between pricing strategies and innovation with a correlation coefficient of 0.464. There also existed a positive correlation between pricing strategies and differentiated benefits with a correlation coefficient of 0.650. Moreover, the correlation coefficient between pricing strategies and performance was also positive, meaning that as a firm charges fair prices, compared to its competitors, performance is improved. Pricing strategies had a coefficient value of 0.170 against organizational performance. The study concluded that positioning is firmly placed within the general segmentation-targeting-positioning framework and plays a pivotal role in marketing strategy. Market positioning strategies yielded improved performance. The study recommends that KQ and indeed other airlines should continue positioning themselves favorably within the global market to enable them earn high profits. They should plan the product mix for a combination of elements such as physical product, product services, brand and package desired by the target consumers. Further, they should continue their focus on high quality service in order to build customer royalty.

Key Words: Market positioning, marketing strategy, pricing strategies, segmentation-targeting-positioning, product mix, organizational performance

Background

Marketing as an organizational philosophy requires that an understanding of customer needs should precede and inform the development and marketing of products and services as opined by (Kotler, 1997). Marketing as a strategy defines how an organization is to compete and survive in the marketplace. Organizational performance is what business executives and owners are usually frustrated about, because even though employees are hard-working, and are busy doing their tasks, their companies are unable to achieve the planned results (Smith, 1995). Competitive advantage is achieved by a combination of unique resources and a high level of competence (Das & Teng 2000). Marketing executives must therefore plan the product mix that will result in a combination of elements that make up the product (physical product, product services, brand and package desired by the target consumers).

A market position reflects how consumers perceive the product's or organization's performance on specific attributes relative to that of the competitors (Kotler, 1994). Positioning is a competitive marketing tool that goes beyond image-making. It is an attempt to distinguish an organization from its competitors, in order to be the most preferred firm for a certain market segment. It is establishing and maintaining a distinctive place and image in the market for product offerings so that the target market understands and appreciates what the organization stands for in relation to its competitors (Ries and Trout, 1986). A firm that positions itself favorably within a particular marketplace, relative to competitors, can earn high profits irrespective of average profitability within the market. Competition and profitability pressures mean that firms must be increasingly responsive to market considerations in terms of their positions.

Successful consumer marketing begins with consumers who need the product and have the resources to buy it. However, these consumers do not buy just a product; they buy a total bundle of values (market offering). The market offering is composed of a mix of elements such as a product, product services, transaction services, brand, package, price, credit terms, price discounts, advertising, personal sales assistance, store or business location availability, inventory assortment and transportation services. Mixing and matching these various elements of the market offering into an appropriate integrated and unified whole becomes the primary focus in developing a successful competitive position in the marketplace today.

Statement of the Problem

Positioning is a powerful tool that allows a firm to create an image. In recent years the airline industry has witnessed increased emphasis on the cultivation of a culture which fosters the effective implementation of marketing programmes. This growing attention stems from the belief that sound marketing practices provide an important source of competitive advantage in the service sector which is characterized by high levels of interaction between firms and their customers. A strong marketing culture leads to customer retention, resulting in higher profitability (Ries and Trout, 2000).

Kenya Airways' market dominance and profitability has been declining over the recent years as indicated in their financial results. In view of profitability achieved over a period of 2006-2007 and 2007-2008, the firm's net profit was down to 5.6%, while the revenue for the same period was up by 19.6%. For the period between 2007 – 2008 and 2008 – 2009, the net profit was down again by 182.9% while the revenue for the same period was down by 35.4%. For an airline to become profitable it must put in place strategies that position itself in market dominance and improve the firm's overall performance. Marketing positioning has been recognized as a vital tool to confront competitive pressures and also as a tool of improving performance. Though the marketing positioning concept and its effect on firm performance has received considerable attention, there is limited empirical literature on its practice and effects on firm performance in the Kenyan context, specifically the airlines industry. Following thereof, the study sought to determine the influence of market positioning on the performance of airline industry in Kenya with specific reference to Kenya Airways.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to determine the influence of market positioning on the organizational performance in the airlines industry in Kenya with the case of Kenya Airways. Specifically the study sought to establish the influence of various market positioning strategies such as pricing, perceived service quality, innovation, differentiated benefits and cost on the performance of the Kenya Airways.

Methodology

The study adopted an exploratory design covering a stratified sample of 215 respondents drawn from a population of 1, 230 (staff and customers). A semi-structured survey questionnaire was used to collect data which was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. In particular, Pearson Product Moment Correlation was used to establish the relationship between the variables while regression analysis was conducted to test the study hypotheses. However, before detailed analysis, data was categorized into themes guided by the objectives of the study. Content analysis was used to analyze the respondents' views on the market positioning strategies adopted by Kenya Airways. The organized data was interpreted on account of concurrence, mean and standard deviation using SPSS computer software.

Results and Analysis

The purpose of the study was to determine the effects of market positioning on the performance of Kenya Airways. The focus was on various market positioning strategies such as pricing, perceived service quality, innovation, differentiated benefits and cost on the performance of the Kenya Airways, resulting in the model; $y = \alpha + \beta_1X_1 + \beta_2X_2 + \beta_3X_3 + \beta_4X_4 + \beta_5X_5 + ẹ$, where y = Organizational performance, α =Constant term, β=Beta coefficients, X_1=Pricing strategies, X_2=Perceived service quality, X_3= Innovation, X_4= Differentiated benefits, X_5= Cost strategies and ẹ = Error term.

In this quest, respondents were asked to indicate the level of significance of the following market positioning strategies on organizational performance on a scale of 1-5, where 1 represented very significant while 5 represented not significant at all. As shown in Table 1, all the strategies were applied as indicated by significant mean scores of less than 2.5 except the involvement of customers in the buying process which had a mean score of 2.76.

Table 1: Effects of Market Positioning Strategies on Organizational Performance

Statement	Count	Min.	Max.	Mean
Kenya Airways compete for the consumers' attention and secure a recognizable comparative position in their minds in harmony with their cultural base	92	1	4	2.46
Kenya Airways competes for consumers' involvement in its daily operations.	89	1	3	1.89
Kenya Airways competes for the customers' effort and time in the buying process	91	2	5	2.76
Kenya Airways competes for the customers' willingness to deal with the technical complexity found in the corresponding need for services	86	1	5	2.29
Kenya Airways competes for the funds consumers are willing to spend in acquiring a service	92	1	3	1.78

The study sought to analyze the market domain of Kenya Airways as understood by the respondents from a market positioning point of view in relation to organizational performance. A combined 89% of the respondents interjected that positioning is firmly placed within the general segmentation-targeting-positioning framework with the remaining percentage not sure of the positioning of the airline within the framework. Almost all the respondents felt that market positioning is the backbone of Kenya Airways' business plan, with 98% feeling that it was used to a very great extent. Although the underlying concepts of market positioning are similar in consumer and business marketing and that differential approaches are needed during implementation, Kenya Airways provides a combination of features perceived to be desirable by the target market.

Pricing Strategies

The value of any pricing strategy is questionable if it is not congruent with the overall strategy of the firm. Pricing strategies, which do not reflect organizational goals, can detrimentally affect performance outcomes. The consequences of pricing strategies have important managerial and public policy implications. Majority of the respondents were of the opinion (strongly agreed or agreed) that pricing has a strong effects on organizational performance.

With a P-value of less than 0.005 against all the study variables, the Pearson Correlation analysis indicated that pricing strategies had a significant effect on the study variables namely the cost, perceived service quality, differentiated benefits, innovation and organizational performance. The study revealed a strong and positive correlation between pricing strategies and perceived service quality with a correlation coefficient of 0.574; an average and positive correlation between pricing strategies and innovation with a correlation coefficient of 0.464. There was also a strong and positive correlation between pricing strategies and differentiated benefits with a correlation coefficient of 0.650. Moreover, the correlation efficient between pricing strategies and performance of Kenya Airways was also positive meaning that as a firm charges fair prices as compared to its competitors, organizational performance is enhanced as supported by Kimes and Wirtz (2002).

Pricing strategies had a coefficient value of 0.170 against organizational performance when the marketing positioning elements (independent variables) were regressed against the dependent variable (organizational performance). The results revealed that 17.4% of the variations in organizational performance are explained by pricing strategies with a confidence level of 95%. It was found that the effect of pricing strategies, though significant, have low explanatory power on corporate performance. This means that hypothesis one did not accurately predict the outcome of the study, leading to rejecting the null hypothesis.

Perceived Service Quality

Service quality is the discrepancy between what customers expect and what customers get, and it is evaluated through five dimensions, tangibles, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, and empathy. Accordingly, organizational competitiveness is possible to support service firms to provide high service quality to customers and markets in order to encourage a competitive advantage and receive a superior performance. The study thus sought to find out how the five dimensions are adopted to enhance organizational performance within the study scope. All the dimensions of service quality show a high adaptability level of 90%, indicating the effort and commitment by Kenya Airways to offering its customers the best service.

The study revealed a positive correlation between perceived service quality and pricing strategies with a correlation coefficient of 0.574. There existed a less than average and positive correlation between perceived service quality and innovation with a correlation coefficient of 0.0.241 and an equally positive but weak correlation between perceived service quality and differentiated benefits with a correlation coefficient of 0.289. There was, however, a negative correlation between perceived service quality and cost strategies with a coefficient of -0.139.

The correlation coefficient between perceived service quality and organizational performance was also positive meaning that the more innovative a firm becomes, it is likely to experience improved performance. The coefficient of determination between perceived service quality and organizational performance was 0.167, indicating positive relationship. According to the study findings, 24.8% of the variations in organizational performance are explained by perceived service quality, with a confidence level of 95%. Arising thereof, the effect of perceived service quality, though significant, has low explanatory power on organizational performance which implies that hypothesis two did not accurately predict the outcome of the study, leading to rejecting the null hypothesis.

Innovation is closely related to organizational performance, and according to Thompson (1996) innovation as the generation, acceptance, and implementation of new ideas, processes, products, or services. Thus, an innovative organization is taken to be a learning organization and at the same time a performing one. This study sought to establish the respondents' views on the relationships that exist between innovation, the learning organization, and organizational performance. According to the results, all the variables under the innovation concept had a high support, with the lowest being 75%. It was established that organizational performance is associated with the development of new knowledge, which is crucial for firm innovation capability and firm performance and that an innovative organization closely monitors the competitors' actions in the market and that an organization committed to learning is likely to have greater innovation capability than competitors.

Differentiated Benefits

Differentiation is a marketing process that showcases the differences between products. It focuses on making a product more attractive by contrasting its unique qualities with other competing products. Successful product differentiation creates a competitive advantage for the seller, enhancing firm performance as customers view these products as unique or superior. Product differentiation can be achieved in many ways. It may be as simple as packaging the products in a creative way, or as elaborate as incorporating new functional features. Sometimes differentiation does not involve changing the product at all, but creating a new advertising campaign or other sales promotions instead (Galbraith, 1997). The results in Table 6 showcase a scenario where most of the strategies have been adopted to either a moderate extent or to a little extent; meaning that Kenya Airways scores poorly on product differentiation. It is imperative that Kenya Airways needs to adapt the strategies in order to have more unique, distinguished products. However, the scatter was quite high peaking at 1.30 showing a high degree of indecisiveness among the respondents. This high scatter can also be explained by the big range of 4 between the minimum observation and the maximum for most of the responses as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Extent of Adoption of Differentiated Benefits Strategies by Kenya Airways

Strategy	Count	Min.	Max.	Mean
Packaging of goods in a creative way	89	1	4	3.13
Incorporating new functional features	92	2	5	3.65
Creating a new advertising campaign or other sales promotions	92	1	5	4.97

The study revealed that product differentiation involves differentiating a product from competitors' products as well as one's own product offerings in order to enhance firm performance. Kenya Airways adopts product differentiation strategy of packaging of goods in a creative way and incorporating new functional features in a bid to improve its performance. The study also established that for the company to achieve better performance, the marketing executives must plan the product mix that will result in a combination of elements such as physical product, product services, brand and package desired by the target customers and that product differentiation at Kenya Airways is done in order to demonstrate the unique aspects of their product and create a sense of value which guarantees better performance.

Costing and Promotion

Costing strategy involves the firm winning market share by appealing to cost-conscious or price-sensitive customers. This is achieved by having the lowest prices in the target market, or at least the lowest price to value ratio (price compared to what customers receive). To succeed at offering the lowest price while still achieving profitability and a high return on investment, the firm must be able to operate at a lower cost than its rivals. The study revealed that cost strategies are very important in enhancing the performance of Kenya Airways as they inform the market, increase sales, maintain and improve market share, create and improve brand recognition and create a competitive advantage relative to competitor’s products and market position. The study revealed that promotional activities were very important in increasing sales as supported by all the respondents. In improving and maintaining market share, promotional activities are equally very important as supported by 98% of the respondents. However, in creating a competitive advantage relative to competitor’s products or market position, respondents had mixed reactions; with 42% rating promotional activities’ role as very important, 10% as important, 34% as somehow important and 14% as not important.

The study sought to assess key performance indicators within the context of Kenya Airways. With the means ranging between 0.59 and 1.99, respondents were in agreement that the aspects presented played a major role in improving organizational performance. The results are in consonance with Dunphy et al. (1996) who studied the strategy that helps to explain why certain organizations achieve superior organizational performance; while Porter (1980) explains the success of an organization’s competitive strategy dependence upon a set of strategic choices that positions the organization successfully within a particular industry or environmental niche.

Pearson Correlation analysis (Table 3) for all the study variables revealed that pricing strategies significantly affected all the study variables since all of them had P-Value of less than 0.005. There was a fairly strong and positive correlation between pricing strategies and perceived service quality with a correlation coefficient of 0.574, and an average and positive correlation between pricing strategies and innovation with a correlation coefficient of 0.657. The same was true of pricing strategies and differentiated benefits with a correlation coefficient of 0.530. Moreover, the correlation coefficient between pricing strategies and performance of Kenya Airways was also positive meaning that as a firm charges fair prices as compared to its competitors, organizational performance is enhanced as supported by Kimes and Wirtz (2002).

Table 3: Correlation of the Study Variables

		PS	PSQ	I	DB	CS	OP
Pricing Strategies	Pearson Correlation	1	.657(**)	.704(**)	.530(**)	-.706(**)	.412(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	92	92	92	92	92	92
Perceived Service Quality	Pearson Correlation	.657(**)	1	.241(**)	.289(**)	-.139(*)	.409(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000		.000	.000	.042	.000
	N	92	92	92	92	92	92
Innovation	Pearson Correlation	.704(**)	.241(**)	1	.306(**)	-.753(**)	.406(*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000		.000	.000	.000
	N	92	92	92	92	92	92
Differentiated Benefits	Pearson Correlation	.530(**)	.289(**)	.306(**)	1	-.769(**)	.642(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000		.000	.000
	N	92	92	92	92	92	92
Cost Strategies	Pearson Correlation	-.706(**)	-.139(*)	-.753(**)	-.769(**)	1	0.367(**)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.042	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	92	92	92	92	92	92
Performance	Pearson Correlation	.412(**)	.409(**)	.406(*)	.642(**)	.367(**)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000	.000
	N	92	92	92	92	92	92

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

PS – Pricing strategies, PSQ - Perceived service quality, I – Innovation, DB – Differentiated benefits, CS – Cost strategies, OP – Organizational performance

As shown in Table 4, the results of model testing were Y = 11.376 + 0.170 X_1 + 0.167 X_2 – 0.165 X_3 - 0.412 X_4 +0.135 $X_{5;}$ Predictor Power (1.068) (0.019) (0.012) (0.010) (0.015) (0.018), and P- Value (0.000) (0.000) (0.000) (0.000) (0.000) (0.000).

Table 4: Regression Coefficients

Model		Non-standardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta	B	Std. Error
1	(Constant)	11.376	1.068		26.802	.000
	Pricing Strategies	.170	.019	.332	9.074	.000
	Service Quality	.167	.012	.345	14.162	.000
	Innovation	-.165	.010	-.431	-16.624	.000
	Differentiated Benefits	-.412	.015	-.561	-28.207	.000
	Cost Strategies	.135	.018	.593	32.129	.000

a Dependent Variable: Organizational Performance

From the regression model, the coefficient of determination is 0.582 indicating that the independent variables explain 58.2 % of the change in the dependent variable. This shows a fairly strong correlation between the independent variables (pricing strategies, perceived service quality, innovation, differentiated benefits and cost strategies) and the dependent variable (organizational performance).

Table 5: Model Summary

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of Estimate
1	.763(a)	.582	.579	.40836

Predictors: (Constant): pricing strategies, perceived service quality, innovation, differentiated benefits, and cost strategies

Based on the coefficients of the variables, it can be concluded that the entire market positioning strategies had a significant influence on organizational performance, with a P-Value was 0.000 which is less than the confidence level of 0.005. Pricing strategies had the highest coefficient value of 0.170, followed by perceived service quality with a coefficient value of 0.167. Cost strategies came in third with a coefficient value of 0.135 while innovation came in fourth with a negative coefficient value of 0.165 and finally differentiated benefits with also a negative coefficient of 0.412. Positive coefficients show a direct relationship between two variables, i.e. a change in one variable results in a change in the other variable in the same direction, while a negative coefficient depicts a change in the dependent variable caused by a change in the independent variable but in opposite direction.

Market Positioning Variables and Organizational Performance

The study conducted regression analysis in respect of each hypothesis. The results in Table 6 show significant relationship between all the market positioning variables and organizational performance with positive P-Values.

Table 6: Regression Analysis of Market Positioning Variables

Model	R^2	DF	F	P-Value
H_1	0.174	47	9.714	0.003
H_2	0.248	47	15.204	0.000
H_3	0.343	37	18.789	0.000
H_4	0.118	48	6.303	0.016
H_5	0.391	18	10.933	0.004

H_1: There is no significant relationship between pricing strategies and performance

The results reveal that 17.4% of the variations in organizational performance are explained by pricing strategies, with a confidence level of 99%; nearly 82.6% is explained by other factors. It was found that the effect of pricing strategies, though significant, have low explanatory power on corporate performance. This means that hypothesis one did not accurately predict the outcome of the study, leading to rejection of the null hypothesis.

H_2: Perceived service quality does not affect organizational performance significantly.

The results indicated that 24.8% of the variations in organizational performance are explained by perceived service quality, with a confidence level of 95%, nearly 75.2% is explained by other factors. In view of this one, the effect of perceived service quality, though significant, has low explanatory power on organizational performance which implies that hypothesis two did not accurately predict the outcome of the study, leading to rejecting the null hypothesis.

H_3: There is no positive relationship between innovation and organizational performance.

According to the analysis, there is indication that 34.3% of the variation in organizational performance is explained by innovation, with accuracy level of 95%, nearly 65.7% is explained by other factors. The effect of innovation, though significant, has low explanatory power on organizational performance which implies that hypothesis two did not accurately predict the outcome of the study, leading to rejecting the null hypothesis.

H_4: There is no relationship between differentiated benefits and organizational performance

The results indicate that 11.8% of the variation in organizational performance is explained by differentiated benefits, with an accuracy level of 95%, nearly 88.2 percent is explained by other factors. The effect of differentiated benefits, though significant, has low explanatory power on organizational performance. This suggests that the hypothesis did not accurately predict the outcomes of the study, leading to rejecting the null hypothesis.

H_5: An organization's cost strategies do not affect its organizational performance significantly.

According to the study, there is evidence that 39.1 percent of the variations in organizational performance are explained by cost strategies, with accuracy of 95%; nearly 60.9% are explained by other factors. It is apparent that the independent effect of cost though significant, has low explanatory power on organizational performance, indicating that hypothesis five did not accurately predict the outcome of the study, leading to rejecting the null hypothesis.

Conclusions

The study concludes that positioning is firmly placed within the general segmentation-targeting-positioning framework at Kenya Airways; playing a pivotal role in its marketing strategy. Product differentiation at Kenya Airways involves differentiating it form competitors' products as well as one's own product offerings in order to enhance firm performance. Kenya Airways uses product differentiation strategy of packaging products in creative ways and incorporating new functional features in a bid to improve its performance. Product differentiation is done in order to demonstrate the unique aspects of the firm's products and services, creating a sense of value which guarantees better performance. The cost strategies focus on enhancing performance through informing the market about its products and services, maintaining or improving market share, creating or improving brand recognition and creation of a competitive advantage relative to competitor's products or market position. Kenya Airways use sponsorship, advertising, sales promotion and personal selling as a means of achieving better performance. The study also concludes that that pricing strategies affect performance outcome and that other than table- locating prices, other forms of pricing policy are not regarded as unfair.

The study also concludes that Kenya Airways has successfully adopted various attributes such as responsiveness, empathy, reliability, assurance and tangibles to provide better service quality to its customers. It was also concluded that organizational competitiveness supports service firms to provide high service quality to customers. Performance is associated with the development of new knowledge, which is crucial for firm innovation capability and firm performance. The distribution channels employed at Kenya Airways include indirect channels, service reliability, direct distribution channels and service quality as competitive positioning strategies relating to quality. Kenya Airways uses various criteria in attempting to segment the market such as psychographics and geographic. There is a strong and positive relationship between pricing strategies, perceived service quality, innovation, differentiated benefits, cost strategies and performance of Kenya Airways; implying that market positioning has a positive effect on organizational performance.

Recommendations

The study recommends that Kenya Airways should position itself favorably within a particular marketplace; relative to competitors who will enable it earn high profits, irrespective of average profitability within the airlines industry in Kenya. To enable the company achieve better performance, the marketing executives must plan the product mix that will result in a combination of elements such as physical product, product services, brand and package desired by the target consumers. The study also recommends Kenya Airways should as a commitment provide high service quality to customers and markets in order to build a strong competitive advantage and achieve superior performance. Kenya Airways should also devise ways of overcoming the challenges that affect its service quality, such as consumers' limitation and loss of focus. The management should make the organization more innovative and closely monitor the competitors' actions in the market and should be committed to learning which will give it greater innovation capability than its competitors.

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