E-Brand as a Strategic ICT-Based Leverage for Iranian Airline Companies in Religious Tourism's Industry

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Abstract

Airlines brands are getting new identities in the electronic age. Because of growing new technologies like internet, there will be new strategic opportunities for airline companies to position their brand. On the other hand, Religious Tourism's Industry has a sustainable market in Iran, because of cultural issues. A lot of passengers prefer to do their religious travels with an airline company. Religious tourism, with its cultural nature provides airlines with strategic opportunities. E-Brand can play an important role in this regard. In this paper we review some these opportunities and challenges. This paper is a descriptive comparative that wrote by investigating a variety of books and papers. The results show if an airline company likes to survive in the changing world, it should change its brand identity toward an E-Brand.

Keywords: Information and Communication Technologies, E-Brand, Airline Companies, Religious Tourism's Industry, Aviation Industry

Introduction

Advances made in Information & Communication Technology, has left great effects on human's life, societies and today's industries, among them, in tourism industry (Law et al, 2009) and aviation industry. Effects of Information & communication technology in tourism & aviation industry resulted in more costs reduction, increase in

efficiency and improvement in services quality experiencing by passengers. ICT in tourism's (Susskind et al, 2011: 6) and aviation's industry can be regarded as part of electronic commerce in which all parts in these two industries have been touched by it (Reino et al, 2011: 66). Among them, especial interests' tourism zones can include such activities as adventure, hunting fields, cultural, religious and etc. (Kova & Lee, 2006: 954). Religious Tourism is a sector in tourism that effects of ICT in its different processes such as communication can be searched for. Religious tourism has been known as a cultural, educational and experimental activity (Triantafillidou & Koritos, 2005: 385), among them spiritual travel or sacred journey (Sharpley &Sundaram, 2005: 171) that has a very close relation with notion of pilgrimage as a multidimensional activity (Belhassen et al, 2008: 673), a multi task travel or multi-functional journey (Digance, 2003: 145). Pilgrimage as a journey with some religious reasons towards a sacred destination and with spiritual proposes, has been defined in advance (Kreiner, 1999: 56), in such a way that includes cultural heritage and with anthropological or sociological tendencies (Henderson, 2011: 542 & Fleischer, 2000: 316).

Pilgrimages can be regarded as a human phenomenon (Belhassen et al, 2008: 686) in religious life of people (Fleischer, 2000: 312). In regard to general notion of pilgrimage that was mentioned above, religious tourism in a simple definition has been introduced as a kind of tourism with religious motivations (Sharpley & Sundaram: 2005: 161, Zwissler, 2011: 337). Motivations can resulted and originated from cultural and religious beliefs (Shuo et al, 2009: 582). With common notions between pilgrimage and religious tourism, religious tourism can be regarded as contemporary patterns of visits from religious destinations (Shinde, 2011: 22 & Shinde, 2010: 535). In religious tourism, with religious grounds and perspective it is possible to bring it together with festivals, events, rituals and religious ceremonies (Shinde, 2010: 528), and to provide tourism services through enterprises such as hotels, travel agencies, restaurants, aviation transportation airlines and etc. to pilgrims (Shinde, 2010: 525) in such a way that have effects and defects on areas like political, economic, environmental , health and etc. (European Commission, 2006 and Henderson,2011: 43). Analyzing functionality of new marketing tools with regards to advances made in ICT is impossible without recognition about complexity that is within notion and function's zones of religious tourism. So, at the beginning, recognition of generalized foundation of religious tourism notions in Airline industry must be described and in following stage, farther marketing opportunities and challenges could be analyzed.

Literature
Research literature can be studied in two level, religious tourism literature and E-brand literature with focus on airlines brand. In religious tourism, there are great numbers of different researches in different places among them India (Shinde, 2010 & Maoz &Bekerman, 2010), Seri-lanka (Buultjens et al, 2005), Yugoslavia (Bax, 1992), Saudi Arabia (Shuo et al, 2009), Iran (Zamani & Henderson, 2010) and Palestine (Subhi & Suleiman, 2011) has pointed out and different subjects like genuineness (Belhassen et al, 2008), marketing and management (Zamani & Henderson, 2010, Tilson,

2005, and Triantafillidou & Koritos, 2005) and religious tourism's markets (Subhi & Suleiman, 2011) are being analyzed.

Using information and communication technology in tourism industry has a long history in a way that Kromideh & Muca (2011) had recognized computerized ticket reservation in aviation industry, the first internationally usage of information technology. Sirirak et al (2011), in their research had discovered a very strong positive relation between ICT usage in tourism industry, functional productivity and customer satisfaction. (Sirirak et al, 2011:34). Berton & Altintas (2011) had come to this conclusion that managers in hotel sections, restaurants, and hospitality for improving excitable processes should increase their usages of information and communication technology (Berton & Altintas, 2011: 49). Oconner & Murphy (2004) also had indicated that using internet in tourism's attraction zones, pricing and customer interactions are effective (Oconner & Murphy, 2004: 473). Pena & Jamilna (2010) had identified that, ICT is appropriate for rural tourism strategy (Pena & Jamilna, 2010: 35). Of course Susskin & Stefaney (2010) has come into conclusion that factors such as security, confidence and latency are factors that can widely limit the use of internet in tourism industry (Susskin & Stefaney, 2010: 7). Also different researches have been done in relation to sustainable development subject in tourism industry that many different subjects such as environmental (Hunter & Shaw, 2007), cultural (Hawkin, 2004), political (Yasarata et al, 2010), business (Tesone, 2004, Dinan & Sargean, 2000) and economical (Tao & Wall, 2009) can be mentioned.

Religion Tourism's Industry
Religious tourism in different areas of the society has the ability to affect and obviously will be effected by different areas. Educational religion resources, are including material and nonmaterial resources (Shinde, 2010: 524) that among them are human recognition subjects (Zwissler, 2011,: 336). Therefore, religious tourism effectiveness and being affected dimensions can be divided into two main groups which are identified as material dimension such as economic, environmental, political dimensions and nonmaterial or spiritual dimensions like cultural, social dimensions. Of course, this should be noted that both parts material and nonmaterial will develop heritage for a religion in which is made of an integrated and complete blend from material and cultural dimensions (Shinde, 2010, Subhi & Suleiman, 2011, Leppakari ,2008, Henderson, 2011, Kreiner, 1999, Digance, 2003). Even though, all mentioned dimensions have important effects on performance of religious tourism, but two of those dimensions, economic and cultural dimensions are holding special place in people's perspective (Shinde, 2010: 524 and Neveu, 2010: 228). This is because they explain initial motivation grounds for travel and also result of journey made to destination. Of course, emphasis should be made again that all dimensions of religious tourism has special importance for formation of such tourism. For example, until political environment in each point of departure and destination is not provided, there will be many deterrents in formation of religious journeys that as examples, one can mention lots of examples such as problems of people of Tibet in China, Moslems in Palestine and Orthodox Christians in Turkey in

making religious journeys to religious destinations.

The religion has many effects on experiences of hosting and personal interests of deferent individuals (Zamani & Henderson, 2010: 79) and because of these notional commonality of religion with main concepts of tourism, it is possible to put religion and tourism in extremely close relationship with each other, and in the past concept of pilgrimage was identified as one of the main reasons for travel in countries and between followers of different religions. As was mentioned, in spite of today's close relation between religion, pilgrimage and tourism, there exist differences in notions and special manner of using them, in a way that, some of the researches, now a day, have identified them different from one another and made some distinction between them (Maoz & Bekerman, 2010: 436 & Fleischer, 2000: 311-312 & Shuo et al, 2009: 582) in a way that, pilgrim travelers or in another words pilgrim tourist and traveler tourist are divided into two contradictory moving lines (Maoz & Bekerman, 2010: 425). So, putting it differently, travel has divided into two traditional and religious in one side and modern and secular in the other (Digance, 2003: 143). Thus, this duet notion is a sign for transitional period which is called postmodern travels (Henderson, 2011: 542).

The existence of this difference has caused separation in notions of religious tourism to tourism and religion (Shinde, 2010: 524) that they will relate to each other by a line (Fleischer, 2000: 312) in which in one end pious pilgrims and the other end secular tourists has been placed (Digance, 2003: 145). Between these two sections, there are three other zones that have been mentioned in picture 1 in the following page.

A   B   C   D   E

Picture1. Divisions between pious pilgrim and secular tourist zones (Kreiner, 1999: 63 and Triantafillidou & Koritos, 2005: 384).

A) Stands for pious pilgrim.
B) Stands for more pilgrim than touristic activities (Pilgrim > Tourist).
C) Stands for the same amount of pilgrim activities as tourist activities (Pilgrim = Tourist).
D) Stands for more tourist than pilgrim activities (Tourist > Pilgrim).
E) Stands for secular tourist.

These zones have been divided based on degree of initial motivation and originality related to tourism's attractions that exists in tourism destination. Religious tourism's attractions which are causes of religious journeys can be identified into three parts that are including: 1) Pilgrimage of temples and sacred places, 2) religious areas and spaces, 3) religious festivals (Shuo et al, 2009: 582 and Maoz & Bekerman, 2010: 425). Each one of the parts mentioned above is able to create necessary motivations for religious journeys that throughout those travels other activities such as holding expeditions and religious meetings are manageable (Sharpley &Sundaram:2005: 161). It seems that, pilgrimage places with importance regarding their tourist destination and their genuineness are identified in level A of the schematic as pious pilgrimage that will develop sustainable motivational grounds for attracting

religious tourists from different parts of the world. Among them, as examples, one can mention Mecca and Medina cities in Saudi Arabia for Moslems, Jerusalem city in Palestine.

Religious Tourism in Middle East and Iran

There are different religion in all over the world, that among them Buddhism, Hinduism, Jewish, Christianity and Islam can be pointed out (Henderson, 2011: 542). Jewish religion along with Christianity and Islam are identified as main and god sent religions (Subhi & Suleiman, 2011: 254) that have great numbers of follower in the world and each one of them has divided into different sectors. From those Islam religion with wide zones of follower specially with in the South Asian, Middle East, and north Africa, is among the most populous of the world religions with followers of more than 1/57 milliards people. Travel to Mecca which is called Hajj is consider to be one of the five basic Islamic religious performances (Zamani & Henderson, 2010: 80) that Moslems for performing some rituals travel to city of Mecca and Medina in Saudi Arabia. In Quran the holy book of Moslems great emphasis has been placed on traveling with physical, social and spiritual goals (Zamani &Henderson, 2010). Therefore Moslems belief goals have created strong financial force in travel and tourism ground, in a way that, will cover for different dimensions among them economic, cultural, and religious ones (Neveu, 2010: 329).

One of the main sects in Islam religion is Shiite sect that promotes a lot for pilgrimage of sacred places and much prize the importance of visiting holy places. In Shiite, religious days aiming to pilgrim spiritual leaders tombs for the believers, as part of their religious believes have great importance. This is because Shiite spiritual leaders are believed to be middling connection for the god's kindness and forgiveness and through connecting with them one can enjoy receiving divine grace and benefiting from secure indirect connection with all mighty. As a matter of facts, Shiite believe that spiritual leaders or Imams as they are called are divine and true human beings and they are saint and away from mistake and sin and after their death like the period they are alive they keep and resave continuation of their role as replacement for god on earth. Among others, tombs of Shiite Imams are in cities such as Medina in Saudi Arabia, Najaf, Karbala and Samarra in Iraq and Mashad in Iran that as cities with nature of special pilgrim will stand in level A on the Picture 1.

Religion tourism has been identified as places completely for pilgrimage Shiite followers, in such a way that, Karbala city only in one day is hosting more than 15 million people from all over the world (IRIB news, 2013). There are more than 200 million Shiite with in Moslem community that mostly located in Persian Gulf region and Middle East among them Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Afghanistan, and Pakistan (Durie, 2009: 1) that from these most concentration of Shiites is in Iran. Iran as a country with rich historical civilization and having different cultural, natural, archeological indicators, and with having rich tourist destinations such as Isfahan, Shiraz, Tehran, Hamadan, Kerman and Yazd (Zamani & Henderson, 2010: 83) surprisingly Mashhad as a mostly religious tourists host, yearly hosting the most internal tourists in whole country. Based on number of statistic, it is estimated that number of pilgrims in that destination is 10 times more than

pilgrims going to Mecca as a center for world of Islam (Tabnak news, 2013). For Shiites besides Imams as spiritual leaders of the religion, sons and daughters and relatives of Imams, and then leading scientific, mystical and spiritual individual's birth place or tomb hold next levels of traveling and pilgrimage attraction. Some of the most important of such places are located in cities like Qom, Shiraz, and Tehran and visiting those places like tombs that play important roles in attracting Shiite travelers, scheduled in programs of visitors to these cities such as Shiraz and so on (Shiraz News, 2013).

E-Brand and ICT Applications
Brand management has played an important role in forming a corporate strategy (Kim and Kim 2005). Brand means a specific product, service, or business identity. A name, term, sign, symbol, design, a good or service which are identifying the sellers to distinguish them from their competitors. Aaker (1991) and Doyle (1994) adopt this definition. In order to achieve goals of product and brand management, it is important to build a strong brand. Strong brands will result in higher profit stream, either in long term or short term (Aaker *al.et, 1991*). Pearson (2005) explains a brand is constructed by features, customer benefits and values. E-brand mean the application of brand in the virtual world. Many companies confirm that their overall company strategy includes an e-Business strategy. However, most companies do not take full advantage of the possibilities that the internet and information and communication technologies are offering to support business activities. At the same time, the topic was never more important than it is today. Developments in information technology greatly affected marketing

communication (Kotler et al, 2002:541) in a way that maybe in none of other domain had not happened as such (Kotler, 2001: 819) and therefore has been a factor in revolutionizing sale in recent decades (Nykiel, 2003: 158). Marketing communication is so important that Fifield (2007) practically has identified marketing synonymous with marketing communication (Leppakari, 2008). The main tools of communication marketing are such as: advertizing, personal selling, direct marketing, sales promotion and public relation (Heung, 2003: 7) that a religious tourist must use them while involving in process of a journey, like all tourists in different parts of tourism industry. Among the most important communication tools in modern era is internet. Tourism industry is one of the three superior industries that using internet in selling their services (Heung, 2003: 112). Therefore, analyzing new potentials of internet as proper media for marketing (Stepchenkova &Morrison, 2006: 944) in different level of communication marketing in Airlines, along with other tools is quite useful.

1. Advertising: Internet as one of the advertizing channels and especially a low cost solution has received lots of attention (Lin & Lee, 2010: 82 and Kim, 2009: 330).
2. Personal Selling: This is to complete religious pilgrim package prepared by travel agencies and place them on their sites as online sales or selling services using their sites.
3. Direct Marketing: That is among the most important domains of ICT effects on marketing communication and through internet one can create direct and interactive connection between tourists agencies and customer (Buhalis & Law, 2008: 619). This direct interaction can be shaped through post,

e-mail, telephone, and most important of all internet (Heung, 2003). Other extremely important and fast growing interactive communication tools that can be named is social networks as Facebook, Twitter etc. that religious tour organizers are able to transfer and share their views with those interested in religious tourism or even receive feedback about their services.

4. Sales Promotion: Sales promotion means incentives and activities that are used to persuade individuals to buy or sell a good or service (Kotler, 2002: 540).

5. Public Relations: public relations often are published through mass medias such as TV, satellite networks and internet, so because of independent nature of them they has more effect on people interacts to and potential customers. Even though satellite Shiite networks like Imam Hossin, Ahl Al Bait, Salam, Samen, etc. are spreading daily, but airline companies does not enjoy of having them independently in order to use them for familiarizing more and more those interested in religious sites to visit and pilgrim. Publishing daily newspaper targeting religious tourism, TV, satellite, internet and social networks can be effective steps in creating Word of Mouth as one of the most important results of public relations.

Aviation Industry Turbulences
Aviation and air services industry is a large, competitive, and challenging industry, characterized by high capital and labor requirement, together with customer participation during transactions hence service fulfillment. The aviation industry has been identified as one of the more intangible service industries (Clemes et al., 2008) and plays an important role in the global economy (Tiernan et al., 2008). In a

changing world driven by automation, globalization as well as generational shift, most airline companies must review and expand the way they have been doing business to incorporate the Internet in their overall strategy and processes. This entails potentially significant changes that need to be structured and implemented rationally. However, new processes and best practices are often difficult to extract from within. Now a day, communicating and telecommunicating technologies such as TV and satellite networks, telephone, and internet can be considered in domain of ICT, so using them efficiently for creating competitive advantages is necessary (Durie, 2009: 933 and Sheldon, 2004: 724). These new age communicational tools could play an important role in shaping airlines brand in electronic world.

Airlines are turning to e-commerce to keep business flying, and the reason they are focusing on selling tickets through their Web sites is that it is the cheapest distribution channel. From the customer's perspectives, Internet has revolution the way of buying flight ticket. Customers can now purchase their tickets directly from the airlines via the Internet. Airlines are also using electronic channels to keep business travellers informed of potential delays and schedule changes. Currently, the world's airlines are in the tourism industry with unprecedented losses and fight recession.

Within turbulent, highly competitive marketplace, airlines are finding it increasingly important to respond both quickly and effectively to changing patterns of customer demand. Airlines need to know and understand those customers who contribute the most to their bottom line. A vexing question for a number of airlines is how much value does e-brand usage, really deliver to the

bottom line and how does an airline go about getting it? While this question remains unanswered, many skeptical senior managers will continue to pay lip service the strategic importance of a customer-centric perspective and will continue with business as usual. The deeper the relationship the airline holds with customers, the more opportunities there will be for selling additional products and services. However, with the emergence of e-business and the new economy, the challenges of building strong customer relationships have become even greater. Customer relationships are the key to airline business growth. Airlines must take absolute responsibility for a customer's satisfaction throughout the "want-it-buy-it-and-use-it" experience. This requires learning and tracking customers' needs, behaviors, and lifestyles and using this information to create a specific value proposition. This strategy is the path to consumer loyalty.

E-Brand Opportunities for Airlines and passengers
There are many benefits to be gained for airlines and airline passengers, firstly, passengers could book and check in through internet 24 hours, 7 days a week, at anytime, anywhere. Secondly, airlines could reduce sales cost. It's 10 times cheaper to deliver to customers through the online service than through a travel agent. The booking cost per passenger online is "well under $1," said Kelly, and is scaling down even further. He said Internet use by passengers was helping the carrier keep fares at low discount levels. (Aviation Week & Space Technology/March 6, 2000, p38).
- Massive investment in both business-to-business (B2B) and business-to-customer (B2C) information systems is expected to translate into

important cost savings in procurement, sales, billing and other support activities. The airline's fully automatic ordering system, for example, should reduce order processing costs by 90%, according to Chairman/CEO Juergen Weber of Lufthansa Aviation Group. (Aviation Week & Space Technology/May 15, 2000, p40).
- Planning and implementing e-business processes across airlines like e-brand applications ensures customers are handled in the most efficient and effective fashion from the beginning to the end of the interaction based on their real-time value to airlines.
- Implementing e-brand applications may simultaneously lower the cost of design, implementation, installation, training, ownership and administration. It also reduces the risk of re-engineering systems at a later date.
- Consistent and dynamic processes are built up-front for the customer. These forces the airline to consider each element in the process design including the network, switch, multi-media management, and these ensuring streamlined processes are in place before the customer makes contact.
- Influence and enhance intelligent call routing by leveraging the data gathered from the switch (ANI, DNIS, and Caller ID), caller, and e-brand applications.
- Create and leverage detailed statistics/metrics and cradle-to-grave reports.
- Real-time access to historical customer information allows support staff to know who your customer is, why the customer is calling, what's been done, what needs to be done, and respond in the most efficient, expedient manner possible.

Also there will be some Benefits for the customer, as:

- The E-mail was responded to immediately, with personalized, valuable information.
- Web self-service allowed customer to take immediate action to resolve issue.
- Personalization enabled promotion tailored to customer profile - enhancing one-to-one marketing.
- The "callback" option was easy to use, enabling the customer to quickly request live support.
- The intelligent interaction routing engine immediately connected the customer to the right CSR.
- Customers enjoy personal treatment, together with appropriate advice on getting the best out of their purchases. The airline may also put customers in touch with others with whom they have similarities, for example by inviting them to meetings.

For the airlines that implementing e-brand applications, it becomes possible to single out customers who are profitable, gaining an understanding of their preferences to improve retention and increase the volumes sold. These valuable customers can become advocates for the airline and its products. In order to implement a true e-brand strategy, airlines must have a vision and look at brand as one holistic project. First, an airline must commit to focus on the customer and create a complete vision that fosters a true customer-centric organization. Once a clear vision is in place, developing a strategy and establishing goals are the next steps toward effectively deploying e-brand. The entire plan must align the airline's strategy, goals, and technology in order to achieve the objectives of the e-brand project.

Conclusion

Religious tourism is mixed with aviation industry and has great ability to affect societies from economic, societal, political, etc. views. Tourist destinations as a whole are divided into 5 parts that starts from destinations only for pilgrimage and no touristic activity to last parts that is completely touristic and no notion of pilgrim what so ever. With using ICT potentials in marketing communication such as internet, social networks and satellite Medias can play proper roles in developments of religious tourism as part of tourism industry. Using from religious resources has ability to complete traveling packages and as a result is able to increase motivations for traveling and can increase competitive advantages in attracting targeted markets in aviation industry. Airlines' success depends heavily on their ability to intelligently manage their e-brand Model. To help airline maximize the strategic value of customer centric initiatives, Airline e-brand model provides a comprehensive analytical solution, it can contribute toward improving the way that measure and optimize airline's relationships with customers. If the issues around e-brand are well understood by airlines, they would be surviving at this competitive industry. If a company failed to provide the positive brand image, it may directly or indirectly affect the consumers' decision making on choosing the airline service. Consumers may shift to the other competitors which offered better experience.

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