

*Airlines Companies' Usage of Social Media: A Content Analysis of Airlines
Companies' Tweeter Messages*

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Abstract

The developments in knowledge and information technologies provide new opportunities for corporations. Corporations are realizing the potential to build relationships with publics using social media. Twitter, as a popular microblogging tool, is a social media platform used by corporations. Twitter has the possibility of informing target audiences about publicity, services and promotions of companies. Additionally, companies have received real-time feedback about organizational announcements and applications from target audiences. Following the study, it was found that most of the text messages in the twitter accounts of the airline companies were sent on weekdays and within the working hours, and the content of the messages were related to the provided services and offered special offers. Moreover, it can be seen that the majority of the texts messages (712; 79.4%) consisted of requests, suggestions, complaints and questions and the replies to them. Those findings show that the airline companies effectively benefit from Twitter in order to develop bidirectional communication with their clients.

Keywords: Airline Companies, Social Media, Twitter, Public Relations, Messages.

INTRODUCTION

The developments seen in the new communication technologies have also changed the communication and interaction of enterprises with target masses. The public relations which focussed on only informing the target mass through traditional mass media gave way to a new approach of public relations which target masses reach out the society, express themselves and the establishments immediately give responses to them.

Beside other enterprises, the airline companies were forced to adopt a strategy focusing on technological innovations in order to maintain the competence with other companies with the emerging of internet during mid 1990's (Buhalis, 2004: 808). Thus, the unilateral communication methods presented by the traditional media underwent a change and airline companies tended to accept a new management perception which adopts a bidirectional communication method sensitive to requests, suggestions, expectations and complaints of the target community.

One of the opportunities presented to the enterprises through the developments in the new communication technologies is social applications. The social media which is associated to the share of information, experiences and perspectives (Weinberg, 2009: 1), has been designed for the communication of people with their friends at the beginning and then it has turned into the tools which provide online communication of enterprises especially in the service sectors with their target groups and and has been gradually gaining importance (Wigand, 2010: 563).

Twitter, one of those social network sites, has the ability to provide dialogical communication between enterprises and target groups (Rybalko and Seltzer, 2010: 337). Thus, the enterprises are not only senders of text messages, they have gained the interactive characteristics both can send messages and receive the messages sent by the target groups. Findings of the study also show that the enterprises which interactively use the Twitter accounts have positive outcomes of public relations (Saffer et al., 2013).

The advantages of using social media for enterprises have been considered by the airline companies which aim to provide more quality services to their customers and form a customer loyalty; a new comprehension of public relations based on bilateral communication in which the customers were involved into the decisions to take and applications to perform.

The study focuses on the levels of utilization of Twitter which is one of the commonly used instruments of social media by 5 airline companies which operate in Turkey. The customers of airline companies are interrogated about the level of their utilization from the institutional Twitter accounts in developing responses to the demands, expectations, suggestions and questions related to new routes, promotion campaigns and current opportunities presented in services. Moreover, it was also questioned whether the airline companies used the Twitter accounts for announcement purposes through a unilateral communication or for the purposes of developing mutual dialogue through bilateral communication which social media present them.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Twitter, emerged through inspiring from a tool called TXT mob which was started in 2004 by a group of tech-savvy activists in order to protest some political decisions and spread their ideas to

large masses through short text messages to their mobile phones established by Jack Dorsay, a software engineer, in 2006 (Zarrella, 2010: 33).

Twitter which can be put into the category as a tool to facilitate online communication, participation and cooperation (Newson et al., 2009: 49-50), is also called a microblog tool. After obtaining a free account from the web address of Twitter.com, the accounts can be updated and text messages up to the length of 140 characters can be sent. The messages can be sent to the other Twitter users which are called followers; the users can also follow other users if they desire (Kamerer and Morris, 2011: 13-14).

Recently, a massive increase has been seen in the use of microblog services such as Twitter. In the first quarter of 2009, approximately three years after it was established, the registered users of Twitter exceeded the quantity of 14 million people (Weinberg, 2009: 125). Compared to the year of 2010, the users of Twitter increased with the rate of 182% and the number of tweets increased 140 million texts (Myers, 2011).

This increase in the amounts of users and the sent texts messages has revived the need for taking part in Twitter which requires much less time, provides the rapid consumer analysis and enables selling to the customers and is user friendly. The companies utilize Twitter in announcing the target groups about their new products and their suggestions related to those new products (Güçdemir, 2010: 101), in encouraging new blog consignments and presenting current news (Zarrella, 2010: 33), in increasing the sales through brand recognition (Wigand, 2010: 135), and the management of customer services and customer relations (Thoring, 2011: 143).

When the characteristics of Twitter as a tool are considered, it is possible to transfer the messages in short, synchronous and asynchronous forms since they are easy-to-use and limited with maximum 140 characters. Besides, it is convenient for both public sector and private sector and it enables the simultaneous and synchronous access to the target groups (Kamerer and Morris, 2011: 14).

Although Twitter is utilized by enterprises with the purpose of sharing more information and news (Güçdemir, 2010: 103), it provides significant opportunities to public relations units of the enterprises in receiving feedbacks from the target groups related to the products and services presented to them and executing some corrective/preventive activities related to them (Alikılıç, 2011: 17).

Moreover, Twitter differentiates from other tools presented by new communication technologies thanks to its technological aspects. When it is compared to a blog, on the contrary to the blogs, Twitter shortens the necessity of time through encouraging short text messages and enables numerous updating during day (Java et al., 2007: 57). Compared to other communicating tools from the insufficient web sites, on the other hand, Twitter enables immediate interactions of the enterprises with target groups (Saffer et al., 2013) and provides an opportunity to apply a conception of public relations based on bilateral and symmetrical communication.

When those advantages are considered, Twitter messages provides significant opportunities for the airline companies both in delivering the announcements to the large masses and creating

convenient responses and policies regarding the demands, suggestions, complaints, expectations and problems of the target masses.

There are limited researches in the literature related to the Twitter applications which provide significant opportunities about establishing and developing dialogues with the target masses from the point of enterprises. Although they are limited, it will be beneficial to employ the findings of the researches which contain the data such as the levels of enterprise in using Twitter, the contents of their messages and their purpose to utilize this tool of social media.

In their study which they performed in order to determine the contribution of Twitter for the development of cooperation between the parties, Honeycutt and Herring (2009), they found that Twitter has been used as a unilateral tool in directly transmitting the message to another user rather than cooperation.

In their study which they carried out on the use of Twitter by the company of 2009 Fortune 50, Case and King (2011) found that 27 of 50 companies (54%) used Twitter. The companies using Twitter utilize this social media tool in order to relay the news related to the company with the rate of 85% while this objective is followed by marketing/promotions, customer services and human resources.

Thoring (2011: 150) evaluated the Twitter accounts of the publishers from the point of interactivity. He found that majority of the analyzed messages consisted of tweet and retweets and only a small part of them consisted of the responses to interactive communication. The responses contain messages related to establishing a communication network with business world, customer services and customer relations rather than the announcements, promotions, branding, and perception management.

In their study which they carried out on Twitter users, Kamerer and Morris (2011: 25-27) stated that the tweets sent could be categorized as a helping desk where services such as news office, creating brands and problem solving, providing support to the customers. At the end of the study, although it is not at the desired levels, Twitter was used to develop the bilateral symmetrical communication.

Linville et al., (2012), sent 10 text messages to the accounts of 60 state universities and 53 colleges of art and aimed to learn the levels they used this social media tool for the dialogue-based communication through 1130 messages in total. Accordingly, the education institutions were determined to use Twitter in transmitting the messages which contain institutional information to the target groups (1007; 89.1%) rather than developing the dialogue with target groups (123; 10.9).

Sreenivasan et al., (2012: 27-32) assessed the structure of the messages of three airline companies on their Twitter accounts through content analysis. Among the messages sent by the customers, complaints have the top rank while promotion, marketing that contains current events and updates of personal status follow the complaints. Among the messages of the airline companies; marketing including the promotions particular to the services of airlines, socialization in order to

obtain interaction between the airline companies and the users and responding the questions from the users. Another conclusion obtained from the findings is that all the three airline companies don't provide enough responses to the questions of the customers.

In their study to evaluate the levels of the effects of institutional Twitter interaction on the quality of relations between the institutions and target groups, Saffer et al., (2013) determined Twitter could affect the quality of relations when its is used as a tool of bilateral communication between the parties.

In the light of the studies in the literature and data obtained from studies, the questions to be answered as follows:

Research Question 1. What is the distribution of tweets sent by the airline companies having Twitter accounts, the institutions and individuals they follow and the number of their followers?

Research Question 2. What is the distribution of messages sent by the airline companies having Twitter accounts according to days of week and hours within days?

Research Question 3. What is the distribution of the contents of the messages sent to target groups within the context of institutions according to their topics?

Research Question 4. Are institutional Twitter accounts mostly run in unilateral form with the aim of informing the target group or in bilateral form with the aim of developing the communication between the parties?

METHOD

After the executed analysis; Atlasjet, Onur Air, Pegasus, Sun Express and Turkish Airlines which carry on business were found to have institutional Twitter accounts and the messages in the Twitter accounts of those five airline companies.

In the study, the messages in the institutional Twitter accounts of five airline companies having business in Turkey were dealt through content analysis for a period of one month between the dates of March 1, 2013 and March 31, 2013 in respect to the days of the week, hours of the day, their topics they were sent for; whether they were sent to the target groups unilaterally with the purpose of announcing to the target groups or they were sent to develop the dialogues with the conception of bilateral communication focusing on the demands, expectations, complaints, questions and suggestions.

During the analysis, total amount of messages in the Twitter accounts of five airline companies having business in Turkey, the number of institutions they follow and the number of their followers, whether they employ their institutional logos, their call-centers and institutional web addresses from the point of revealing the stylistic aspects of the accounts.

The analyses were maintained through distribution of the messages in respect to the days of week and hours of day. When it is considered that social media is a tool that can function on everyday of the week and every hour of the day, especially, the questioning of this data is crucial that the days of the week and hours of the day when airline companies use Twitter more effectively.

Another question in the study is related to the content of the messages in the Twitter accounts of the airline companies. The messages in the accounts were classified according to their topics and the content of the messages were questioned related to the activity area of the airline companies.

The analyse were finalized through questioning whether the airline companies utilize from the Twitter accounts in a unilateral form with the aim of informing in any topics or bilateral form of the communication with the purpose of obtaining the responses and feedbacks of the passengers related to the services given by the airline companies.

FINDINGS

General View of the Twitter Accounts of the Airline Companies

General view of the institutional accounts of five airline companies in Turkey was given in Table 1. Accordingly, institutional Twitter accounts of the five airline companies in Turkey were analyzed. Those airlines companies, in alphabetical order, are Atlasjet, Onur Air, Pegasus, Sun Express and Turkish Airlines, respectively.

Table 1. General View of the Twitter Accounts of the Airline Companies

AIRLINE COMPANIES	TWEETS	FOLLOW	FOLLOWERS	CORPORATE LOGO	CALL CENTER	URL TO WEB PAGES
ATLASJET	2.079	15.797	31.518	+	+	+
ONUR AIR	963	405	5.970	+	+	+
PEGASUS	2.547	1	36.581	+	-	+
SUN EXPRESS	57	2	3.802	+	-	+
TURKISH	3.140	31	277.47	+	-	+

When the messages of five airline companies in Turkey having institutional Twitter accounts as of the date of May 1, 2013, the top user is Turkish Airlines with 3.140 tweets. Pegasus and Atlasjet follow Turkish airlines with 2.547 and 2079 tweets, respectively. The company having the least tweets in its institutional Tweeter account is Sun Express with 57 tweets.

When the Twitter accounts of the institutions and individuals followed by the airline companies were analysed, Atlasjet is at the top rank with 15.797 while Onur Air and Turkish Airlines follow it with 405 and 31, respectively. From the point of individuals and institutions followed by the airlines companies, Sun Express and Pegasus share the bottom two ranks with 2 and 1 people to follow, respectively. Here, we can understand that Atlasjet utilize its 15.797 institutions and individuals to follow as if they were news sources through Twitter.

When the followers are assessed, Turkish Airlines is on the top rank with 277.470 followers. Turkish Airlines is followed by Pegasus and Atlasjet with 36.581 and 31.518 followers, respectively. The difference of Turkish Airlines from other airline companies is its background as the first airway company, its membership in Star Alliance and being an institution which flies to both many cities in the country and numerous countries abroad.

The Distribution of Tweets Seen in the Twitter Accounts of Airline Companies According to Time

The distribution of the messages seen in the Twitter accounts of airline companies in Turkey is another topic evaluated in the study. Because, social media provides airline companies an opportunity to maintain the interaction with the target groups on 7 days a week and 24 hours a day and develop dialogues related to the demands, complaints, suggestions and expectations of them. In order to determine the hours of day which airline companies receive the messages in their institutional accounts, a day was divided into twenty four hours and the hours which most of the messages were sent and received were interrogated.

Table 2. The Distribution of the Messages in the Twitter Accounts of Airlines According to their Time

AIRLINE COMPANIES	12.00 AM-05.59 AM	06.00 AM-11.59 AM	12.00 PM -05.59 PM	06.00 PM-11.59 PM	TOTAL
ATLASJET	103	147	17	17	284
ONUR AIR	36	36	36	4	112
PEGASUS	72	95	10	-	177
SUN EXPRESS	6	4	-	-	10
TURKISH AIRLINES	104	140	53	17	314
TOTAL	321	422	116	38	897

When the times which the messages in the Twitter accounts of the airline companies are analysed, the density was between 06:00 a.m. and 05.59 p.m. When the distribution of the messages in the Twitter accounts are considered, 538 (59.9%) messages were seen to be sent or received within working hours, while 359 (39.1%) messages were sent or received after hours, namely, between 00.00 and 05.59 at night and 06.00 and 11.59 in the evening.

Another point that draws attention in the findings is related to the time when the research is carried out; Sun Express Airline Company has only ten messages although it has an institutional Twitter account. This finding shows that Turkish Airlines most effectively utilized Twitter which is one of social media tools with 314 tweets and Sun Express failed in utilizing this tool in the required effectiveness.

Table 3. The Distribution of the Messages of the Airline Companies According to Days

AIRLINE COMPANIES	ON WEEKDAYS	AT THE WEEKEND	TOTAL
ATLASJET	224	60	284
ONUR AIR	97	15	112
PEGASUS	139	38	177
SUN EXPRESS	4	6	10
TURKISH AIRLINES	244	70	314
TOTAL	708	189	897

Another topic analysed in the distribution of the messages in the institutional Twitter accounts of airline companies in Turkey in accordance with time is the distribution according to the days of week. The basic topic questioned here is whether the messages were sent or received on weekdays or at the weekend. When Table 4 is analysed, majority of the messages were sent and received in the Twitter accounts of the airline companies on weekdays. 708 (78.9%) of the messages in the Twitter accounts of the airline companies were on weekdays while 189 (21.1%) of them were at the weekend.

It shows that the messages sent and received by the airline companies take place on weekdays and within the working hours. This finding is significant since it shows that both institutions and customers don't benefit from the communicating aspects of Twitter on 7 days of the week.

The Distribution of the Messages in the Tweeter Accounts of the Airline Companies According to their Topics

Another point to discuss within the study has been the topics in the messages in the Twitter accounts of airline companies, the density of topics which this social media is utilized for (Table 4).

Table 4. The Distribution of the Messages in the Twitter Accounts of the Airline Companies According to Their Topics

CONTENT OF MESSAGES	ATLASJET	ONUR AIR	PEGASUS	SUN EXPRESS	TURKISH AIRLINES	TOTAL
APPLICATIONS	138	93	34	7	137	409
DELAYS	-	6	1	1	16	24
SPONSORSHIPS	2	-	-	-	16	18
NEW ROUTES	40	6	24	-	15	85
INTRODUCTION OF THE COUNTRY	51	-	-	-	42	93
CANCELLATIONS OF FLIGHT	8	-	-	-	11	19
PROMOTION CAMPAIGNS	42	5	114	2	68	231
CELEBRATIONS AND COMMEMORATIONS	3	2	4	-	9	18
TOTAL	284	112	177	10	314	897

When the distribution of the messages in the Twitter accounts were analysed according to their topics, they were seen to focus on the applications such as check in, online check in, airport ground services, transportation, and the sale of ticket (409; % 45.5). This topic is followed by the promotion campaigns (231; 25.8%), the introduction of the country (93; 10.5%), new routes (85; 9.5%) and delays (24; 2.6%). The lowest rates of the topics of the messages in the Tweeter accounts of the airline companies were about cancellations of flight (19; 2.1%), sponsorships (18; 2.0%) and messages for celebrations and commemorations (18; 2.0%).

It was determined that approximately half of the messages in the Twitter accounts of the institutions related to airline transport in the service sector (45.5%) were related to the provided services. Turkish Airlines and Atlasjet, Twitter show equal distribution in the messages related to the services they provide to their customers.

Communicative Aspects of the Messages Seen in the Twitter Accounts of Airline Companies

It was also questioned that whether the messages seen in the Twitter accounts of the airline companies are used in unilateral form from the point of public relations or it is aimed to develop dialogues with target groups through bilateral messages.

When the aspects of the messages in the Twitter accounts of airline companies were analysed in terms of content and their techniques; it was determined that the airline companies preferred URL due to the restriction of messages with 140 characters (106; 11.8%). Nevertheless, the airline companies were determined to utilize announcements (60; 6.6%) in order to inform their

customer on any topics and retweets (19; 2.1%) which enables directly forwarding any messages without interfering in the content of the messages.

Table 5. Communicative Aspects of the Tweets Seen in the Twitter Accounts of the Airlines

	URL	ANNOUNCEMENTS	RETWEETS	DEMANDS	COMPLAINTS	SUGGESTIONS	ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	CRITICS	QUESTIONS	REPLIES	TOTAL
ATLASJET	28	7	2	2	2	3	16	20	29	136	284
ONUR AIR	5	-	-	-	3	1	12	-	4	51	112
PEGASUS	12	37	13	8	5	4	17	17	18	46	177
SUN EXPRESS	5	-	-	-	-	1	-	4	-	-	10
TURKISH	56	16	4	1	2	6	22	64	28	106	314
TOTAL	106	60	19	3	6	15	67	105	79	339	897

The techniques of using URL, announcement and retweets in the messages sent may be included into the process of unilateral communication. It can be seen that the airline companies utilize these technique related to the topics such as services, the introduction of the country, sponsorship, new routes, flight-cancellations, and celebrations-commemorations and they mostly have the aim of informing the customers.

When the message forms of airline companies in accordance with bilateral communication model; the distribution is seen as follows: replies (339; 37.7%), critics (105; 11.7%), questions (79; 8.9%), complaints (69; 7.7%), acknowledgements (67; 7.5%) demands (38; 4.3%), and suggestions (15; 1.7%).

The replies to the messages of the customers sent from the Twitter accounts of the airline companies containing demands, complaints, critics, suggestions, admirations, and questions related tot some applications may be mainly considered as bilateral with the aim of developing dialogues which the parties are equal.

When the general distributions are handled; majority of the messages in the institutional Twitter accounts of five airline companies in Turkey (712; 79.4%) were determined to be questions, demands, suggestions, complaints and critics related to the services provided by the airline companies and the responds of airline companies. Moreover, the total amounts of the messages containing the use of URL, announcements and retweet applications with some purposes such as the services provided by the airline companies, new routes, cancellation of flights and the introduction of the country is 185 (20.6%).

When the findings are evaluated, it was determined that the airline companies use Twitter in order to set up a dialogue with target groups and develop conversation rather than building unilateral communication. This is a huge opportunity for both airline companies adopting the customer satisfaction-based service perception and the customers receiving services from those companies. The customers may have find opportunities to express their expectations for better service and the airline companies will have the chance to develop their service quality in accordance with the demands and expectations of their customers. Especially, the information obtained by the public relations units of the airline companies will provide significant hints in the race with other companies they are competing.

CONCLUSIONS

The public relations units of the institutions have achieved the opportunity to be closer to their target groups through new communication technologies and reach them directly without using mediators. By means of social media, the institutions have achieved the opportunity of actualizing a bilateral communication perception which can provide answers to demands, suggestions, expectations, complaints and questions of their customers as well as the unilateral communication perception which only aims to inform the target groups as seen in the traditional tools.

According to the findings of the research, it was determined that the messages in the Twitter accounts of the airline companies were sent within the working hours between the hours of 06:00 a.m. and 05:59 p.m. Accordingly, 538(59.9%) messages were sent or received within the working hours, 359 (39.1%) of them were sent or received during after hours. Among the messages in the accounts of airline companies, 708 (78.9%) of them were sent on weekdays while 189 (21.1%) of them were received or sent at the weekend. It shows that the messages which the airline companies received and sent are on the weekdays and within the working hours. This finding also shows that both institutions and customers fail in utilizing the aspects of Twitter which enables communicating on seven days of the week.

When the distribution the messages in the Twitter accounts of the airline companies are analyzed, the airline companies were seen to focus on the service they provide (409; 45.5%). It is followed by promotion campaigns (231; 25.8%), the introduction of the country (93; 10.5%), new routes (85; 9.5%) and delays (24; 2.6 %). The lowest rates of the messages in the Twitter accounts of the airline companies are seen in flight cancellations (19; 2.1%), sponsorships (18; 2.0%) and celebration-commemoration (18; 2.0%). The density of the messages focusing on the presented services is related to the fields of activity of the airline companies.

It was found that majority of the messages in the Twitter accounts of five airline companies in Turkey comprised of questions, demands, suggestions, complaints, critics of the customers related to the services provided by the airline companies and the responses of airline companies to those messages (712; 79.4%). Besides, total quantity of the messages containing the services provided by airline companies, promotion activities, new routes, the flight cancellations and the introduction of the country are 185 (20.6%). This finding is significant since it shows that the airline companies utilized from social media not only to inform their customers but also establish a dialogue and develop dialogue with their customers. This is a huge opportunity for both airline companies which adopt the customer satisfaction focused service perception in the service sector and the customers getting services from those companies.

Thus, the customers will be able to express their expectations for a better service and the airline companies will be able to develop their service quality in accordance with the demands and expectations of their customers. Especially, the information which the public relations units of the airline companies will provide significant hints in the race which they compete with other companies.

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The logo for the International Association for Business and Society (iafor) is centered on the page. It consists of the lowercase letters 'iafor' in a light blue, sans-serif font. The text is enclosed within a large, faint circular graphic composed of two overlapping arcs: a red one on the left and a blue one on the right, which together form a partial circle around the text.

