

2017

# Strategies for Mitigating Low-Cost Airlines' Passenger Complaints

Michael Jay Price  
*Walden University*

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

This is to certify that the doctoral study by

Michael Price

has been found to be complete and satisfactory in all respects,  
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Walden University  
2017

Abstract

Strategies for Mitigating Low-Cost Airlines' Passenger Complaints

by

Michael Jay Price

MAcc, Nova Southeastern University, 1981

BS, New York Institute of Technology, 1968

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2017

## Abstract

Representatives of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics reported that passenger complaints filed for the first quarter of 2015 were up 14.4% over the same period of the previous year. The purpose of this single case study was to explore strategies for mitigating low-cost airlines' passenger complaints. Porter's generic strategies provided the conceptual framework for this research study. Data were collected from 3 ground service managers employed by a low-cost airline in Florida using semistructured interview questions, direct observation, field notes, and review of the airline's website and public documents filed with the U.S. Securities and Exchange Commission. Member checking and methodological triangulation were used to ensure data saturation. Inductive line-by-line analysis of participant interviews and review of documents and website to identify similar words and phrases resulted in the emergence of 5 themes: complaints, training, customer retention, policies and procedures, and low-cost strategies. The implication for social change exists because airline managers can apply insights gained from this study to mitigate passenger complaints, thereby increasing the number of customers, lowering fares, and maintaining profitability. In this way, the study may support the creation of additional jobs for airlines as well as other industries providing services to an expanded workforce necessary to accommodate more passengers. Further, in supporting better performance for low-cost carriers, this study may help these businesses to offer low fares to customers previously unable to afford travel, enabling them to visit new places and gain a better understanding of other cultures.

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## Dedication

I dedicate this doctoral study to my wife, Caryn, my first and only love, who has supported me in all my endeavors, stood by me, encouraged me, and put up with me through all the trials and tribulations of my doctoral journey. I could not have accomplished this difficult task without you. To my children, Joseph, Alyson, and Mindy; my grandchildren, Chloe, Isabella, Jacob, Katie, Matthew, Rachel, and Sariah; my son-in-law, Juan; and my mother-in-law, Cecelia, thank you for your understanding and support during my journey.

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## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

Low-cost airlines have a low fare structure, which is an economic advantage in the marketplace (Chang & Hung, 2013). Low-cost airlines' poor service may be a result of their low-cost strategy (Min & Min, 2013). Identifying customer service requirements may provide low-cost airline managers an opportunity to focus on service failures and implement new strategies to correct areas where failures in operating procedures occur (Liau & Tan, 2014). The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the dominant factors that affected low-cost airlines in their efforts to retain customers. The results of this study provide low-cost airline managers with information on how to implement strategies regarding operating areas that impact passenger retention. Further, the information in this study provides low-cost airline managers strategies to correct or expand areas where service failures occur so that they can improve customer retention.

### **Background of the Problem**

Changes in the airline industry have resulted in a shift whereby airfare pricing, once dominated by legacy or traditional carriers, has become dominated by low-cost carriers. Low-cost carriers have achieved competitive advantage by using low fares to affect customers' choices of which airlines to fly (Brueckner, Lee, & Singer, 2013). Traditional airlines offer more services, schedules, and destinations than low-cost airlines, which offer limited schedules and lower fares (Pearson & Merkert, 2014). Customer satisfaction and service quality are key factors in the retention of customers

(Curry & Gao, 2012). Therefore, low-cost airline managers need strategies to become proactive to ensure customer satisfaction, thus achieving profitability (Kahn & Kahn, 2014).

### **Problem Statement**

According to representatives of the Consumer Protection Division of the U.S. Department of Transportation (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2015), domestic U.S. airlines received 4,580 complaints during the first quarter ending March 31, 2015, representing an increase of 578 complaints over the same period in 2014 (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2015). Representatives of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics reported that complaints filed for the first quarter of 2015 were up 14.4% over the same period the previous year (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2015). The general business problem is that passenger complaints have a negative impact on airline profitability. The specific business problem is that some low-cost airline ground service managers lack strategies to mitigate passenger complaints.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies that ground service managers of a low-cost airline need to mitigate the impact of passenger complaints. The targeted population included three ground services managers of a low-

cost domestic airline with flights originating from airports located in South Florida, who were selected because they had implemented complaint-reducing strategies.

The potential for positive social change resulting from this study includes social and economic benefits through increased tourism, increased jobs, business travel, sharing knowledge, and personal experiences through passenger interactions with local citizens. Mitigating passenger complaints may provide low-cost airlines the opportunity to remain profitable. Improving service in the low-cost airline industry relates directly to increases in customer satisfaction and customer repurchasing loyalty (Curry & Gao, 2012). Customers who repurchase tickets from a low-cost airline ensure increased usage of that airline, supporting the achievement and/or maintenance of profitability, thus affording the airline the financial ability it needs to retain its low-cost services. Moreover, low airfares, in allowing tourists to visit destinations around the world, can contribute to the economic growth of developing countries (Cowper-Smith & De Grosbois, 2011). Furthermore, as Burns and Cowlshaw (2014) and Lee, Seo, and Sharma (2013) noted, achieving and maintaining profitability enables airlines to create jobs and provides them with the financial stability they need to upgrade equipment in order to be less toxic to the environment; thus, this research study has potentially far-reaching implications.

### **Nature of the Study**

I used the qualitative methodology for this study. The purpose of a qualitative research study is for the researcher to achieve an understanding of a phenomenon by

obtaining information from individuals having experienced the event (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). The role of researchers in this model is to describe the experience of participants in their own words through observations and interviews in participants' environment (Yilmaz, 2013). Because qualitative research focuses on an experience, the researcher must engage in close communication with participants, thereby acquiring a holistic awareness of the environment (Sallee & Flood, 2012). Yilmaz (2013) posited that qualitative researchers can extract the meaning of participants' stories, actions, or interactions through in-depth interviews, gathering detailed data to gain increased understanding of the phenomenon of interest.

Qualitative research entails interpretive study of people, cases, social conditions, and events in participants' environment (Yilmaz, 2013). In contrast, quantitative researchers explain occurrences through analysis, using numerical data interpreted through mathematical formulas (Yilmaz, 2013). Mixed methods encompass elements of both qualitative and quantitative research, allowing researchers to focus on problems for which less information exists. According to Lund (2012), researchers using mixed methods often have difficulty in choosing a validity system. Lund also stated that researchers using mixed methods may have difficulty in determining how to weigh each method in a study. The focus of this study was gaining information on the experience of the participants; quantitative or mixed-methods research would not have been conducive to achieving this goal.



I used a single case study design in this study. Yin (2014) defined a single case study as an investigation of a single occurrence through observations where the occurrence and environment are of interest. Additionally, Yin included in a case study's definition the incorporation of various types of data sources and the use of developed theories addressing the purpose of the study. Using a single case study design provides researchers with the ability to present new knowledge through in-depth analysis of a case (Damianakis & Woodford, 2012).

Other qualitative research designs include ethnography and phenomenology. Researchers using ethnography focus on why events occur for specific groups using prolonged observations in the groups' environment (Reeves, Peller, Goldman, & Kitto, 2013). Researchers using phenomenology focus on identifying and exploring a described human experience of a particular occurrence (Turner, Balmer, & Coverdale, 2013). Of the various qualitative research designs, the case study design had greatest alignment with the problem and scope of this study because it allowed me to concentrate on a single phenomenon in a real workplace environment, obtaining data from participants who had experienced the phenomenon.

### **Research Question**

What strategies do low-cost airlines' ground service managers use to mitigate passenger complaints?

### **Interview Questions**

1. What strategies have you found that succeeded in mitigating customer complaints?
2. How did you implement complaint mitigation strategies?
3. What difficulties did you encounter implementing complaint mitigation strategies?
4. How did you approach handling difficulties in the implementation of complaint mitigation strategies?
5. How have you measured the success of complaint mitigation strategies?
6. What benefits has the airline derived from implementing complaint mitigation strategies?
7. What would you like to share that we have not covered in our discussion?

### **Conceptual Framework**

Changes in the airline industry following deregulation in 1978 afforded airlines opportunities to enter and exit markets without restrictions (Garrow, Hotle, & Mumbower, 2012; Huscgelrath & Muller, 2013). The entry of low-cost airlines in the marketplace produced competition and demand in addition to increasing pressure on traditional airlines' expansion and profitability (Diaconu, 2012). The low-cost model differed from the product-differentiation model that traditional airlines used in the

industry (Scheraga & Caster, 2012). Porter (1991) concluded that a company's competitive advantage consists of providing a unique product or service at a lower cost.

Porter (1980) proposed that the cornerstone of an organization is creating a competitive strategy consisting of differentiation, lower cost, and focus strategies, collectively known as *generic strategies*. The conceptual framework supporting this study was Porter's generic strategies. Porter (1980a, 1980b, 2008) posited that companies need to define market share in an industry through five competitive forces: (a) threat of new entrants, (b) bargaining power of buyers, (c) rivalry between existing competitors, (d) threat of substitute products, and (e) bargaining power of suppliers (Porter, 1980a, 1980b, 2008). According to Porter (1980a, 1980b, 2008), by addressing these forces, a company's leaders can situate themselves to ensure that competitive forces will do the most or least damage, achieving a strategic competitive advantage in their industry.

Porter (1980a, 1980b, 2008) noted that rivalry among existing competitors includes price competition, increases in service, and advertising to achieve competitive advantage. These three dimensions of competition represent the basis of passengers' decisions concerning which airlines they choose to fly (Curras-Perez & Sanchez-Garcia, 2015). Learning each reason relating to a passenger's decision to fly a low-cost carrier after they experience a complaint is significant in contributing to customer retention. (Chen & Hu, 2013). Customer retention provides the impetus for managers of low-cost

carriers to achieve sustainability in the airline industry (Akamavi, Mohamed, Pellmann, & Xu, 2015). Passenger retention is a significant factor in low-cost airline carriers' operations managers' abilities to achieve and maintain competitive advantage (Hannigan, Hamilton, & Mudambi, 2015; Wu & Cheng, 2014).

### **Operational Definitions**

*Airline-within-airline:* An airline-within-airline results from a traditional airline's formation of a low-cost airline subsidiary operating under a different name (Pearson & Merkert, 2014).

*Ancillary fees:* Ancillary fees are for services such as baggage, seat reservations, and in-flight service that airlines add to their base airfare. Another name for these types of additional service fees is *add-on charges* (Garrow et al., 2012).

*Deregulation:* Deregulation resulted from an act passed by the U.S. Congress eliminating restrictions on airlines in terms of where they can fly, fares they can charge, and their flight schedules (Ozcan, 2014).

*Hub:* A hub is a primary airport located close to a metropolitan area with airlines providing direct and transfer service to various locations (De Wit & Zuidberg, 2012).

*Low-cost airline:* The term *low-cost airline* refers to an airline providing basic service (i.e., limited in-flight services, "no frills," comfortable seating) (Han, 2013).

*Product differentiation:* Product differentiation is a strategy that produces or provides a unique service or product (Scheraga & Caster, 2012).

*Service quality:* Service quality results from actions performed by management and employees consisting of involving interaction quality, physical environment, outcome, and access quality (Wu & Cheng, 2014).

*Secondary airport:* Secondary airports are airports located farther away from metropolitan areas, mainly providing direct point-to-point service (De Wit & Zuidberg, 2012).

*Traditional airline:* Traditional airlines, also known as *full-service carriers*, include all services and fees in their fare structures (O'Connell & Warnock-Smith, 2013).

*Unbundling:* Unbundling is an airline's policy of removing ancillary fees from airfares, resulting in a base airfare (Garrow et al., 2012).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are beliefs that a researcher assumes is true but incapable of verifying and needs to ensure the reader understands that these weaknesses exist in the study. (Fan, 2013). In qualitative research, the researcher considers what should be evidence and what signifies knowledge (Barnham, 2015; Chandler, 2013). Researchers' questions pertain to what they think they know, which could represent over- or underestimation of what it is possible for them to know (Chandler, 2013). According to McGhee (2012), researchers' questions can expand their perspectives on topics they probably would not have otherwise found. The first assumption that I made for this study

was that managers were aware of all of the airline's complaint mitigation strategies. Another assumption was that the airline's complaint mitigation strategies were effective in mitigating passenger complaints. The last assumption was that the managers participating in this research study answered the interview questions in a truthful and unbiased manner. The assumptions I had are relevant to this study, which was the exploration of the question of whether strategies of low-cost airlines ground service managers used to mitigate passenger complaints were successful.

### **Limitations**

According to Connelly (2013), limitations are weaknesses that are part of a problem under investigation. Statements of limitations, according to Brutus, Aguinis, and Wassmer (2013), should include information regarding the impact that potential weaknesses may have on the outcome of a study. Qualitative researchers investigate a phenomenon to obtain an awareness of the situation, receiving unqualified opinions from respondents (Brailsford et al., 2013).

There were three significant limitations in this research study. The first was that it did not include interviews with a focus group of frequent flyers who fly particular low-cost and legacy carriers. I interviewed and observed three ground service managers at one airport in South Florida representing a small number of locations and ground service managers involved in the daily operation of an airline throughout the participating

airline's system. Interviews and observations of managers representing other airports and airline services might have yielded additional and conflicting data.

Another limitation was having limited access to the aircraft boarding gate area and not being allowed to observe managers at the boarding gate area because of security constraints. I obtained permission from the airline's manager to access the operations building to conduct face-to-face interviews in a secluded area, and I observed managers' interactions with agents and customers at the check-in/ticket counter area. My ability to observe the interactions managers had when passenger complaints occurred was limited by the restrictions on access to the boarding area (see Appendix A).

The last significant limitation of this research study was that I conducted the research at a single airport in South Florida, which led to limiting the number of interview participants. The results may not apply to other low-cost airlines. Initially, four managers agreed to participate in this study. However, one manager at the time of the scheduled interview declined to participate; subsequently, all documentation, data, and references pertaining to that manager were destroyed. It is also likely that limiting interviews to managers at one location did not result in data indicative of the airline's complaint mitigation strategies and policies as followed by managers throughout the airline's system.

## **Delimitations**

Holloway and Wheeler (2010) defined delimitations as boundaries established by a researcher to either include or exclude elements from the scope of a research study. Delimitations are controls that a researcher places within the limits of a study (Rule & John, 2015). A significant delimitation of this study was the geographical area it encompassed. Other delimitations of this study were the time and cost of conducting the study, which limited me to airports geographically located in the southern part of South Florida, in addition to limiting my research to a specific type of airline. Although a researcher may limit inquiry to a specific geographical area, using various methods of data collection affords a researcher the ability to triangulate data, providing additional validity to the study (Turner & Danks, 2014).

## **Significance of the Study**

The airline industry is highly competitive and has faced increasing financial challenges since airfare deregulation became law in 1978 (Garrow et al., 2012; Huscgelrath & Muller, 2013). Additionally, high fuel costs, economic recession, global financial crises, the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 (9/11), and post-9/11 threats have continued to place pressure on the airline industry (Scheraga & Caster, 2012, as cited in Waguespack & Rhodes, 2013).

The introduction of low-cost carriers into the market has been the most significant factor affecting traditional airlines' ability to maintain competitive advantages and



sustainability (Detzen, Kahn, Likitapiwat, & Rubin, 2012). Low-cost airlines focus on cost reduction, cost containment, and fare unbundling to provide lower fares than traditional airlines (Diaconu, 2012). Passengers on low-cost airlines may incur additional fees for services and amenities including checked baggage, onboard food, assigned seating, early boarding, and carry-on luggage (De Wit & Zuidberg, 2012). Airline passengers using low-cost carriers are aware of the differences in service between low-cost and traditional airlines (Wittman, 2014). However, when recurring service and aircraft problems cause passengers on these airlines to complain, employees and managers need to be prepared to address and reduce passenger complaints (Helm & Tolsdorf, 2013; Hvass & Torfadottir, 2014).

This research study may provide valuable information to leaders of low-cost airlines seeking to address and mitigate passenger complaints. By planning for and creating customer complaint strategies based on the findings of this research study, managers might mitigate the effect of complaints on passenger loyalty. Implementing new strategies and employee training in advance of complaints could provide low-cost airlines with valuable tools enhancing their ability to increase passenger retention after an adverse event, thereby increasing the potential to reduce lost revenues and increase profitability.

The airline industry delivers social and economic benefits through tourism, business travel, sharing knowledge, and experiences. Additionally, the continuing

availability of low-fare airlines may enable tourists to visit destinations around the world, thus contributing to the economic growth of developing countries. Domestically, low-cost airlines service small communities and secondary airports with point-to-point service. According to Ozcan (2014), in small U.S. communities that retained passenger air service, per-capita income increased by 28.1% between 1999 and 2011. During the same period, in communities that lost passenger air service, per-capita income increased by 17.5%. The economic disparities between communities with and without air service indicate the importance of communities retaining low-cost carriers (Ozcan, 2014).

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies that low-cost airline ground service managers use to mitigate passenger complaints. The study encompassed Porter's (1980) generic competitive strategies. Representatives of the U.S. Department of Transportation's Bureau of Transportation Statistics reported that complaints filed for the first quarter of 2015 were up 14.4% over the same period the previous year (U.S. Department of Transportation, 2015).

The sources consulted in this study were identified through searches of management and business databases within the Walden University and Nova Southeastern University online libraries. I used the following databases in this study: (a) Business Source Complete; (b) ProQuest; (c) government databases, including those of the U.S. Department of Transportation and the Securities and Exchange Commission; (d)

Google Scholar; and (e) Sage Premier. There are 239 citations in this research study; 95.8% correspond with peer-reviewed sources, and 87.4% of the works cited were published after 2013. This literature review section contains 104 citations, with 91.3% corresponding to peer-reviewed sources and 87.5% of the sources cited published after 2013.

Researchers use literature to support the development of the research process, focusing on theories, frameworks, research outcomes, and opposing opinions (Sylvester, Tate, & Johnstone, 2013). When conducting a literature review, according to Wolfswinkel, Furtmueller, and Wilderom (2013), a researcher should use a systematic method to choose a significant number of scholarly articles that will define and provide direction for future research. My intention in conducting this research study was to determine strategies needed to mitigate passenger complaints in order to improve customer retention and gain competitive advantage in the low-cost airline market.

Key search words I used in searching databases included *Porter's Generic Strategies, Porter's Five Forces, low-cost airlines, product differentiation, competitive advantage, service failures, customer retention, airline complaints, traditional airlines, legacy airlines, low-cost leadership, focus strategy, airline deregulation, airfares, unbundling, airlines, passenger complaints, customer satisfaction, customer loyalty, marketing strategy, leadership, sustainability, competition, profitability, and airline employee training.*

I introduce in this section literature pertaining to the theoretical foundation of this study and low-cost airline operations. The review of academic and professional literature contains seven subject categories: Porter's Generic Competitive Strategies, low-cost leadership, product differentiation, focus strategy, low-cost airlines, passenger complaints and retention (loyalty), and training. The review of professional literature focuses on low-cost airlines employing Porter's Generic Competitive Strategies in their operations and areas that tend to produce passenger complaints impacting an airline's retention and profitability.

### **Porter's Generic Competitive Strategies**

Managers, according to Keiningham, Morgeson, Aksoy, and Williams (2014), must continually develop strategies to achieve sustainability and a competitive edge in their business environment. Simon and Gomez (2014) found that a rival's customer satisfaction motivates leaders in a company to increase their customers' satisfaction. In the airline industry, Porter's (1980a) generic strategies affect passengers, which in turn may affect airlines' sustainability and competitive edge.

Before deregulation of the U.S. airline industry, airlines followed differentiation and market segmentation strategies (Joo & Fowler, 2014). Airline deregulation unlocked the airline industry, allowing competition from new entrants in the industry based on a low-cost model to achieve competitive advantage in the marketplace (Berman, 2015). Airlines faced pressure from new entrants using low-cost and product differentiation

strategies to change the look of the airline industry. Strategies encompassing Porter's (1980a) generic strategies affect passenger retention, which in turn may affect airlines' sustainability and competitive edge.

Porter suggested that the cornerstone of an organization is creating a competitive strategy consisting of differentiation, lower cost, and focus strategies, collectively known as *generic strategies*. A distinct competitive advantage arises from an organization's ability to make strategic choices (Heracleous & Wirtz, 2014). According to Porter, creating a competitive advantage is the cornerstone of an organization's operation. Porter's generic strategies include three processes an organization can use to create a sustainable competitive advantage, as cited in Singh (2012).

Porter (1980a) hypothesized that developing a competitive strategy requires a company to perform an analysis of its competition in order to provide managers with information on how the company relates to its industry's environment. Elements of a successful competitive strategy include cost, delivery, and quality (Cai & Yang, 2014). The industry demand to achieve competitive advantage, according to Porter (1980a, 1980b), consists of (a) threat of new entrants, (b) bargaining power of buyers, (c) rivalry among existing competitors, (c) threat of substitute products, and (d) bargaining power of suppliers. Porter (1980a, 1980b) predicted that as each of the five elements in an industry become operable, profitability will decrease. Therefore, Porter (1980b) suggested that

companies reduce the pressure of the five elements (competitive forces) by adopting one of three generic strategies to increase their profitability.

Porter (1980a) argued that three types of generic strategies could offer organizations a foundation for operating more profitably in their industry. The three generic strategies Porter posed were cost leadership, differentiation, and focus. *Cost leadership* strategy involves the vigorous pursuit of efforts to reduce costs by controlling those related to (a) overhead, (b) service, (c) advertising, (d) research, and (e) development (Bogdan, 2014; Porter, 1980a). *Differentiation* distinguishes a company's products or services from those of other companies operating in the same market (Bogdan, 2014). *Focus* strategy represents a company's emphasis on a particular product or geographic market (Daft & Albers, 2015; Porter, 1980a).

Porter (1980a) posited that an organization can employ a single generic strategy theory to achieve success. A firm's competitive strategy employing either differentiation or cost leadership is related to its competitive strategy (Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014). Using a focus strategy in conjunction with a differentiation or cost leadership strategy enhances a firm's ability to compete in the marketplace (Dhliwayo, 2014). If a company is unable to use one strategy, it will be "stuck-in-the-middle," achieving lower profits than a business choosing to use solely one of the three generic strategies (Porter, 1980a, 1980b, 1985, as cited in Lechner & Gudmundsson, 2014).

Porter (1985) indicated that a company's generic strategy is essential for a business to include in its strategic plan, in that the strategy is the fundamental approach to attaining a competitive advantage. Companies seeking to achieve a competitive advantage must adopt a generic strategy because it is an essential element of a company's performance and long-term success (Porter, 1980a, 1980b, 1985).

Day and Wensley (1988) expanded Porter's (1980a, 1985) theory using the phrase *integrated concept of competitive advantage*. Day and Wensley contended that business performance is an integral part of a competitive advantage developed by employing generic strategies. Day and Wensley theorized that the combination of superior skills and superior resources affords a company the ability to achieve a significant performance advantage over its competitors. According to Day and Wensley, *superior skills* consist of individual skills possessed by the personnel of the company, which set the organization apart from its competition, while *superior resources* involve the business's ability to outperform its competitors by providing customers with products or services at lower prices resulting from lower operating costs. Hvass and Torfadottir (2014) found that employees could change customer dissatisfaction arising from service disruptions when they received support and training from management, which, in turn, could lead to higher customer loyalty and retention.

Porter (1980a, 1985) and Day and Wensley (1988) argued that employing a generic strategy ensures an advantage in the marketplace. A company needs to use a

strategy to achieve long-term success with an emphasis on customer requirements, or it will fail to attain a competitive advantage (Luck & Lancaster, 2013). Porter (1991) stated that businesses create a competitive advantage by achieving lower costs than their competitors, or by leveraging an ability to be different from competitors with a higher price exceeding the additional cost. Porter's generic strategy theory was the conceptual framework of this research study focusing on low-cost airline managers' strategy to mitigate customer complaints.

### **Low-Cost Leadership**

Porter (1980a) described *cost leadership* as the active effort of a company's management to find cost savings using strict control of overhead and operating costs. Achieving lower cost than a company's competitors is the foundation of the low-cost leadership strategy. Teerantansirikool, Siengthai, Badir, and Charoenngam (2012) explained that cost leadership strategies are procedures for selling products or services to customers at lower prices while maintaining a higher profit margin than marketplace competitors. Teerantansirikool et al. found that a relationship exists between cost leadership and how a company performs financially.

Miles (2013) suggested that cost leadership encompasses the ability of businesses to design operations around cost minimization, allowing them to provide products or services to customers who are concerned with price rather than service and experience provided by a unique product or service. According to Miles, cost leadership strategy



offers businesses a small competitive edge over their competition. Companies choosing a cost leadership strategy pursue aggressive pricing, providing their customers with higher value. Wright (1987) found that companies' market share and financial success directly related to employing a cost leadership strategy. Daniela (2014) found that using a low-cost strategy produced less revenue, and therefore, there was a need to reduce costs to remain profitable. Daniela suggested that companies could experience problems if they concentrated solely on cost reduction and ignored their customers' needs. Further, Daniela contended that creating a product differentiation strategy results in stronger financial gains than using a low-cost strategy.

Achieving a competitive advantage, according to Porter (1991), is the result of two attributes: a company's ability to operate with lower cost structure, and a company's difference from its rivals. Companies that operate more efficiently than their competitors can prevent them from thriving in the marketplace. Joo and Fowler (2014) found that companies that focused on using a low-cost leadership strategy functioned more efficiently than their competitors, thus creating a competitive advantage.

The purpose of engaging in a low-cost leadership strategy is to produce a long-term competitive advantage over industry competitors (Budd, Francis, Humphreys, & Ison, 2014). Companies following a low-cost leadership strategy must operate efficiently by controlling costs while maintaining service and quality (Stankeviciute, Grunda, & Bartkus, 2012). Achieving a competitive advantage, according to Singh (2012), occurs

when a company achieves performance superior to that of its competitors while providing equal or better service at lower prices. Attaining a competitive advantage using low-cost leadership enables a business to achieve profitability through low operating costs and customer satisfaction (Ghazzawi, Palladini, & Martineli-Lee, 2014).

Companies operating in a competitive market need to lower costs to maintain their profitability in the marketplace (Azadi & Rahimzadeh, 2012). Azadi and Rahimzadeh (2012) expressed the need for companies to provide better services or products in a competitive environment. Bereznoi (2014) revealed that companies should operate using certain strategies, including creating value for their customers while achieving and maintaining profitability. Businesses that lower prices to generate short-term profits without correcting other elements of their business activities achieve reduced profitability (Bereznoi, 2014). Businesses that create a strategy that encompasses reducing costs at every juncture can maintain a low-cost structure that results in lower consumer prices (Bereznoi, 2014).

According to Scheraga and Caster (2012), airlines following a low-cost leadership strategy achieved higher growth and profitability. Airlines pursuing the low-cost leadership strategy achieved higher profitability and growth in the marketplace (Scheraga & Caster, 2012). Banker, Marshruwala, and Tripathy (2014) found that companies using both low-cost leadership and a differentiation strategy were able to achieve a high level of performance. However, Banker et al. concluded that using a differentiation strategy

results in sustainable performance over a longer period than using a low-cost leadership strategy.

Yeung, Tsang, and Lee (2012) found that low airfares were a significant reason for travelers flying low-cost carriers. Low-cost carriers needed to maintain low fares to retain customers. According to Yeung et al., low-cost carriers achieved customer retention by maintaining low fares using cost-efficient strategies. Berman (2015) found that successful low-cost companies had common elements, including a culture of cost controls, efficiency, and thriftiness.

A study by Wright (1987) focusing on two low-cost airlines (now defunct) found that focusing on costs led to cost leadership strategies. Wright found that cost leadership strategies concentrating on a target market were used less often than cost leadership strategies focused on reducing costs and charging lower prices for a standardized product or service. Adler and Gellman (2012) found that airlines operating using cost containment in mature homogeneous markets achieved a competitive advantage. Adler and Gellman also posited that, at the time of their study, airlines in the United States operating in the domestic market operated profitably because of containment practices.

However, according to Adler and Gellman (2012), mature markets gave rise to stagnation in profits. Therefore, according to Adler and Gellman, airline managers should adopt differentiation strategies. Mouillot (2013) concluded that differentiation strategy could exceed cost strategy in effectiveness over the long term. According to

Mouillot, companies competing with any advantage other than price achieved a sustainable advantage. Mouillot also found that selecting a differentiation strategy, as opposed to operating using a cost strategy, indicated a willingness to achieve long-term profitability. However, Mouillot expressed the opinion that profits are investors' motivation, indicating that a combination of cost and differentiation strategies is considered a good mix to employ.

Sakavou (2015) reported that companies observed using differentiation and low-cost strategies were equally profitable. Sakavou also revealed that organizations using low-cost leadership and differentiation strategies could be the result of companies having different resources and reputations and thus not attributable to employing low cost and differentiation strategies. Makadok and Ross (2013) found that employing similar pricing structures affected those companies providing superior products using higher costs, causing a reduction in their competitive advantage. Additionally, Makadok and Ross found that companies offering superior products achieved an increase in market share by reducing prices, which also reduced their profitability. Further, Makadok and Ross reported that companies reducing prices and failing to lower costs eventually eroded profits, losing their competitive advantage.

### **Product Differentiation**

Porter (1980a) described differentiation strategy as a strategy providing a unique product or service in the industry the company operates within. According to Porter,

differentiation strategy allowed the company to compete with their competition because of brand loyalty and customers' rejection of lower prices. Through customer loyalty, differentiation strategy achieved higher profits and brand loyalty (Porter, 1980a).

Claudiu-Catalin (2014) expressed the opinion that differentiation strategy is a means of achieving a competitive advantage in the marketplace because of the customized services afforded to customers. Claudiu-Catalin also indicated product differentiation is the communication of an identity through symbols and or logos expressing the brand's image as being unique to the customer.

Alstete (2014), focused on Porter's generic strategy model, finding focus differentiation strategy provided customers with better products and was the strategy of choice for participants. Alstete's study consisted of 380 business students completing business plans over an 11-year time span. However, Alstete expressed the opinion that in a weak economy lower prices would prevail as a result of reduced consumer discretionary spending. Alstete's findings also indicated future entrepreneurs should be flexible and willing to incorporate more than one strategy in their business endeavors. Low air fares and schedules are necessary operational activities of the low-cost airline model producing a positive impact on customer purchase decisions (Lee et al., 2013). Employing low airfares is a strategy low-cost airline use to differentiate themselves from traditional airlines (Hernandez & Wiggins, 2014).

Bogdan (2014) posited differentiation strategy included better quality, performance, and price. Bogdan also stressed companies forming strategies should be cautious of their expectations. Becerra, Santalo, and Silva (2013) found differentiation strategies afford business an opportunity to avoid pressure from competition to reduce prices. Becerra et al. indicated employing a differentiation strategy providing quality service is a significant factor when competitive pricing occurred in the marketplace.

According to Cheng (2013), possessing a competitive advantage involved the use of both differentiation and cost strategies. Asdemir, Fernando, and Tripathy (2013) found companies engaging in using cost leadership or differentiation strategies received a positive reaction from the marketplace. However, Asdemir et al. also found the marketplace considered differentiation strategy more effective than employing a cost leadership strategy.

Attiany (2014) used benchmarking, which is the process of external concentration on internal behaviors of a company's operations, to achieve improvement resulting in a competitive advantage through the use of either a cost leadership or differentiation strategy. Attiany found using a differentiation strategy had a significant impact in achieving a competitive advantage in the marketplace. According to Heracleous and Wirtz (2014), in a study that involved Singapore Airlines' use of cost leadership and differentiation strategies, found the airline produced a competitive, sustainable advantage in the marketplace using the two strategies.

Gehani (2013), in a study involving low-cost airlines, found changing a competitive strategy from a low-cost strategy to a differentiation strategy is disruptive because of changing from cost cutting to increasing costs to produce premium services. Chang, Fernando, and Tripathy (2015) found business following a low-cost leadership strategy placed more emphasis on operation efficiency than businesses following a differentiation strategy. Chang et al. also found companies using differentiation strategies concentrated on innovation, marketing, and brand recognition to achieve a competitive advantage in the market place. Gehani posited innovative strategies produced differentiation strategies while also maintaining a low-cost strategy.

Bustinza, Bigdeli, Baines, and Elliot (2015) examined the effects of servitization which they defined as the change in a company's revenue through implementing new products and services associated with the company's traditional business. Bustinza et al. found servitization should be implemented to deliver value to customers, and the services should be specific to the organization's products and objectives. Also, according to Bustinza et al., strengthening the business through servitization created product differentiation in the market place. Greenfield (2014) conducted a quantitative study to examine if there was a connection between service qualities, specifically on-time performance, and achieving a competitive advantage in the market place. Greenfield used data obtained from the U. S. Department of Transportation, over a 5-year period between 2005 and 2010, consisting of non-stop flights within the United States.

According to Greenfield, airlines could prevent delays by increasing costs and redeploying additional aircraft when possible to routes that have the highest delay costs thus reducing delay costs that affect airfares. Additionally, according to Greenfield, quality affects demand and market share; therefore, changing business operations impacts costs leading to increases in profitability and market share.

### **Focus Strategy**

Porter (1980a) defined focus strategy being as a strategy consisting of two options, cost focus and cost differentiation focus. According to Porter (1980a, 1980b, 1985), cost and differentiation focus each aim at specific targets providing service more efficiently than its competition in the market place. Porter (1980a) also included in the definition of focus strategy the ability of firms to provide enhanced service for the company's target market at a lower cost as opposed to other companies operating in the market place. Also, according to Porter (1980a), a company employed either a focus strategy encompassing cost leadership or differentiation strategies to achieve a competitive advantage. The figure in Appendix B depicts Porter's generic strategies.

According to Rizea (2015) in a study about Ryanair, a low-cost carrier defined focused differentiation strategy as a strategy whereby companies focus on a distinctive product or service to a specific market segment. Riza also found Porter's focus strategy, cost leadership strategy, and differentiation strategy can function in conjunction with each other. Prajogo, McDermont, and Jayaram (2014) found Qantas and Jetstar airlines



initially focused competing on quality and then resorted to competing based on cost leadership through airfares.

Porter (1980a) argued companies should not solely focus on pure cost leadership or differentiation strategy. Therefore, managers should also concentrate on customer's wants, needs, and expectations. Luck and Lancaster (2013) found companies needed to focus on requirements that they deem is important to their customers. Porter (1985) posited managers should be cognizant of the competition in their market place and thus be able to focus on establishing other strategies relating to cost or differentiation strategies.

Ibrahim (2015) examined 220 small firms to recognize strategies and methods they use in determining profitability. Ibrahim found companies using low-cost strategy was a significant factor in achieving profitability and competitive advantage if the strategy the companies employ maintained cost efficiency over an extended time. Ibrahim also found using focus differentiation strategy is the strategy of choice by firms achieving high profitability because of their ability to avoid direct competition with competitors in the marketplace. Turcato, Namasivayam, and Shevels (2014) in their study of tour operators using focus strategy concluded focusing on customers could change customers from concentrating on price to service. Turcato et al. also found focus strategy created customer retention through building personal relationships.

Elian and Cook (2013) described Spirit Airline's successful use of Porter's low-cost and focus strategy in achieving profitability and a competitive advantage in the leisure and visiting friends and relatives' passenger market. Elian and Cook also found a substantial number of Spirit Airline's passenger's complaints centered around service requiring their need to focus on customer satisfaction in addition to maintaining their low-cost strategy to remain profitable. Although currently, according to Elian and Cook (2013) many Spirit Airlines passengers accepted service issues because of their low-fare pricing structure. Yayla-Kullu and Transitpong (2013) justified the relationship between airline service quality and profitability. Yayla-Kullu and Transitpong found 80% of low-cost airlines received a benefit using a low-cost focus strategy indicating cost reductions do not adversely impact service quality to customers.

### **Low-Cost Airlines**

The United States enacted the Airline Deregulation Act of 1978 to deregulate control of airfares and routes by the Civil Aeronautics Board as established by the Civil Aeronautics Act of 1938 (as cited in Brown, 2014). Berman (2015) posited deregulation allowed low-cost airlines to enter traditional marketplaces. According to Orhan and Gerede (2013), airline deregulation impacted the airline's strategy and competitive abilities. Orhan and Gerede found in their study of low-cost airlines since deregulation occurred, each of Porter's competitive generic strategies is representative of Turkish low-cost airline successful operating strategies. Acar and Karabulak (2015) found

competition resulting from pricing is prevalent in the aviation industry thus becoming a significant factor in the industries competitive environment. Acar and Karabulak also found the results of airlines following cost leadership strategies in the Turkish aviation marketplace increased the size of the market and their respective share in the entire market.

Pearson and Merkert (2014) found traditional airlines are forming low-cost subsidiaries known as an airline - within - airline to stem the threat by low-cost carriers using cost-effective operating strategies resulting in lower fares thus capturing a substantial market share. Pearson and Merkert concluded low-cost subsidiaries produced lower yields and passenger loads negating the expectations of their traditional parent airline of higher yields and load factors. Berezoni (2014) explored Jetstar Airways, a low-cost carrier formed by Qantas Airlines, a traditional carrier focusing on a business model using cost-cutting innovations as a means to compete in the international arena. Berezoni found employing cost cutting measures and different operating strategies including reducing in-flight services, smaller seats, using secondary airports, and a uniform fleet of aircraft allowed Jetstar to achieve greater profitability than Qantas Airlines. Homsombat, Lei, and Fu (2014) found traditional airlines simultaneously operating an airline - within - an airline when a traditional carrier forms a low-cost carrier to combat the increase in market share of other low-cost carriers operating in the marketplace. Homsombat et al. determined traditional airlines received benefits through

product differentiation while the low-cost subsidiary achieved profitability by providing low fares resulting from cost cutting activities.

Narangajavana, Garrigos-Simon, Garcia, and Forgas-Coll (2013) conducted a study using 2,211 cases of pricing traditional and low-cost airlines operating between Alicante, Spain and London England. Narangajavana et al. concluded there is a necessity for companies to use Porter's low-cost strategy as part of analyzing their operations and operating environment. Narangajavana et al. further concluded long-term pricing exists and its result depends on whether the airline functions as a low-cost or traditional carrier and the differentiation strategy they employ. Hannigan et al. (2015) conducted a study involving fourteen major U. S. airlines including traditional and low-cost carriers between 1996 and 2011 assessing whether pricing has an impact on a business's performance. Hannigan et al. concluded price, service quality, and passenger loads directly affected an airline's performance. Hannigan et al. also found focusing on service represent the dominating force behind firm performance leading to a strategy producing a competitive advantage in the marketplace.

Duval (2013) found increasing competition in the airline industry is a result of reductions in airfares brought on by changes in operating costs. Duval expressed the opinion airlines should focus on product differentiation through brand recognition. Luo (2014) in a study exploring the impact on competition when two legacy airlines merge specifically because of competition from low-cost carriers. Luo found the merging of

legacy or traditional airlines produced a small impact on airfares as opposed to low-cost carriers using low-cost strategies that produced a significant impact on fares when the different carriers are in direct competition with each other.

Cho, Windle, and Dresner (2015) found in their study why passengers choose to fly from airports where low-cost airlines are present. Cho et al. using data from three airports in the Washington, D.C. area concluded low-cost airlines employing a low-fare strategy increased passenger presence, competition with traditional or legacy airlines, and market growth. Conversely, Cho et al. found airports lacking the presence of low-cost carriers negatively impacted their market share. Additionally, Cho et al. also found there is a *spillover* effect of passengers causing traditional or legacy airlines to reduce airfares and increase flights to remain competitive. Hernandez and Wiggins (2014) examined the effect low-cost carriers have on airfare pricing in the airline industry. Hernandez and Wiggins found low-cost carriers; in particular, Southwest Airlines lowers all airfares and forces traditional or legacy airlines to lower their airfares to remain competitive in the market place. Brueckner et al. (2013) researched competition and airfares between low-cost carriers and legacy or traditional carriers in the U. S. domestic market. Brueckner et al. focused on low-cost and traditional or legacy airlines flying within the same market (airports) and nearby airports using data from the U. S. Department of Transportation database between 2007 and 2008. Brueckner et al. found legacy or traditional airlines flying in both non-stop and connecting markets had little impact on average airfares.

Conversely, according to Brueckner et al., low-cost airlines competing in the same markets had a significant impact on airfares with low-cost carriers influencing fares regardless of flying from in-market or adjacent airports and when low-cost carriers were a potential competitor in new markets.

O'Connell and Warnock-Smith (2013) focused their study on providing a general awareness of the forms of ancillary revenues full-service and low-cost airlines employ. Ancillary revenue according to O'Connell and Warnock-Smith are passenger sales other than fares that can include charges for extra legroom, checked baggage fees, priority boarding, seat reservations, and travel insurance. O'Connell and Warnock-Smith posited there is a concern for all airlines especially full service airlines adopting ancillary service charges and their impact on passengers expected level of service. O'Connell and Warnock-Smith concluded full service airline passengers are more likely to accept ancillary fees than low-cost airline passengers. Additionally, O'Connell and Warnock-Smith found traditional airline fares at times might be less expensive than the unbundled low-cost carriers fare after adding ancillary charges. Mumbower, Garrow, and Newman (2015) investigated what influences customers in purchasing premium coach seats using data from JetBlue's website from August 5, 2010 through October 1, 2010. Mumbower et al. concluded finding new innovative ways are necessary for airlines to increase fees as passengers; in general, are not in favor of add-on fees. Mumbower et al. found airlines need to be transparent in their fare structure due to passenger concerns and government

regulations. Mumbower et al. also concluded the importance of using differentiation strategies including cabin layout, amenities, and new aircraft being factors that entices passengers to accept add-on fees as a strategy to remain profitable.

Scotti and Dresner (2015) conducted a qualitative study examining the effects of checked baggage fees from data collected from routes flown by Southwest Airlines between 2007 and 2010. According to Scotti and Dresner, checked baggage fees represented the second largest revenue source for airlines. Additionally, Scotti and Dresner posited unbundling baggage fees allowed airlines to avoid charging passengers the airline ticket tax thus producing a lower base ticket price. Scotti and Dresner concluded increasing baggage fees is a cause for reductions in passengers and fares. Scotti and Dresner also found passengers do not consider ancillary fees in the same manner they consider fares when purchasing tickets. Low-cost airlines should focus on providing quality service to passengers with respect to essential services including baggage delivery, cleanliness, and timely departures and arrivals (Lin & Huang, 2015a). Therefore, Lin and Huang (2015a) expressed the opinion that providing quality service is an independent influence guiding a passenger's decision as to which airline to fly diminishing the impact of additional fees.

Dobson and Piga (2013) examined mergers of two European low-cost airlines acquiring other low-cost carriers using data consisting of primary fare data and secondary route traffic obtained through *electronic spider* connected to the leading low-cost

carrier's websites. Dobson and Piga focused on airline's pricing structure as the key element of their strategy. According to Dobson and Piga, low-cost is the strategy prevalent between the two airlines affording the merged airline to preserve low fares and in some routes, fare reductions occurred. Subsequently according to Dobson and Piga, although the two low-cost airlines operated using different strategies regarding service, including Southwest Airlines, *no-frills* approach, low fares was the common denominator that differentiates low-cost carriers. Min and Joo (2016) concluded through their examination comparing strengths and weaknesses of airlines to identify operating efficiencies to achieve low-cost leadership in the formation of alliances between carriers. According to Min and Joo, the purpose of forming an alliance was to reduce costs, thus, operate more efficiently. Min and Joo found forming alliances between airlines did not improve the airlines operating efficiency despite reducing costs. However, Min and Joo found lower revenues occurred due to one of Porter's generics strategies, product differentiation, being the reason for reduced revenues regardless of cost containment.

### **Passenger Complaints and Retention (Loyalty)**

Mellat-Parast, Golmohammadi, McFadden, and Miller (2015) examined the relationship between service failures and airlines' competitive strategy. Mellat-Parast et al. used data focusing on arrival delays, baggage, and boarding problems including overbooking of reservations. The data utilized in Mellat-Parast et al.'s study was from the U. S. Department of Transportation Bureau of Transportation Statistics between 1998



and 2009 covering low-cost and traditional airlines. Nikbin, Marimuthu, Hyun, and Ismail (2015) found flight delays, baggage handling, and baggage damage as leading causes of passenger complaints. Nikbin et al. expressed the opinion that airlines should place a high priority on rectifying service complaints that are controllable as they have a significant impact on passenger loyalty.

Mellat-Parast et al. (2015) found that airlines' strategy affected their competitive strategy. Yayla-Kullu and Transitpong (2013) expressed the opinion airlines offering service and quality to their passengers established positive customer relations leading to retention, market share, profits, and differentiation between carriers. Also, according to Mellat-Parast et al., baggage problems and customer complaints had a significant adverse effect on low-cost airlines employing low cost operating strategies as opposed to traditional carriers using focus strategy. Chou (2015) found low-cost airlines service failures are a result of lost baggage, flight delays, poor customer service, and unprofessional flight staff. According to Chou, low-cost airlines service failures significantly impacted their passenger's attitude toward loyalty. Chou also found passengers consider flight delays and lack of flight updates being the significant factor in service failures of low-cost airlines. Two-service recovery methods used according to Chou deemed most relevant are apologies and compensation. However, according to Chou, these methods do not alleviate low passenger satisfaction ratings. Therefore,

airlines need to employ other strategies to increase customer satisfaction when service failures occur to increase customer retention (Chang & Hung, 2013).

Keiningham et al. (2014) examined the relationship between major and minor service failures in the airline industry using data obtained from the National Transportation Board covering 425 low-cost airline passengers flying one of three low-cost carriers between 1997 and 2009. Keiningham et al. examined five factors airlines adapted to measure service quality of low-cost carriers and passenger repurchase intentions after flying a low-cost airline. The five factors Keiningham et al. examined were (a) tangible factor – aircraft and passenger comfort, (b) reliability – passenger service, (c) responsiveness – airlines staff’s ability to solve passenger problems, (d) assurance – passenger’s security in traveling the airline, and (e) empathy – passenger care. Keiningham et al. found assurance, reliability, and empathy were significant factors that passenger considered when choosing to repurchase tickets. Keiningham et al. expressed the opinion only minor service failures related to passenger dissatisfaction, therefore, once the three most important factors are operational; managers can concentrate on adding other services to achieve a greater market share.

Lerrthairakul and Panjakajornsak (2014) examined the relationship between low-cost airlines service quality and passengers repurchase intentions relating to profitability. Lerrthairakul and Panjakajornsak study encompassed data from the National Transportation Board and Transportation Air Travel Consumer Report for other related

incidents. Lerrthaitrakul and Panjakajornsak found major incidents revolved around bodily injuries had a lesser effect on passengers repurchase and profitability than flight delays and cancellations. Conversely, Wang (2014) found passenger concerns about an airline's safety record were a significant factor in their selection of an airline. Further, Wang found after passengers select an airline to fly, service quality including the aircraft's physical environment become important factors in their opinion and subsequent repurchase decisions of which airline to fly.

Curras-Perez and Sanchez-Garcia (2015) surveyed 592 passengers flying traditional and low-cost airlines analyzing the effects on their overall satisfaction, trust, reputation, consumer-company identification, consumer commitment, word-of-mouth, and repurchase intentions. Curras-Perez and Sanchez-Garcia revealed trust and identification determined passenger commitment to repurchase. Curras-Perez and Sanchez- Garcia also found corporate reputation indirectly affected commitment (passenger retention) with low-cost airlines equating to trust, and traditional airlines relating to identification and trust. Commitment according to Curras-Perez and Sanchez-Garcia referred to trust and was a major factor for traditional airlines, whereas, customer satisfaction was important to low-cost airlines. Lin and Huang (2015a) explored factors including fare pricing, airline schedules, flight safety, service, and reputation significantly affected low-cost airline's passenger retention. Lin and Huang (2015a) found the principal reason passengers decided to fly low-cost carriers are reputation and service

quality. Low-cost airlines needed to concentrate on other aspects of their operations as cost containment measures leading to low fares being the only part of a customer's reason when considering an airline to fly (Hanaoka, Takebayashi, Ishikura, & Saraswati, 2014).

Akamavi et al. (2015) examined significant factors low-cost airlines needed to be aware of to maintain passenger loyalty. Akamavi et al. considered factors other than pricing, fees, and scheduling influencing passenger loyalty leading to their repurchasing decision. Akamavi et al. found in a survey of 286 low-cost airline passengers experiencing service failures considered employee efficiency important in fostering trust and increasing passenger satisfaction leading to service recovery and greater passenger satisfaction. According to Akamavi et al., customer satisfaction drove customer loyalty indicating low-cost airline's employee's behavior represented a significant factor in passenger repurchase decisions. Nameghi and Ariffin (2013) identified the importance passengers placed on traditional airlines crew's behavior. According to Nameghi and Ariffin, hospitality in the airline industry consisted of courtesy, appreciation, socializing and comfort. Nameghi and Ariffin found full-service airlines used differentiation strategies. Nameghi and Ariffin in their exploratory analysis involving 391 airline passengers using confirmatory factor analysis involving 546 passengers found hospitality was an essential element in passenger retention. Nameghi and Ariffin expressed the opinion that low-cost airlines to remain competitive in a highly competitive environment required airlines to distinguish themselves from other airlines with service and

hospitality. In determining customer retention, hospitality is an important factor low-cost airline considered to increase passenger retention because of their low-cost or no-frills strategy of offering limited services (Nameghi & Ariffin, 2013; Wang, 2014).

Wittman (2014) conducted a quantitative study to explore passenger complaints filed with the U. S. Department of Transportation Consumer Protection Division. The complaints according to Whitman ranged from baggage and flight delays to passengers denied boarding aircraft. Whitman revealed low-cost airlines and network (traditional) airlines offered different products and services. Whitman also found low-cost airline passengers initiated fewer complaints than traditional airlines. Whitman posited low-cost airline passengers filed fewer complaints because of lower service expectations, unaware of complaint procedures, or their acceptance of poor service because of paying lower fares. Wu and Cheng (2014) explored service quality in the airline industry. According to Wu and Cheng, service quality is the difference between service expectations and the customers' opinion of the actual service received through actions carried out by the company's management and employees consisting of four components consisting of interaction quality, physical environment, outcome, and access quality. Wu and Cheng found service strategies should be developed based on passenger feedback leading to increased passenger satisfaction resulting in stronger customer retention in the highly competitive airline industry. Wu and Cheng did not include price as a factor because they considered price reflects value rather than service. According to Mouillot (2013),

although cheap offers win, they do not bring customer loyalty. Building an advantage based on attributes other than prices will result in a sustainable competitive advantage (Mouillot, 2013).

Min and Min (2013) concentrated on performance rather than strategy in their study revolving around understanding passenger's service concerns. Min and Min used participants having flown low-cost or traditional airlines operating in the United States. In addition to safety, Min and Min found passengers considered other important attributes including baggage handling, competitive airfare, on time arrivals, and departures. According to Min and Min, a significant effect of service quality was the influence on a passenger's decision of which airline to fly. Low-cost airlines provided poor service performance resulting from their low-cost strategy being a reason for diminished service (Min & Min, 2013). Chang and Hung (2013) conducted a quantitative study consisting of face-to-face interviews between January 19 and January 21, 2007, including respondents checking in at full service and Low-cost airlines at the Tao-Yuan International Airport. Chang and Hung concluded low-cost airlines' largest advantage is their fare structures. However, Chang and Hung also pointed out low fares have the potential to cause passenger concerns regarding the airline's safety status. Chang and Hung further concluded trip purpose, ease of booking reservations, frequent flyer programs, airline image, and passenger socioeconomic attributes were significant factors in passengers forming loyalty toward a low-cost airline. Conversely, problems caused by

these factors cause passengers to reduce their loyalty in low-cost carriers despite their low fare structure.

Another aspect relating to low-cost strategies is the ability of employees to negate passenger complaints stemming from controllable and uncontrollable events that lead to passenger dissatisfaction. Hvass and Torfadottir (2014) focused their study on low-cost carriers front-line employee specifically, the in-flight cabin crew's ability to change passenger dissatisfaction and mitigate damages caused by service disruptions. According to Hvass and Torfadottir, airline service disruptions included weather, air traffic control, mechanical, flight, and baggage delays. Hvass and Torfadottir found employee customer service training, and management's recognition of frontline employee's efforts were important factors in their attempts to resolve customer complaints. Hvass and Torfadottir further concluded front-line employee's job satisfaction increased as a result of their properly handling complaints that in turn increased customer satisfaction leading to passenger loyalty. Misopoulos, Mitic, Kapoulas, and Karapiperis (2014) employed sentiment analysis to identify positive and negative reasons passengers consider important when choosing an airline to fly. Misopoulos et al. found areas of service dissatisfaction (negative sentiment) were flight delays, lost luggage, check-in, and, boarding problems. According to Misopoulos et al., customers were satisfied (positive sentiment) with mobile check-in applications, fares, and onboard entertainment. Misopoulos et al. expressed the opinion that the information obtained in their study was a

useful tool airline managers can use to revise strategies concerning customer service issues.

Managers need to focus on specific areas of service failures that can negatively affect a customer's opinion of their airline. Mikolon, Quaiser, and Wieseke (2015) in their quantitative study focused on frequently recurring service failures. Mikolon et al. study included 1,254 European airline passengers flying either one-way or round trip specifically concentrating on flight and baggage delays. Mikolon et al. tested customer satisfaction ratings when passengers received communication by the airlines explaining the service failure before the occurrence of a service failure. Mikolon et al. found communicating with passengers before experiencing a service failure reduced the negative impact on customer satisfaction. Additionally, Mikolon et al. also found customers having high expectations of service had received advanced communication of a service failure and was ineffective in stemming complaints. Mikolon et al. further concluded communicating a service failure in advance, and then the problem failing to materialize did not have a detrimental effect on passengers. Also, Mikolon et al. concluded airlines should have considered communicating a service failure before a failure occurs particularly when the service failure is the result of outside influences. Chen and Hu (2013) performed a quantitative study to determine if the interaction between passengers and airline employees affected customer loyalty and retention. Chen and Hu found service quality had a positive impact regarding passenger loyalty.



According to Chen and Hu, the relational benefits had a direct effect on customer loyalty and retention. Chen and Hu concluded passengers perceived personal interaction equating with service, which increased customer loyalty. Additionally, Chen and Hu found interacting with passengers was a value-oriented benefit as opposed to other service expectations.

Constantino, Gravio, and Tronci (2013) focused on flight firming as a method of improving airline service quality. According to Constantino et al., flight firming was a process of canceling non-reliable reservations to maximize aircraft passenger loads. Constantino et al. indicated canceling reservations is thought of by passengers as being denied boarding causing passengers to file complaints. Constantino et al. also found flight firming created higher revenues and is a strategy requiring proper procedures to be in place to reduce cancellations to repeat passengers. Additionally, Constantino et al. found satisfied passengers tend to buy additional services and provided positive word of mouth opinions regarding service quality. The effects of service quality impacted customer loyalty, retention, and customer satisfaction leading to higher demand and the attraction of new customers (Constantino et al., 2013). Liang (2013) conducted a study to provide a strategy for managers to address passenger complaint behaviors. According to Liang, companies needed to establish a complaint level to address and remedy complaints. Liang pointed to Southwest Airlines as a company that used a low tolerance complaint level rendering high passenger satisfaction, conversely, Ryanair; a European

low-cost carrier used a high tolerance compliant level with lower passenger ratings.

Liang found organizations using lower complaint levels received overstated complaints by customers having a strong aversion to the company, therefore, reducing the validity of the customer's complaints. Also, according to Liang, compliments did not change the outcome of a situation. Thus, according to Liang, it was the organization's choice of complaint level responses that are directly affected by competitive pressure in the market place that lead to their strategies for handling complaints.

Customer complaints can also stem from the airline's operational facilities and equipment resulting from their employing low-cost operating strategies. Han and Hwang (2014) conducted a quantitative study investigating the effects of the ambient in-flight conditions, specifically, odor, noise, temperature, and air quality and their relationship to customer service quality and repurchase intentions in the low-cost airline industry. Han and Hwang found that low-cost airlines needed strategies to correct in-flight environmental conditions through improved technology, which likely will increase passenger and repurchase intentions. Khan and Khan (2014) examined the importance of customer satisfaction in the airline industry. Khan and Khan examined the relationship between reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangibility to passenger satisfaction leading to increasing passengers flying an airline. Khan and Khan concluded airlines receiving high ratings in every facet achieved satisfied customers thus obtaining a larger share of the market through adding new customers and increasing customer

retention. Additionally, Khan and Khan (2014) and Khan (2014) also found customer satisfaction was becoming as important as airfares. Therefore, according to Khan and Khan, airlines need strategies to keep their customers content and make every effort to change existing strategies to limit customer complaints. Kim and Cho (2014) expressed the importance of airlines' maintaining a positive relationship with their passengers to preserve their loyalty leading to their repurchasing decisions. Therefore, according to Kim and Cho, airlines needed to implement strategies alleviating passenger stress when service failures occurred enhancing the airline's reputation through strategies including apologies, explanations, and monetary considerations. Increasing passenger's views of airlines by how they handled service failures leads to brand recognition and passenger repurchase intentions (Kim & Cho, 2014). The importance of managers following strategies addressing service failures requires an airline to be aware of areas consistently causing service failures and maintaining strategies to overcome passenger dissatisfaction when the service failure occurs (Mellat-Parast et al., 2015).

Waguespack and Rhodes (2013) in their study examined data from the U.S. Department of Transportation Air Travel Consumer Report for a 25 year period from 1987 to 2012 that included flight delays, denied boarding, mishandled baggage, advertising, and customer service. Waguespack and Rhodes also examined a 2013 J. D. Powers survey indicating passenger dissatisfaction with additional fees and service quality of airlines. According to Waguespack and Rhodes, ancillary fees were a

significant source of profits for airlines and disliked by passengers. Although passenger dissatisfaction continued to increase, Waguespack and Rhodes expressed their opinion that passengers simply changed their expectations and accepted poor service. Thus, according to Waguespack and Rhodes, if passengers receive poor service, airlines will continue reducing costs while ignoring service issues resulting in passengers experiencing an increase in service quality issues and allowing airlines to follow a strategy of increasing fees and reducing service. Helm and Tolsdorf (2013) revealed in their study persons having a pre-existing favorable opinion of an airline did not shield the airline from losing favor with those persons having indicated a favorable opinion before a problem arose. Helm and Tolsdorf found a favorable opinion did not reduce the effect of a problem. Therefore, Helm and Tolsdorf concluded firms having a poor reputation would experience a smaller decrease in loyalty as their customer's expectations were lower. Also, Helm and Tolsdorf expressed the opinion managers needed to be aware of the firm's reputation and recognize the impact upon customer loyalty and profitability. Companies failing to achieve customer service satisfaction also failed in their efforts to achieve customer loyalty with the result of reducing profits and market share (Anwar, Mulyati, & Amelia, 2013)

As airlines change their operating strategies causing an increase in customer dissatisfaction, competition operating under the same low-cost model recognizing the areas of poor service can implement strategies to alleviate those complaints and capture

additional market share. Allen, Brady, Robinson, and Voorhees (2015) examined scenarios in the hotel and airlines industry that created opportunities for another company when a service failure occurred. According to Allen et al., the two industries were chosen because of their significant contact with customers and their frequent service failures. According to Allen et al., a service failure for one company created an opportunity for another company to provide help and acquire customers from its competition. Allen et al. found once the customer-experienced support from the other company; they exhibited more satisfaction, even when gestures of goodwill from the primary service provider took place. Therefore, according to Allen et al. when repeated service failures occurred, and goodwill gestures were used as a strategy to correct or soften the impact of the service failure, the company did not retain customers. Kumar, Bhagwat, and Zhang (2015) focused on determining which customers to target with win-back programs after service failures occurred. Win-back programs according to Kumar et al. are initiatives or second chances companies offered customers having stopped using their services or buying their products for various reasons. Kumar et al. concluded customers trust, and commitment before leaving the company was a significant influence on their return. In addition, Kumar et al. found the more customers referred others to the company; the more this strategy increased the likelihood of their accepting the win-back offer and returning as a customer. Another interesting outcome according to Kumar et al. was customers who left for the price of the service were also likely to accept the offer and

were not concerned with service quality. Conversely, customers leaving the company for service related issues were less likely to return because of their lack of trust and the company's ability to provide service. Therefore, Kumar et al. also concluded win-back programs often helped mitigate customer apprehension of switching back. Also, Kumar et al. found a win-back program consisting of discounts and service upgrades were the most effective in reacquiring lost customers.

Barich, Ruiz, and Miller (2016) posited the airline industry continued to change how it provides services to passengers by adopting self-service functions. Barich et al. provided a step-by-step description of a passenger's journey from ticket purchase, baggage processing, and collection to in-flight service, debarkation, and embarkation indicating the importance for airlines to establish specific procedures to enhance the passenger experience. Barich et al. proposed airlines provide in-flight services such as booking hotels and issuing the voucher, transportation arrangements, and baggage delivery. Barich et al. concluded the added services provided additional revenues for airlines and convenience for passengers. According to Barich et al., offering additional services in this manner is another approach low-cost airlines used to increase revenues at little or no cost leading to the carriers low-cost operating strategy. Airline profitability stems from passenger retention resulting from service and safety (Jeeradist, Thawesawngskulthai, & Sangsuwan, 2016). Passenger's expectations of quality service are part of an airline's image, thus, according to Jeeradist et al., poor service quality

adversely affected their profitability and customer retention. Bolton, Gustafsson, McColl-Kennedy, Sirianni, and Tse (2014) found companies needed to improve strategies that provide services enhancing the customer experience through value and service. Liao and Tan (2014) examined consumer opinions concerning the low-cost airline industry in Malaysia to identify their needs in their efforts to improve service. Liao and Tan found four main areas customers of low-cost airline placed their focus included customer service, ticket promotions, flight cancellations and delays, and post-booking service. Liao and Tan concluded understanding customer needs afford low-cost airlines an opportunity to focus on areas customers deem important allowing management to correct areas with negative responses, and concentrate on areas passengers considered necessary. Gregoire, Salle, and Tripp (2015) expressed the view that companies need to ensure there was a system in place to identify service failures before an occurrence thus alleviating customer complaints and public awareness. Additionally, Gregoire et al. indicated the importance of not repeatedly committing the same service failures as they created passenger animosity toward the company leading to negative advertising impacting customer retention and market share.

### **Training**

Littlepage, Hein, Moffett III, Craig, and Georgiou (2016) found training was a factor in increasing performance and reducing delays thus increasing revenues. Littlepage et al. also found training also fostered participants to work better as a team because of

their awareness of skills and responsibilities of other team members. Gibbs, Slevitch, and Washburn (2017) found flight attendants competency training directly affected their performance which in turn affected customer service and satisfaction. Also, according to Gibbs, Slevitch, and Washburn, standardized training increased job performance, service, and skills.

Karatepe and Vantankhah (2014) revealed in a study using flight attendants as participants there was a need to employ and train customer service staff to be passenger service oriented. Karatepe and Vantankhah also found the necessity to train and retrain employees focusing on methods that encompassed using empowerment tools to solve passenger complaints. Saray, Patache, and Ceran (2017) posited a workplace fostering a strategy of employee empowerment in their decision making enabled the employee to be more self-assured and inspired leading the company to sustain its operations. Also, Saray et al. expressed their opinion employees should be provided with training and information to achieve the goal of sustained operations. Wang and Cole (2014) concluded managers needed to be cognizant of where passenger complaints emanate. According to Wang and Cole, managers should make sure ground service employees obtained extensive training to reduce certain complaints including passengers with disabilities.

Airlines will characteristically experience service failures which may not be preventable; therefore, managers according to Park and Park (2016) posited the need to



understand the importance of a prompt response. Park and Park stated customers judge an airline by their employee's immediate response to a service failure which only occurred having fully trained employees. Chung and Rong (2014) expressed the opinion that airlines should include in their strategies personal training of their employees aimed at meeting passenger's expectations.

### **Transition**

My purpose was to investigate strategies for mitigating low-cost airlines' passenger complaints. Section 1 encompassed the foundation of my research study including (a) problem (b) purpose statements, (c) nature of the study, (d) research question, (e) interview questions, (f) background of the problem, and (g) purpose statement. Additionally, Section 1 included (a) assumptions, (b) limitations, (c) delimitations, (d) conceptual framework, (e) operational definitions, and (f) significance of the study. Section 1 contained the review of professional and academic literature consisting of (a) an introduction, (b) Porter's generic strategies, (c) low-cost leadership, (d) product differentiation, (e) focus strategy, (f) low-cost airlines, (g) passenger complaints and retention, and (h) training. In Section 2, I restated the purpose statement and also included (a) role of the researcher, (b) participants, (c) research method and design, (d) population and sampling, (e) ethical research, (f) data collection instrument, (g) data collection technique, (h) data organization technique, (i) data analysis, and (j) reliability and validity. Section 3 includes the application to professional practice and

implications for change and also includes an introduction, (a) my presentation of findings, (b) my application to professional practice, (c) my implications for social change, (d) my recommendations for future research, (e) my reflections, and (f) my conclusion.

## Section 2: The Project

Service failures in the airline industry directly affect profitability. Thus, airline managers should understand and focus on service areas in which they can improve their competitive strategies (Mellat-Parast et al., 2015). There is a need for low-cost airline managers to reduce service failures, thus mitigating customer complaints about their airline while leveraging an opportunity to achieve customer retention that could translate to increased profitability.

In addition to restating the purpose of the study, I address the following in Section 2: my role as the researcher, the participants, the research method and design, population and sampling, ethical research, the data collection instrument, the data collection technique, the data organization technique, data analysis, and reliability and validity.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies that ground service managers of a low-cost airline need to mitigate the impact of passenger complaints. The targeted population included three ground services managers of a low-cost domestic airline with flights originating from airports located in South Florida, who were selected because they had implemented complaint-reducing strategies.

The potential for positive social change resulting from this study includes social and economic benefits through increased tourism, increased jobs, business travel, sharing knowledge, and personal experiences through passenger interactions with local citizens.

Mitigating passenger complaints may provide low-cost airlines the opportunity to remain profitable. Improving service in the low-cost airline industry relates directly to increases in customer satisfaction and customer repurchasing loyalty (Curry & Gao, 2012).

Customers who repurchase tickets from a low-cost airline ensure increased usage of that airline, supporting the achievement and/or maintenance of profitability, thus affording the airline the financial ability it needs to retain its low-cost services. Moreover, low airfares, in allowing tourists to visit destinations around the world, can contribute to the economic growth of developing countries (Cowper-Smith & De Grosbois, 2011).

Furthermore, as Burns and Cowlshaw (2014) and Lee, Seo, and Sharma (2013) noted, achieving and maintaining profitability enables airlines to create jobs and provides them with the financial stability they need to upgrade equipment in order to be less toxic to the environment; thus, this research study has potentially far-reaching implications.

### **Role of the Researcher**

As the researcher in this single qualitative case study, I served as the data collection instrument, creating the interview questions, choosing participants, and conducting interviews and observations of participants. In qualitative research, participant interviews can yield comprehensive information (Collins & Cooper, 2014). According to Yin (2014), the interview process can be a significant source of data in a case study. The interview questions used in this research study are in Appendix C.

As the researcher in this single qualitative case study, I needed to ensure that the interviews, observations, and final report of the findings were free of bias. Researchers cannot fully escape bias and their tendencies to imbue data selection tactics in their research project (Hazel & Clark, 2013). During the data collection phase, I made every effort to remove bias by continually evaluating all documents. I applied member checking and bracketing to ensure that interpretations were valid, that participants' responses were recorded correctly, and that all themes found in the transcripts became part of this research study. Member checking allows participants to respond to transcriptions of their words in order to ensure that the researcher has adequately represented their interview data (Houghton, Casey, Shaw, & Murphy, 2013). According to Chang, Llanes, Gold, and Fetters (2013), member checking is a method for ensuring the trustworthiness of the researcher's conclusions by providing participants with results to review and correct where needed. Member checking also affords the researcher the use of a tool to confirm that data saturation has occurred by repeatedly interviewing participants until no new data emerge (Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013). As cited in Morden et al. (2015), observation entails the researcher describing and analyzing what participants say and do in their environment. Zhao and Ji (2014) contended that using participant observation allows a researcher to obtain data not found during participant interviews. The objective of a researcher in performing data collection is to

be objective and encourage objective responses from participants during the interview process while ascertaining information relevant to the study's research question.

My exposure to the airline industry stems from being a passenger using various airlines for business and pleasure. I live and work in South Florida, where the airline industry influences the economy of the state and has an impact on the golf industry, which is my source of employment. I consider the transportation industry, particularly the airline industry, to be an essential aspect of commerce. Moreover, having watched the airline industry evolve over the last 40 years, I have developed a career plan that involves becoming a consultant to the airline industry.

The Belmont Report is a summary of ethical principles and guidelines for the protection of human subjects of research (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). The Belmont Report stemmed from the National Research Act of 1974, which established how practitioners conduct ethical research on humans. The Belmont Report has three core principles: (a) respect of persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). I adhered to all three ethical principles during my involvement with human subjects in this research study.

Bias is a significant obstacle for qualitative researchers conducting interviews to collect data. Bias involves divergence from the truth in data collection, analysis, and interpretation, resulting in reporting false conclusions intentionally or unintentionally (Simundic, 2013). I understood that bias could impact this research study. My

responsibility, as a researcher, was to remain neutral, be cognizant of any bias I might have, and not interject bias into the interviews or findings. I placed myself in an *epoché* condition during the interview process. In an attempt to mitigate bias, I used bracketing. Bracketing is a process allowing a researcher to become aware of any presuppositions about the research topic (Tufford & Newman, 2012). My findings included all information regarding any bias that I was aware of and that I considered a threat to my conclusions. Awareness of biases enabled me to design and implement a study that minimized bias where possible (Malone, Nicholl, & Tracey, 2014). A detailed interview protocol was used to guarantee that I followed the same steps with all participants, thus giving them equal treatment (Fredricks et al., 2016). I followed all aspects of the interview protocol with each interview participant to avoid bias in this study. Therefore, the interview protocol I used was vital ensuring I followed the same interview protocol with each participant in this research study (see Appendix D).

### **Participants**

Participants in this research study were ground service managers that had a minimum of 1 year of full-time or 2 years of part-time service with the low-cost airline, during which time they had gained experience with using strategies to mitigate passenger complaints successfully. Experienced participants are an important source of information, providing the researcher with an understanding of the phenomenon of interest (Yin, 2014).

An essential element of an organization's growth is the quality of its services and products (Anwar et al., 2013). According to Anwar et al. (2013), interviewing is integral in identifying strategies that organizations can employ to improve their service and product quality. Using a semistructured interview technique allows a researcher to understand practices, systems, and relationships that the participant expounds upon during the interview process (Drew, 2014). I interviewed participants face to face using a semistructured interview technique. Using the semistructured interview method allowed me to obtain interviewees' ideas and opinions about my research study topic.

I purposefully selected managers in the employment of a low-cost airline operating in the South Florida market serving airports located in various major tourist areas within the state. I used typical case sampling in my research study. Typical case sampling is a purposeful sampling strategy that is nonrandom and is the best fit for a single case study (Robinson, 2014). As cited in Benoot, Hannes, and Bilsen (2016), typical case sampling clarifies a common occurrence. Fenna et al. (2013) used purposeful sampling to ensure interviewees would meet their specific predetermined experiences relating to their study. Purposeful sampling is an accepted practice in qualitative research that is used to achieve in-depth responses from participants (Khoury, Huijjer, & Doumit, 2013). Purposeful sampling can help a researcher to realize the goal of identifying and obtaining insight into a phenomenon through interviews with participants with direct knowledge of the phenomenon (Spelman & Rohlwmg, 2013).



The purposeful sampling strategy I employed in this research study was typical case sampling. Using a purposeful typical case sampling strategy involved random participants having experienced the phenomenon encompassed in this research study. To qualify as a participant, a low-cost airline manager needed to have achieved customer satisfaction by mitigating passenger complaints. Using data triangulation allowed me to confirm whether the low-cost airline employing the managers who participated in the interview and observation process had been successful in resolving passenger complaints.

Data triangulation consists of using multiple sources to ensure that data from various sources are consistent with the goals of a study (Kaczynski, Salmona, & Smith, 2014). I used interviews, direct observation, and documents to triangulate data. Lloh (2016) argued that by using interviews and focus groups, researchers can develop strong descriptions of participants' experience with phenomena of interest. Observation, interviews, and focus groups are essential elements of data collection in qualitative research (Yousefy, Yazdannik, & Mohammadi, 2015). Additionally, I used documents filed with U.S. government agencies including the Securities and Exchange Commission and the U.S. Department of Transportation to verify the success that the low-cost airline in my study had achieved in resolving passenger complaints. Lee et al. (2015) explained that triangulating data consists of using document review, observation, and interviews to reinforce the consistency of data. I directly observed each participant at the check in / ticket area interacting with passengers and agents on different days and at different times.

I contacted managers through emails and telephone calls to the senior management of a low-cost carrier operating from the South Florida market (see Appendices E and F). I sent a letter of invitation by email explaining the intent of this research study (see Appendix A). After receiving approval from the Institutional Review Board (approval number: 02-27-17-0523532), I sent the Walden University informed participant consent form for adults over 18 years of age for the participants' review, approval, and signature, in addition to a letter of cooperation (see Appendix H). A senior manager of the airline executed the letter of cooperation, and the participants reviewed, signed, and dated the participant consent form prior to commencing the interview process. I maintained contact with participants via email and phone conversations in order to inform them of the status of their interviews, to perform member checking, and to share information on the progress I was making, in order to maintain their interest and involvement in the data collection portion of this study.

### **Research Method and Design**

The object of this qualitative single case study was to examine strategies that low-cost airline managers use to mitigate complaints, thereby promoting increased customer retention. This section provides an opportunity to expand on the research method and design used in this research study. Comprehending humans' experiences in their environment is the aim of qualitative research (Shelton, Smith, & Mort, 2014). A single case study can provide significant information about daily occurrences that may inform

the development of new strategies (Yin, 2014). Low-cost airline managers need guidance concerning which of their strategies are effective so that they can mitigate passenger dissatisfaction and increase customer retention, leading to an increase in market share and profitability. Therefore finding successful strategies that managers can use to mitigate passenger complaints could be achievable through passenger interaction with managers having the experiences of managers having the experience of successfully handling passenger complaints in the low-cost airline industry.

### **Research Method**

Qualitative research, according to Kaczynski et al. (2014), encompasses the gathering of information from one-on-one interviews to discover a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. According to Pomeroy (2013), qualitative research involves the use of unscientific data to gain insight and provide explanations of a phenomenon, rather than to determine specific cause-and-effect relationships. I selected the qualitative method because it provided me with the opportunity to elicit valuable, detailed information from participating managers. According to Eisenbeib and Brodbeck (2014), managers would share the strategies they used during encounters with customers. Qualitative research allows researchers to find out what participants think based on their understanding of a phenomenon (Barnham, 2015).

Qualitative research may be used to develop a narrative to answer *what*, *why*, and *how* questions in relation to a phenomenon (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2014). Qualitative

research encompasses a variety of data acquisition approaches, including interviews, focus groups, and observations in natural environments (Shelton et al., 2014). Using a semistructured interview technique, researchers can obtain detailed information from participants on their thoughts, understandings, and beliefs in relation to a phenomenon until data saturation occurs (Eisenbeib & Brodbeck, 2014).

Quantitative research adheres to a positivist approach whereby statistical analysis using variables can present an untrue or alternate premise without providing substantive information relating to a problem (Babones, 2016). Dolnicar (2015) expressed that researchers using quantitative methodology should focus on understanding the phenomenon rather than determining relationships and the number of times a phenomenon occurs. Using quantitative methodology, researchers perform measurements using statistics to determine the relevance of a phenomenon within a sample (Barnham, 2015). In contrast, the focus of this research study was to provide qualitative data through face-to-face interviews with participants, affording them a chance to provide in-depth experiences about the study phenomenon; a quantitative method would not have been conducive to reaching this research study's goals.

Mixed-method research involves the use of a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches to provide an expanded understanding of complex problems (Hayes, Bonner, & Douglas, 2013). Mixed methods research allows a researcher to measure variables to answer *how*, *much*, and *why* questions (Caruth, 2013). Mixed

methods research may provide realistic answers to difficult research questions; however, the process is time consuming and expensive and tends to force researchers to use smaller samples (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2014).

In any study, the research question should be the determinant as to which research design to use (McCusker & Gunaydin, 2014; Yin, 2014). In this study, qualitative methodology provided the information needed to answer the research question concerning the strategies that managers of low-cost airlines use to mitigate passenger complaints.

### **Research Design**

I used the case study design to answer the research question concerning strategies that low-cost airline managers used to mitigate passenger complaints. Using a case study promoted discourse between theory and research (Rule & John, 2015). Choosing a single case requires a researcher to ensure the case relates to the researcher's theory and portrays an everyday occurrence (Yin, 2014). Case study affords a researcher the ability to provide an understanding of a case after compiling data from participants experiencing the phenomenon (Klonoski, 2013). Single case studies produce and relay an understanding of a single instance of a particular phenomenon (Mariotto, Zanni, & DeMoraes, 2014). In a single case study, the researcher prepares a report of findings after studying a phenomenon in its smallest details. This report contains knowledge gained by the researcher in order to allow the reader to become familiar with the case and

findings (Mariotto et al., 2014).

Other qualitative research designs included ethnography and phenomenology. For researchers to employ ethnography as a research design, researchers needed to immerse themselves to acquire a full understanding of the phenomenon (Reeves et al., 2013). Researchers used the ethnographic research design to study a group's culture in their natural setting focusing on producing an authentic understanding of the group's connection with their culture and environment creating a basis for the researchers understanding of social issues (Cruz & Higginbottom, 2013). According to Yin (2014), using an ethnographic research design included extensive field work culminating in a comprehensive written report detailing the researchers understanding of the phenomenon accumulated from observations, interviews, and documents. The ethnographic research design does not align with the intended goals of this research study.

The phenomenological approach according to Tuohy, Cooney, Dowling, Murphy, and Sixsmith (2013) was about the researcher understanding and interpreting the meaning of participant's experiences. Using phenomenology as an approach to research embodies participants of large groups attaching their meaning and understanding of a phenomenon (Gill, 2014). The phenomenological approach is a research method expressing lived experiences of participants providing different ways they view a phenomenon (Tomkins & Eatough, 2013). I did not use the phenomenological approach in this research study

because the goal was to examine a segment of the airline industry and their strategies to mitigate customer complaints.

An important phase in research is when new data becomes available during the interview process. Data saturation provided case study researchers the means to increase validity in their study (Periyakoil, 2013). Data saturation involved the researcher interviewing participants until no new data emerged (Marshall et al., 2013). Researchers can also achieve data saturation through the addition of new participants until no new data or themes occurred (Marshall et al., 2013; Periyakoil, 2013). Achieving data saturation also indicated a sufficient sample size (Arslanian-Engoren & Scott, 2016).

### **Population and Sampling**

In this single qualitative case study, I gathered information from three ground service managers currently employed with a low-cost airline operating in the South Florida market with experience in addressing customer complaints. According to Marshall et al. (2013), single case studies should employ 15 to 30 participants; however, an appropriate sample size may be difficult to determine. Sousa (2014) expressed the opinion that the number of participants is insignificant compared to the importance of obtaining pertinent evidence relating to the researchers' question. Choosing a sample size in a qualitative study, according to Robinson (2014), is subject to the research question, and the practicality of obtaining information under reasonable circumstances. I used a four-point strategy posited by Robinson when selecting participants in this single

qualitative case study. The four-points strategy posed by Robinson was to (a) define sample size, (b) choose a sample size, (c) select a sampling strategy, and (d) obtain relevant participants. The strategy I used in selecting participants in this research study required participants to be ground service managers administering policies of a low-cost airline that directly related to mitigating customer complaints.

A researcher needs to decide to use an appropriate purposive strategy to select participants using either significant, deviant, extreme, or typical case sampling being purposive strategies best suited to use in a single case study (Robinson, 2014). Jacobs, Burns, and Wendel-Hoppey (2015) expressed the importance of using purposeful sampling by using a typical case to ensure that participants have specific experience relating to the research phenomenon. Eisenbeib and Brodbeck (2014) found that using typical purposeful sampling enabled researchers to focus on participants in their sample universe who were leaders with direct knowledge or experience relating to the research question. I used typical case study purposive sampling by selecting managers having direct knowledge and experience administering a low-cost airline's customer complaint mitigation strategies in the South Florida market.

### **Ethical Research**

I conducted this research study, including contacting participants, after I received approval from Walden University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). The Walden University IRB approval number is 02-27-17-0523532. I followed the Belmont Report



guidelines that include (a) principles of respect of persons, (b) beneficence, and (c) justice, the three essential research ethics involving human subjects (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 1979). Each participant that participated in this research study received a Participant Consent Form and a copy of the Letter of Cooperation Form (see Appendix G) signed by an executive or manager of the participant's airline. Four managers agreed to participate; one manager prior to commencing with face to face interview and prior to signing the Informed Consent Form decided to withdraw. All references and information pertaining to the manager that withdrew from the study was destroyed. The Participant Consent Form signed by the managers that participated in this research study included the purpose of the study, sample questions, the interview will be audio recorded, and the participant will be observed performing their duties by the researcher. The Participant Consent Form also included information indicating participation in the study is voluntary, and the participant can withdraw at any time during the process without penalty by email to me or in person at any time during the interview process. There was no remuneration of any kind to the participant for participating in the research study, and a copy of the results was requested by the participants and will be sent to them after the study is approved. I contacted participants by telephone and or email only after I received an affirmative email from the participant indicating their willingness to participate in this research study.

Ethical issues are critical in research as the basis for forming trust between the researcher and participants (Barker, 2013). Bromley, Mikesell, Jones, and Khodyakov (2015) expressed that researchers need to be cognizant during the interview process of all ethical practices while engaging in interviews with participants. A researcher needs to ensure that obtaining, storing, and analyzing data are essential in protecting and preserving participants privacy and rights (Yin, 2014). To accomplish the task of maintaining a participant's privacy and rights, I referred to each participant as a participant with a designated number and alphabet letter. I used consecutive numbers with the letter and number designation. An example is ground service manager would be *1A*. Additionally, I will store the data for 5 years on a stand-alone disc drive locked in a safe along with all written data, recorded interviews, and notes. At the end of 5 years, I will destroy the disc drive and shred all written data, recorded interviews, and notes.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

I was the primary data collection instrument for this research study. Yin (2014) recognized the researcher as the collector of data from interviews, documentation, archival records, direct and participant observation, and physical artifacts that are sources of data for performing a case study. According to Mikene, Gaizauskaite, and Valaviciene (2013), the researcher functions as the collection instrument gathering data from various sources for inclusion in a qualitative case study. Ryan, Gandha, Culbertson, and Carlson

(2014) recognized the researcher being the facilitator during interviews with participants that will subsequently analyze the data obtained during the interview.

According to Yin, (2014), interview questions are a tool the researcher employs to solicit information from participants to obtain data specific to the study. As the data collection instrument, I used face-to-face interviews with participants asking open-ended questions that the participant received in advance of the interview. Richardson, Davey, and Swint (2013) found using in person interviews allows the researcher to obtain significant information from participants in addition to observing participants physical reactions when answering questions that can influence questioning. Providing interview questions before the actual interview according to Black, Palombaro, and Dole (2013) affords the participant time to think about questions that could provide a deeper and faster response to questions during the interview session.

Chang et al. (2013) found member checking is an essential element in establishing the correctness of participant interviews ensuring the accuracy of the researcher's study results. Koelsch (2013) expressed the importance of member checking as a validation of the researcher's understanding of the participant's experiences along with the potential of providing the researcher subsequent additional information relating to the research question. Member checking ensures trustworthiness through the process of participants confirming the researcher's preliminary results (Behboodi-Moghadam, Salsali, Eftekhari-Ardabili, Vaismoradi, & Ramezanzadeh, 2013). To ensure the validity of this research

study, I provided an opportunity to each participant an opportunity to discuss my interpretation of their interviews and what I observed. I also asked follow-up questions after my observation to clarify interview interpretations in addition to having the opportunity to ask additional questions until I achieved data saturation.

Data saturation occurs when interviews and observation notes do not reveal new themes (Browne, Ventura, Mosley, & Speight, 2014; Liu, 2014; Lloh, 2016). Browne et al. found data saturation took place when participants identified in the purposeful sampling criteria fail to reveal new information about the phenomenon. I asked each participant to respond to the same interview questions, and they had an opportunity to review all questions prior to our initial face-to-face interview (see Appendix C).

### **Data Collection Technique**

To address the research question, What strategies do low-cost airlines ground service managers use to mitigate passenger complaints? I conducted semistructured interviews with ground managers (participants) currently in the employ of a low-cost airline operating in the South Florida marketplace. Contact with the airline and participants occurred after I received approval from the Walden University Institutional Review Board (IRB). After receiving approval from the IRB, I secured permission to approach potential airlines participants (see Appendix A). After obtaining permission from the airline, I contacted potential participants (see Appendix F and Appendix H), and conducted interviews upon receiving an acknowledged affirmative participant informed

consent form (see Appendix G). I followed the interview protocol (see Appendix D), using seven open-ended questions during the initial interview process (see Appendix B). I also observed participants in their work environment completing an observation worksheet focusing only on participants performing their normal duties as suggested by Zhao & Ji, 2014 (see Appendix H). I conducted interviews in a secluded second-floor closed door office environment. I discussed the informed consent form, interview questions, the protocol including the recording of the interviews, and they could withdraw from participating in this research study at any time during or after the interview. I also discussed the interview process including questions I would ask, member checking, and the observation process and time requirements.

The interview process according to Yin (2014) is a critical element producing information needed in acquiring an understanding of the phenomenon. I was the data collection instrument during each face-to-face interview with participants using a semistructured interview technique. According to Jones (2015), an advantage of face-to-face interviews is the ability of the interviewer to extract through interactive questioning with participants their comments that could increase and disclose issues pertinent to the research question. Ochieng et al. (2014) also found that face-to-face interviews allow participants to tell their experiences that could reveal information the researcher did not consider using in the study. Disadvantages of face-to-face interviews include (a) time consuming, (b) expensive, and (c) intrusion on the participant (Doody & Noonan, 2013).

Van De Mierop and Vrolix (2014) found face-to-face interviews could lead the interviewer to ignore topics and thus create bias during the interview.

I used member checking and observation to ensure the accuracy, trustworthiness, and the credibility of each participant's interview. Member checking is a method employed to increase the credibility of the participant's interviews by having the participants receive a transcript of their interview and comment on the accuracy of the researcher's transcription (Houghton et al., 2013). Member checking according to Chan, Tam, Lung, Wong, and Chau (2013) should occur periodically during the interview process to increase the assurance of the accuracy of the data. Member checking according to Behboodi-Moghadam et al. (2013) establishes trustworthiness and creditability of the researcher's interpretation of the participant's interviews. After transcribing each participant's interview, I produced a list of my understanding of each statement made by each participant. I discussed each statement with each participant until I did not find new information.

I also observed each participant to increase reliability and credibility. Observing participants according to Zhao and Ji (2014) affords the researcher the ability to use another method of data collection and further the understanding of a phenomenon. Croxford, Notley, Maskrey, Holland, and Kouimtsidis (2015) considered group observations as a method to achieve triangulation. As cited in Lloh (2016), triangulation of data from several sources including interviews and observation increase the credibility

of the researcher's data. I observed each manager over a period of two weeks during peak arrival and departure times. I recorded written notes on an observation sheet (see Appendix H) and discussed my observations with each participant.

### **Data Organization Technique**

Yin (2014) expressed that databases are necessary to maintain data in an organized manner easily assessable by the researcher and others. According to Grosseohme (2014), there should be an exclusion of all information pertaining to the participant's identity from all of the researcher's data. I identified each participant using an alphabet letter and number to conceal the participant's identity. I used consecutive numbers with the letter designation A. Patichol, Wongsurawat, and Johri (2014) posited that the typical methods employed to organize and perform analysis of qualitative data are descriptions, categorizing concepts, identifying patterns, and generalizations. According to Yin, interviews, documents, numerical data, and all other sources of information should become part of the researcher's database. Properly maintaining an organized database allows for the retrieval of data for review while maintaining the anonymity of participants' interviews and comments.

Yin (2014) considered maintaining a database crucial in preserving all of the collected raw data supporting a researcher's report. I scanned all paper documents into my computer. I transferred all documents and data pertaining to this research study to a standalone hard drive and erased all the documents residing on a computer. I will store

on a password protected stand-alone hard drive all the data, and keep the drive in a bank safety deposit box for 5 years. Khan (2014) suggested the storing of all data on password-protected devices. Secure remote and mobile collection devices are necessary when collecting, analyzing, and storing data (Williams, Ferdinand, & Croft, 2014). At the end of 5 years, I will physically destroy the standalone hard drive.

### **Data Analysis**

Using data triangulation increases a researcher's ability to capture a better understanding of the phenomenon relating to the research question (Carter, Bryant-Lukosius, DiCenso, Blyth, & Neville, 2014). As cited in Cope (2014), triangulation consists of the researcher using several resources to achieve a conclusion. Data triangulation reflects the researcher's use of multiple sources to support the conclusions stated in the researcher's study (Yin, 2014). Methodological triangulation according to Yin is data derived from multiple sources of evidence and merged to achieve a single goal. Methodological triangulation provides different approaches to data collection and new opportunities for the researcher to understand and communicate the data relating to the phenomenon (Cope, 2014). Yin suggested using open-ended questions, documents, observation, and archival records to achieve methodical triangulation in a single case study. In this single case study, I conducted face-to-face interviews using open-ended questions, observation, member checking, and public documents filed directly by the subject airline, and public U.S. government documents relating to airlines.



Data analysis in qualitative research consists of organizing data, converting data to codes that subsequently become themes (Yin, 2014). Analyzing data in qualitative research consists of the researcher organizing and transferring all the raw data into codes or descriptions that subsequently develops into themes reflecting the researchers understanding of the data (Gale, Heath, Cameron, Rashid, & Redwood, 2013). According to Parkinson, Eatough, Holmes, Stapley, and Midgley (2016), data analysis consists of organizing data, producing codes, and then themes the researcher can interpret ultimately leading to the researcher's presentation of findings relating to the research question. Yin (2011; 2014) described five phases to analyze data methodically. Yin's five phases to analyze data are (a) compiling, (b) disassembling (c) reassembling, (d) interpreting, and (e) conclusion. I used Yin's five phase approach to analyze the data I collected from interviews and observations.

I audio recorded and transcribed each participant's interview and my observation field notes; converted to a data file, and imported the results into NVivo® software, version 11. Yin (2014) posited computer software is a useful tool aiding the researcher in coding, storing, and organizing data. Using computer software according to Gale et al. (2013) speeds up the coding process, organizes, stores, and is readily accessible to the researcher. Houghton et al. (2013) found using NVivo® software provides the researcher with the capability of providing an audit trail of the findings along with providing

information when necessary confirming that the findings are not the experiences of a single study participant.

I also used themes that evolved when I used NVivo® software, version 11 to enhance my understanding and ensure I did not miss any themes to achieve the research study goal to obtain an understanding of the strategies low-cost airline managers need to mitigate complaints when confronting passenger. Additionally, reviewing new themes emulating from the database I created using manual analysis and NVivo® software, version 11 lead to additional discussion requiring updating sections of this study. Upon reviewing of the themes, I found through using NVivo® software, a rich description of the phenomenon evolved leading to what strategies managers should employ to mitigate low-cost airline passenger complaints.

### **Reliability and Validity**

Reliability and validity according to Morse (2015) are strategies providing trustworthiness to ensure the quality of the research. Cope (2014) and Morse expressed reliability and validity are strategies in qualitative research that evaluate the quality of the study. Black et al. (2013) argued spending a long time performing triangulation using member checking increases the rigor of qualitative research. I used methodical triangulation using semistructured interviews, member checking, observation, the airline's website, and public documents to achieve rigor and research quality.

## **Reliability**

According to Yin (2014), reliability in qualitative research occurs when another researcher uses the same protocol as the original study's researcher and achieves the same results. Reliability in qualitative research is another form of dependability that ensures the trustworthiness of a study (Gunawan, 2015). Elo et al. (2014) expressed the opinion that dependability refers to whether data will withstand testing and produce the same results if provided at a different time, and under different circumstances, thus ensuring the trustworthiness of the research using member checking provides trustworthiness of the data (Richardson et al., 2013). I used member checking and observation to support the reliability of this study. Member checking uses transcript review, a procedure whereby the researcher furnishes to the participant either the transcribed interview or the researcher's summary for review with an offer to make corrections if necessary (Morse, 2015). Zhao and Ji (2014), posited observation enhances the reliability of the researcher's data by providing a different view of data found in interviews. I conducted member checking using a list of my interpretation of each participant's answers to each question and my observation of each participant. I discussed my understanding with each participant to ensure my interpretation of each participant's answers and actions were their responses and actions I observed.

**Validity**

According to Cope (2014), validity and rigor are processes of evaluating the quality of qualitative research. Qualitative researchers use credibility, confirmability, and transferability as methods to ensure the quality of their research (Masso, McCarthy, & Kitson, 2014). Arreciado and Pera (2015) expressed using credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability enhances data collection and analysis. Morse (2015) expressed the opinion that validity ensures the researcher is capturing and representing the main idea and details of the phenomenon and that it is recognizable by others who have or have not had the experience.

Credibility represents whether the researcher's data are accurate (Cope, 2014). Member checking is a method involving participants providing feedback to the researcher as to the accuracy of the researcher's understanding of the participant's descriptions of the phenomenon, thus providing the researcher with a tool to confirm the accuracy of the data within the findings of the researcher's report (Moon et al., 2013). Triangulation according to Green (2015) is another tool ensuring the researcher's findings are not opinions of the researcher but the results of the data collected. Establishing the credibility of the researcher's findings represents an assessment whether the data support a researcher's understanding of the data (Munn, Porritt, Lockwood, Aromataris, & Pearson, 2014). Triangulation consists of the researcher obtaining data or information from different sources to increase the accuracy of the researcher's findings (Moon et al.,

2013). Yin (2014) posited there are six sources of evidence common to case study research. According to Yin, the six sources most prevalent are (a) interviews, (b) physical artifacts, (c) participant observation, (d) direct observation, (e) documentation, and (f) archival records.

Confirmability according to Rapport, Clement, Doel, and Hutchings (2015) consists of whether the researcher's findings related to the data rather than the researcher's opinions. Cope (2014) expressed confirmability in qualitative research involves the researcher detailing methods leading to the relationship between the data and the researcher's findings. Richardson et al. (2013) found member checking and triangulation are two methods a researcher can use to achieve qualitative research. Maintaining an audit trail of journals, interviews, transcripts, and audiotapes are methods employed to achieve transferability (Lloh, 2016). Consequently, I used member checking, maintaining an audit trail, and triangulation to achieve confirmability of this research study's findings.

Gunawan (2015) expressed that transferability is a type of external validity. External validity, according to Yin (2014), occurs when the researcher's findings can apply to other similar settings, subsequently creating transferability. Black et al. (2013) found researchers should provide full details of participants' experiences to achieve transferability. According to Moon et al. (2013), transferability occurs when the researcher provides an abundance of information for other researchers to determine if the

original researcher's findings can transfer to another similar phenomenon. Lloh (2016) found transferability occurred when researcher's findings can apply to similar organizations. I achieved transferability in this research study through triangulation ensuring I have not found new themes from participants interviewed and observed thereby providing extensive evidence affording readers to conclude the evidence found in my research study can become useful in other studies.

Achieving reliability and validity in qualitative research requires the researcher to achieve data saturation that occurs when the researcher does not find new data or themes from participant interviews (Marshall et al., 2013; Periyakoil, 2013). Black et al. (2013) found using member checking enables the researcher to obtain new themes until there are no new themes thus achieving data saturation. Lloh, (2016) expressed the opinion that using triangulation is another form of achieving reliability thus increasing the meaning of the study's results. I achieved reliability and validity by achieving data saturation using transcript review, observation, member checking, and purposeful sampling.

### **Transition and Summary**

This qualitative single case study included an examination of Porter's (1980) generic competitive strategies guiding low-cost airlines operating strategies. The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies low-cost airline ground service managers used to mitigate passenger complaints. The study encompassed Porter's (1980) generic competitive strategies. Section 2 included (a) the research

purpose statement, (b) selection of participants, (c) my role as the researcher, (d) methods used to select participants (e) the justification, (e) research method, and (f) design that served as the foundation for this research study. I then proceeded to explain in section 2 (a) how I conducted; and adhere to ethical research, (b) the data collection instrument I used to collect data for this research study, (c) the technique, (d) design, and (e) how the research study achieved reliability and validity. I present in Section 3, the application to professional practice and implications for change that include an introduction, (a) presentation of findings, (b) application to professional practice, (c) implications for social change, (d) recommendations for future research, (e) my reflections, and (f) a conclusion.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was the exploration of strategies that ground service managers of a low-cost airline need to mitigate the impact of passenger complaints. Porter's (1980) competitive strategy consisting of differentiation, lower cost, and focus strategies, collectively known as *generic strategies*, is the operating strategy that low-cost airlines employ. This operating strategy causes complaints, which lead to a need to acquire strategies to mitigate passenger complaints. This research study concentrated on three ground service managers employed by a low-cost domestic airline operating in and out of the South Florida region. The data used to achieve data saturation in this research study were obtained using face-to-face semistructured interviews, direct observation, and review of public documents published by the U.S. Department of Transportation and Securities and Exchange Commission and the participating low-cost airline's website. After analysis of all of the data, I uncovered five themes linking strategies needed to mitigate passenger complaints, as shown in Table 1. The themes are (a) complaints, (b) training, (c) customer retention, (d) policies and procedures, and (e) low cost. To ensure data saturation, I used methodological data triangulation involving interviews, observations, and documents. Recommendations arising from in this research study could lead to the development of new strategies or the enhancement of existing



strategies by low-cost airlines to mitigate passenger complaints more successfully, leading to increases in customer retention and profitability.

### **Presentation of the Findings**

The overarching research question that directed this study was the following: What strategies do low-cost airlines' ground service managers use to mitigate passenger complaints? Seven interview questions were posed and answered by three ground service managers with more than 2 years of experience with the participating low-cost airline. Face-to-face interviews occurred in a room with a closed door that was primarily used for trainings and meetings. I analyzed data that I obtained through face-to-face interviews using a line-by-line approach to discover themes. Analyzing data in qualitative research consists of the researcher rearranging raw data into codes that subsequently become themes (Gale et al., 2013; Yin, 2014). The themes in Table 1 represent the five significant themes emerging from my analysis of the data. I defined each theme associated with my research question and included the results in my findings. Parkinson et al. (2016) posited that by organizing data to produce codes and themes, a researcher can derive information that results in findings associated with the research questions.

The conceptual framework for this research study was Porter's (1980) generic strategies. Porter described a competitive strategy consisting of differentiation, lower cost, and focus strategies as *generic strategies*. Each of Porter's generic strategies affects low-cost airline operations, ultimately affecting passengers, their repurchase intentions,

and the airline's long-term sustainability in the marketplace. Participants' responses in this study reinforced Porter's generic strategies as a significant factor in the low-cost airline's operating strategies that led to passenger complaints, ultimately leading to a need for strategies to mitigate passenger complaints.

Table 1

*Themes*

Themes	Sources	Frequency	Frequency %
Complaints	3	113	36.81%
Training	3	91	29.64%
Customer retention	3	44	14.33%
Policies and procedures	3	35	11.40%
Low cost	3	24	7.82%

**Theme 1: Complaints**

The first significant theme derived from participant data in this study was passenger complaints and methods in place that the participating airline's employees can use to mitigate complaints stemming from service failures. Deepa and Jayaraman (2017)

expressed the opinion that airline passengers are losing confidence in the airline industry's ability to provide dependable and consistent service. Participant 2A revealed that the airline receives feedback from customers indicating that they understand service failures such as those related to weather as uncontrollable. Although such service delays are sometimes unavoidable in the airline industry, failing to address service interruptions influences passengers' perception of an airline, thus increasing the likelihood of negative repurchase intentions (Kim & Park, 2016). Table 2 indicates that 36.81% of the participants' responses addressed complaints.

Table 2

*Theme 1: Complaints*

Theme	Sources	Frequency	Frequency %
Complaints	3	113	36.81%

Participant 1A stated that ground service agents attempt to resolve customer issues immediately by providing customers with information, guidance concerning airline procedures, and the help necessary to correct the situation. Participant 1A indicated that although agents handle complaints or service failures professionally, when a customer remains upset or is not satisfied with the agent's response, a leader or supervisor is called. Should the problem persist, according to the participants, a complaint resolution officer (CRO) is requested by the agent or supervisor to mitigate the problem. Participant 1A

also provided information pertaining to the airline's customer care line, or *Complaint Hot Line*. Participant 1A expressed concerns about customers being able to reach the airline's customer care call center, remarking, *It's a hit or miss thing*. All three participants described using the customer care center to mitigate passenger complaints when station employees were unable to resolve them. Additionally, each respondent indicated that employees made every attempt at the station level to rectify customers' problems when possible at the time that they occurred. Participant 2A expressed the sentiments of all three participants by saying, *I try to get across to my agents to treat people the way you expect to be treated because that is number one*.

Participant 2A indicated that ground service agents make every effort to resolve passenger complaints using methods learned during training. Participant 3A noted that empowering ground service agents to make decisions, including reducing or waiving fees, had made a significant impact toward resolving customer complaints. Participant 3A also expressed the importance of communication between agents and government agencies, especially the Transportation Safety Administration (TSA), in efforts to reduce complaints and passenger stress. Participant 1A explained that some passengers find *gray areas* in everything, and it is up to the ground service agent, using training and tools provided, to mitigate complaints in an effort to better serve the customer.

All three participants revealed that a significant number of complaints arise in relation to the provisions of the American Disabilities Act, which requires passengers

with special needs to receive extra assistance. Participant 3A indicated that customers arriving early for a flight are helped to the gate and are assured that they will receive help boarding the aircraft. Participant 3A also stated that agents should check on passengers with special needs every 30 minutes to tend to any needs that might arise while they are waiting to board the aircraft. Participant 2A found that conversation with customers provided an opportunity to take the pulse of passengers, mitigate any complaints, and determine whether established policies and procedures had been followed (e.g., asking special needs passengers if a ground service agent had escorted them and tended to their needs). Participant 2A expressed that being aware of a passenger's experience, whether good or bad, could enable agents to provide better service to the customer in the future as well as stop any current problems from escalating.

Participant 1A expressed the opinion that ground service agents maintained their composure when passengers complained about fees, TSA delays, and flight delays. Participant 3A indicated that being fully staffed during peak departure and arrival times is a major factor in reducing passenger complaints. Participant 3A also stated that it is important to have extra staff from other areas of the operation to assist agents with helping passengers to board planes promptly when necessary to avoid departure delays or passengers missing their flights.

Passengers consider preflight service quality to be a significant factor in their loyalty to an airline (Sajadi, Way, & Bohrer, 2016). Mikolon et al. (2015) and Sajadi et

al. (2016) posited that passenger check-in processes should include providing passengers with information concerning service issues. As indicated by Participant 2A, passengers understand obvious service failures if they are made aware of them. Further, each participant indicated that providing passengers with information regarding service failures provides passengers with an understanding of failures and what agents can do to make their experience better.

Flight delays, customer service problems, and baggage issues were the main topics of complaints that the U.S. Department of Transportation received from airline passengers between 2007 and 2014 (Birim, Anitsal, & Anitsal, 2016). Birim et al. (2016) noted the need to monitor service failures including late arrivals, flight cancellations, overbooking, and baggage problems. Participant 2A expressed the opinion that monetary issues drive customer complaints. Participant 1A revealed that complaints filed with the corporate office are sent to the station receiving the complaint so that staff can investigate the incident. After a thorough investigation, the local station must provide corporate headquarters with all details, remedies, and lessons learned from the occurrence. According to Participant 3A, the corporate office provides monthly complaint statistics to each station as well as positive customer feedback. Participant 1A revealed that complaint statistics are separated by types of complaints, allowing managers to concentrate on correcting controllable complaints with ground service agents using specific incidents as a training tool.

Each participant stated that passenger complaints had been reduced through empowering agents to resolve customer issues using various methods, including waiving and/or reducing certain fees and finding flights at nearby airports serviced by the carrier. According to Participant 3A, agents are monitored by managers to ensure that fees are not waived simply to avoid confrontation. During my direct observation, as I entered the check-in area, two passengers brushed by me. The two passengers spoke to an agent, who immediately proceeded to escort the two passengers to the front of the check-in line. After a few minutes, the two passengers became agitated, and the gate agent called for a supervisor. The supervisor escorted the two passengers to a secluded section of the gate area and tried to remedy the situation. The passengers had arrived late and had missed their flight. The supervisor made every effort to help them, short of issuing a refund. After an hour of confrontation, the supervisor remedied the situation without reducing fees, given that the passengers had clearly arrived late. The two passengers left the ticket area calm and appeared to be in good spirits. Depending on the service failure, customers look for a benefit matching the loss (Cambra, Melero, & Sese, 2015). Cambra et al. (2015) also suggested that customers expect more benefits when a service failure occurs. Thus, companies cannot use a standard complaint strategy to remedy every service failure.

Complaint strategies including tracking of complaints are tools that employees can use to mitigate customer complaints resulting from service failures. Such approaches

directly relate to the research question regarding strategies for mitigating customer complaints. Employees need to be cognizant of each situation through investigation of every passenger complaint, ensuring that they provide a remedy and/or reason for a service failure. Participant 2A expressed,

You want to do whatever you can to make their experience from a negative to positive and help them understand that we are bound by certain rules and guidelines set forth by the airline, the airline industry, Federal Aviation Administration (FAA), and TSA.

Although there are policies and regulations that staff must follow, it is important that staff address customers, show empathy, and make every effort to mitigate their complaints because these actions have a significant bearing on customer retention.

## **Theme 2: Training**

The second theme emerging in this study was the airline's training of ground service agents. Companies that provide employee training increase employees' performance and commitment to their organization, leading to improved customer service (Dhar, 2015; Saray et al., 2017). Requiring training of ground service agents is necessary to ensure that agents understand the airline's and regulatory agencies' policies and procedures to serve customers and adhere to government regulations. Table 3 indicates that 29.64% of the participants' responses were related to training.



Table 3

*Theme 2: Training*

Theme	Source	Frequency	Frequency %
Training	3	91	29.64%

Participant 3A explained that all new employees receive a week and a half to two weeks of initial training. In addition to agents' initial training, the three participants discussed new monthly training modules that agents are required to complete covering customer service, customer complaint resolution, and new company policies on acceptable methods of resolving customer complaints. The training modules are provided by corporate to all stations under the term *University* and are used in conjunction with on-site manager training. Participant 3A also stressed the importance of remaining compliant with TSA and law enforcement officers' security procedures.

Participant 1A explained that agents receive classroom and online training. Participant 2A indicated that agents receive recurring monthly trainings on topics such as when an agent should call the complaint resolution officer (CRO) to mitigate a customer's problem. Monthly recurrent training was also of prime importance to Participants 1A and 3A. Participant 1A expressed the opinion that there should be more *face-to-face* training. Participant 2A stated that there should be more training using various methods such as classroom, online, and individual training by managers. Each

participant indicated that training is essential to the airline's operation and claimed that their agents were well trained. Participant 3A commented, *we found that training and educating the staff is really important*. Participant 1A voiced the opinion that agents should be held accountable for completing monthly training on time, with failure to do so leading to potential disciplinary actions. Participant 3A stated, *agents signing off indicating they have completed and understand the training module should be held accountable for their actions*. Participant 1A conveyed that the corporate office provided training modules (universities) that consisted of *hot* topics or issues found trending throughout the airline.

Karatepe and Vantankhah (2014) and Wang, Luo, and Tai (2017) expressed the opinion that companies need to provide training to their employees to remain competitive in the service industry. Employee education fosters employees' understanding of customers and their demands by providing tools to create impressions that customers remember, thus increasing their loyalty to the company when purchasing services (Saray et al., 2017; Wang et al., 2017). De Brito Neto, Smith, and Pedersen (2014) suggested that airlines should concentrate on feedback from their employees in determining whether training provided through e-learning or face to face is effective. Thus, employee training should include feedback from employees. Additionally, results of employee training should be monitored and compared to supervisors' evaluations, customer complaints, and

complaint resolution to determine the effectiveness of an employee's ability to perform tasks after receiving training.

The three participants, during their respective interviews and follow up interviews (member checking), stressed the importance of employee training and the beneficial effect training has on mitigating customer complaints. The airline's 2016 annual Securities and Exchange Commission (SEC) Form 10K report indicated training and development of their employees using development courses and recurrent training programs contributes to future cost savings and is an integral component of their operating model. The airline's SEC report also represented their work force as being, *The most productive workforce in the U.S. airline industry*. The participant's responses along with the airline's SEC reporting indicate an ongoing commitment to address, and mitigate customer complaints through employee training directly addressing the research question of strategies to mitigate low-cost airline customers complaints.

### **Theme 3: Customer Retention**

The third emergent theme in this study was customer retention. A significant attribute an airline should employ to achieve customer retention is meeting customer expectations through service quality (Climis, 2017; Wu & Cheng, 2014). Customer retention (repurchase) is essential to a low-cost airline in their efforts to achieve sustainability. Table 4 indicates 14.33% of the participant's responses were related to customer retention.

Table 4

*Theme 3: Customer Retention*

Theme	Source	Frequency	Frequency %
Customer retention	3	44	14.33%

All participants in this study addressed customer retention's importance to the airline's success. The participating airline operates primarily from smaller secondary airports flying from point *A* to point *B* and return thus customer retention is important due to the limited number of customers willing to fly direct flights to smaller airports flying on a low-cost carrier. Participant 2A revealed repeat business is a major goal for the airline and its employees. According to Participant 1A, the airline experience many repeat customers each month. Moyes, Kourouklis, and Scott (2016) found customer retention and expressions of positive word of mouth to others occur when companies are reliable and provide a swift response to service failures.

Participant 3A indicated the airline maintains statistics on how often passengers fly including a catalog of positive passenger feedback. Participant 3A expressed the opinion the airline wants customers to travel using their airline whenever prudent. Participant 2A stated, *agents should be concerned more about the customer's experience*. Customers having a favorable image of an airline tend to become repeat customers and provide favorable comments to other potential customers (Hapsari,

Clemes, & Dean, 2017). Responding to controllable service failures can be the deciding factor in customer repurchase intentions.

Fostering a proactive and positive image of the airline, Participant 2A indicated having random conversations with arriving passengers about their experience presents a favorable image to passengers and can be a tool to mitigate any issues arising before, during, or after their flight. Participant 1A asserted passenger name recognition is an indication the ground service agent is respectful and responsive to passengers and their needs. Participant 2A stated, *agents should want to do everything they can to get the customer to become a repeat customer*. Airlines should use various methods of feedback including interviews ensuring employees are responsive to their customer's needs that develop repurchase intentions (Leong, Hew, Lee, & Ooi, 2015; Wu & Cherng, 2014). Leong et al. found airlines need to change strategies resulting from customer responses to increase customer retention. Chung and Rong (2014) and Gupta and Sharma (2015) posited companies need to be aware of passenger complaints and the company's reactions to those complaints.

According to Gupta and Sharma (2015), service failures are inevitable, and the speed of the company's response affects customer satisfaction and ultimately their repurchasing intentions. When passengers complain, it could be an indication of a service failure the airline needs to address. Immediately addressing customer service complaints, employee training, and expanding complaint call centers are strategies to

mitigate complaints in efforts to achieve customer retention (Nikbin et al., 2015; Murali, Pugazhendhi, & Muralidharan, 2016). The participant's responses convey the importance of customer retention by indicating their customer concerns translating into their efforts to mitigate controllable complaints and showing empathy to their customers.

#### **Theme 4: Policies and Procedures**

Policies and procedures emerged as the fourth theme discovered during interviews with the three participants and reinforced during member checking by each participant. Mellat-Parast et al. (2015) and Svensson and Padin (2017) expressed the opinion that strategies are adaptable and equitable to a specific service related complaint need to be in place before an occurrence takes place. Companies having employees follow stringent remedies to satisfy customers equitably tend to leave the customer with a negative impression of the company (Svensson & Padin, 2017). When a service failure occurs, companies can reduce the impact of a service failure by promptly responding to mitigate a complaint, handling each incident individually and understanding each occurrence (Barakat, Ramsey, Lorenz, & Gosling, 2015). Table 5 indicates 11.40% of the participant's responses were related to policy and procedures.

Table 5

#### *Theme 4: Policies and Procedures*

Theme	Source	Frequency	Frequency %
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Policies and procedures	3	35	11.40%
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Low-cost airlines need to ensure policies and procedures are available to employees to mitigate passenger complaints arising from controllable and uncontrollable service failures and misunderstanding of company and government policies leading to negative passenger repurchasing intentions. Policies and procedures (P & P) according to each participant arise from corporate operating policies, government, and law enforcement agencies. Participant 3A revealed operating P & P's emanate from corporate headquarters. Participant 1A indicated the timing of implementing new policies change agent's daily routine and is a concern because it tends to cause problems.

Participant 2A during member checking stated, *we have rules that are set in stone, and unfortunately those rules are set in stone by the FAA*. Participant 1A divulged agents can make decisions based on the timing of an issue by calling a supervisor or in the case of a passenger running late, contact the pilot to delay departure until the passenger can get to the plane. Participant 3A indicated flights would be held for special needs passengers. Participant 1A explained the pilot makes the final decision to hold the aircraft once the cabin doors are closed. Participant 2A represented agents *tell* passengers what they will have to pay for including certain carry-on bags.

During member check, Participant 2A indicated agents have available tools to clarify whether a baggage fee is justified. A tool available to agents according to Participant 2A is using a bag sizer, whereby the customer can visually observe if their bag in question qualifies, thus meeting the carry-on requirement. During my direct observation of the participants in this study during the check-in process, I observed brochures and displays explaining the airline's policies including the explanation of methods available to passengers on their saving money on certain fees. I also observed passengers using the bag sizer to determine if their baggage brought on board the aircraft would incur an additional fee.

Upon my review of the airline's website, a detailed description of all Policies & Procedures (P &P) including the potential for additional fees for specific services and government regulations are readily available by category in a question and answer format. Participant 2A indicated agents are trained to answer and explain to customers the airlines P & P when checking in for their flight. Davidow (2014) asserted customers need to be aware of policies particularly when complaints are involved. Employees need to provide customers with information on how to contact the company if they are not satisfied thereby reducing the customer's negative opinion of the company (Davidow). The airline and participants in this study recognize the importance of following policies and procedures by providing detail information on the airline's



website, posting brochures, training, and face to face communication for the express purpose of reducing passenger complaints.

Participant 3A revealed agents are empowered to waive fees. Participant 2A indicated agents could correct customer problems. Participant 3A also revealed agents are empowered to waive fees. Participant 2A stressed managers provide agents with tips to resolve passenger complaints concerning carry-on baggage fees. Participant 1A revealed agents explain to customers the company's policies and procedures ending with, this is the way the airline always operates. Each participant revealed problems arise when fees are charged to customers on one flight and not on another flight.

Empowering agents to waive fees according to all participants in this study requires the agents to advise passengers waiving fees is a courtesy and there will be a fee imposed for their next flight. During my initial interview, Participant 2A indicated at times a discrepancy in baggage fee policy exists. According to Participant 2A, problems occur when a passenger when the departing agent fails to charge a passenger a baggage fee, however; on the return flight, a baggage fee is imposed creating a customer dispute.

During member checking, Participant 2A revealed smaller stations handling six to eight flights a week use outside contractors hiring their employees. Participant 3A stated, *outside contractors receive the same training as the airline's employees.*

Participant 2A indicated because of contractual agreements the airline's managers cannot approach outside contractors or their employees to discuss service failures. The

airlines 2016 SEC 10K form supports the manages statements regarding outside contractor's service and states, *reliance on others to provide essential services on our behalf gives us less control over costs and the efficiency, timeliness, and quality of services.*

Participant 3A indicated agent evaluations include the percentage of fees waived and are reviewed to ensure they are justified. Participant 3A expressed the opinion that, *agents need to be honest with passengers regarding their flight status and any other occurrence that may arise.* Participant 1A revealed managers make corrections to policies and procedures that, *do not work.* The company should afford their employees the ability to engage and resolve customer complaints when they arise to impact the customer's perception of being satisfied (Ogbeid, Boser, Harrington, & Ottenbacher, 2015). Khan and Khan (2014) and Ogbeid et al. (2015) found authorizing employees to solve a customer complaint expeditiously mitigates customer's complaints leaving the customer with a positive attitude toward the company.

The airline's policies and procedures stress employee involvement to resolve complaints when they occur. According to the airline's 2016 SEC 10K form filing, empowering employees to make decisions is a strategic plan recently implemented to mitigate customer complaints. Ensuring an airline remains competitive in the market place, complaint strategies need to be reviewed, updated, and able to provide a swift resolution when necessary (Khan, and Khan, 2014; Leong et al., 2015). Employees

adhering and administering company policies and procedures are essential elements in the mitigation of passenger complaints being the focal point of this research study.

### **Theme 5: Low Cost**

The final theme emerging in this study was low-cost, specifically, the airline operating as a low-cost airline. The participants during their interviews and member checking answered questions relating to passenger complaints as it relates to the airline's operating as a low-cost carrier thus addressing the research question, What strategies do low-cost airlines ground service managers use to mitigate passenger complaints? The participating airline in this study is a domestic low-cost carrier. All participants are ground service managers participating in daily operations focusing on passenger interaction prior, during, and after their flights occur.

The low-cost carrier, specifically the ultra-low-cost carrier, achieves sustainability through unbundling of fares, charging ancillary fees, and reducing their operating costs (Bachwich & Wittman, 2017). Min and Min (2013) expressed the opinion low-cost airlines service failure is a result of their low-cost operating strategy. New low-cost airline customers emphasize price and convenience as opposed to repeating customers emphasizing service (Lin & Huang, 2015b). Table 6 indicates 7.82% of the participant's responses were related to the airline's low-cost operating strategy.

Table 6

*Theme 5: Low Cost*

Theme	Source	Frequency	Frequency %
Low cost	3	24	7.82%

Participant 2A expressed the opinion low budget airlines offer customers an opportunity to fly from one destination to another at another at a, *very low rate*. Participant 3A exclaimed the airline is designed to charge *cheap rates* for those customers wanting to fly having limited financial resources. Participant 3A also indicated the airline operates using a unique business model using different procedures than legacy or traditional carriers. Participant 2A explained low budget airlines charge less for base fares and survives by charging additional fees for various add-on services. Low-cost airline ticket prices are an important element in their pricing model and customer satisfaction (Acar & Karabulak, 2015; Bachwich & Witman, 2017; Koklic, Kinney, & Vegelj, 2016). The low-cost airlines pricing structure is also a significant force in a customer's choice of which airline to fly (Duval, 2013; Koklic et al., 2016).

According to participant 2A, although customers *tend to say you are a low budget airline, they keep flying with us*. Participant 2A claims passengers fly with our airline because they are aware they will be receiving a lower fare than if they flew with an airline operating from a major hub regardless of being a legacy or low-cost airline.

Participant 3A disclosed passengers enjoy the airlines pricing structure and they are aware of how the airline operates. Participant 3A revealed customers enjoy having the ability to customize their flight experience using add-ons. Participant 2A indicated selecting seats, checking bags, certain carry-on baggage equates to money. Participant 2A exclaimed, *the airline does not run for free, so we are giving away tickets at a really reduced rate compared to other carriers*. Participant 1A expressed the opinion that the airline receives few complaints from customers concerning charging add-on fees. Participant 3A stated customers could view the airline's website where they will find all fees and methods of payment listed. Low-cost airline customers consider price being an important element in their choosing which airline they fly (Akamavi et al., 2015; Deepa & Jayaraman, 2017).

An airline operating using a low-cost model provides amenities charging additional fees. Each participant revealed there are elements of employing a low-cost strategy that can create complaints thus addressing the research question in this study, What strategies do low-cost airlines ground service managers use to mitigate passenger complaints? Understanding how their company operates is a tool an employee could use when customer complaints occur resulting from charging for add-on fees thus mitigating the effect of the complaint.

### **Applications to Professional Practice**

The purpose of this research study was to explore the question, What strategies do low-cost airlines ground service managers use to mitigate passenger complaints? The study encompasses three low-cost airline ground service managers involved in the day to day operations of a domestic low-cost airline flying from point A to point B. Findings from this study may help some low-cost airline ground service managers lacking strategies to mitigate passenger complaints. The unique environment the airline industry operates within causes varied types of service issues leading to customer complaints (Kim & Park, 2016; Ogbeid et al., 2015; Park & Park, 2016). The ability of low-cost airline's ground service managers to be cognizant of strategies to mitigate customer complaints may increase customer retention thus increasing the profitability and sustainability of the airline. Porter's (1980) generic strategies are the foundation of this research study. Porter's generic strategies consist of differentiation, lower cost, and focus strategies, the underlying operating model of low-cost airlines and are contributing factors in creating customer complaints.

The findings from this research study present areas low-cost airlines should focus on in constructing new and reinforcing current strategies to mitigate passenger complaints. Customer satisfaction including service and complaint resolution reinforces customer association with an airline building loyalty and trust leading to customer retention (Hussain, 2016; Lin, 2015;). Overcoming passenger complaints resulting from

fees, flight delays, lost or delayed baggage, government regulations including TSA clearance delays, and outside influences such as weather asserts the need for managers of low-cost airlines to formulate strategies to reduce the effect of passenger complaints.

Low-cost airlines should focus on employee training enhancing their skills and their understanding of airline policies and procedures. Employees need to be empowered and trained to make decisions based on different occurrences to reduce the impact of a customer complaint (Beatty et al., 2016). The airline should employ *scenario* training based on common and uncommon complaints obtained from the airline's complaint statistics to increase their understanding and strategies of handling customer complaints.

Using common complaint strategies may not be viable in every customer complaint situation. Customers equate reimbursements from complaints arising from service failures based on the type of failure and their association with the company (Fierro, Melero, & Sese, 2015). Thus, employees need to be prepared to react to as many forms of complaints as possible. Employee training focusing on complaint mitigation should ensure they have tools available to meet customers needs and expectations. Essential elements employed in employee training is mitigating customer complaints, their knowledge of the airline's and government's policies and procedures, resources available to stem complaints, and communication with passengers and other employees to resolve customer complaints.

### **Implications for Social Change**

Low-cost airlines provide low fares to tourist destinations increasing the number of visitors adding economic benefits to the area (Hsu, Yen, Chang, & Woon, 2016). Low-cost airlines servicing small locations provide employment opportunities and affordable travel to individuals that may not be able to afford legacy or traditional airlines because of their pricing structure. Martin and Sintes (2016) found passengers flying to tourist destinations using low cost airlines reap the financial benefits of lower fares allowing tourists additional resources to spend more at their destination. An added benefit of low-cost airlines entering a market place is increasing economic benefits for the surrounding areas (Costa & Almeida, 2015). The results of this study could affect social change through the influx of additional tourists created by increased affordable travel to the area. The implication of social change includes creating jobs in industries both related and unrelated to the airline industry through increased travel. Another important implication of social change is the potential for new travelers emanating from different regions of a country, or different countries who in the past were unable to travel because of financial limitations would now be able to interact and exchange ideas fostering a better understanding of different cultures.

### **Recommendations for Action**

The recommendations for action to both the participating airline and their managers who were participants and managers not involved in this study is to ensure



employee training becomes structured that will include formal training on a consistent basis for all employees on the front line representing the airline. The research question encompasses strategies to mitigate passenger complaints. The development of a method to maintain uniform records of each employee is suggested to monitor results. The results of all employee training, including station managers training, should be reported to corporate and shared with all managers to determine areas requiring additional attention. Combining training reports and complaint statistics will enable training to center on specific areas in efforts to reduce customer complaints. The airline should also institute a mandatory formal training policy requiring employees scoring low grades in training sessions or receiving repeated passenger complaints to retake training modules supervised by a corporate trainer and manager. After retraining, managers should observe the employee interacting with passengers especially when complaints arise to ensure the employee is following lessons learned during retraining.

Another recommendation is the airline should include in contracts with outside contractors using their own employee's requirements that they must complete the same training as the airline's employees and follow the same policies and procedures as stations operated by airline employees. Although there is a financial need for using outside contractors, the airline should understand the outside contractor represents the airline in the eyes of the customer. The passenger at the ticket counter, embarking or debarking assumes ground service agents work for the airline. Outside contractors

mitigating customer complaints must follow all of the airline's policies and procedure. Many complaints arise when passengers are charged incorrectly at a contractor station and subsequently on the return flight is charged correctly by an agent employed by the airline following airline policies and procedures. Consistency in training and complaint mitigation at all levels can reduce many controllable customer complaints. To ensure policies and procedures are being followed I suggest airlines use secret shoppers at both airline and contractor stations to test employees in real life complaint situations. I will share the results of this study with the participating airline and the managers participating in this study. I also intend to consult with low-cost airlines and disseminate the findings using airline literature publications, scholarly publications, and airline manager's conferences.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The findings from this research study justify the need to expand the study of strategies low-cost airlines can use to mitigate complaints. My assumptions of complaints relating to passenger retention and their complaints relate to flying a low-cost airline are inconclusive. I suggest a future study to concentrate on passenger retention and complaints directly linked to flying a low-cost carrier. This research study included a single low-cost airline operating in Florida. Using one low-cost airline in a limited geographic area may not encompass all customer complaints which may be due to this airline's present customer complaint strategies and other operating strategies. Future

research should compare complaint mitigation strategies between other low-cost carriers and traditional airlines using data from multiple locations.

One limitation of this study was my not being able to interview participants at the embarkation gate where many complaints arise concerning baggage charges and overbooking. Another limitation was one participant manager after first agreeing to an interview decided to withdraw from participating in the study. Using one location limits the availability of participants. The significant limitation of this study was the lack of interviews with passengers to understand better their complaints and reasons triggering their complaints. Observing one airline at a specific location with limited available managerial resources could affect the results of this research study. Although I could triangulate my data using semistructured interviews, observation, and public documents, the results are only indicative of one low-cost airline operating from one location. Future researchers should encompass multiple locations and airlines in their research.

### **Reflections**

As I reflect on my starting the DBA program, I considered what I would be able to contribute to the university and my classmates, and in turn, what I could learn from their experiences and the university's faculty. I work in the hospitality industry, and I plan to share my many experiences in the business world with my peers from potentially all over the world as they would share theirs with me. I found feedback and sharing of

their experiences aided me in reaching my goal of completing my class work and this research study.

I learned discussions are an integral part of the learning process. Therefore, the interaction between other learners and me afforded each of us the opportunity to discuss ideas that led to my doctoral study topic. Interacting with learners from around the world and my being able to share their experiences opened new and different ways in which I viewed various topics in the program and will take into the business and academic world. I also found being part of a team while I formulated and wrote my research study helped me grow and develop lasting professional relationships that will extend after graduation.

Attaining my DBA is a goal I set for myself many years ago. I, as well as others, have endured long hours, missed family and social events, illness, and the loss of loved ones. We also have increased our knowledge of research and in our area of specialization. Every area of the program allowed me to grow into becoming a better leader, educator, and person. Attending the residencies, having seminars, staff, and instructors were tools available to me as I moved toward achieving my goal, attaining my DBA. There are many challenges faced during my pursuit of the DBA including personal and professional, each one, good and some bad but each is contributing factors in building my character and professional acumen. The result, the findings of this research study could be used to improve low-cost airline service through mitigating passenger complaints that in turn will increase tourism which is a key industry in Florida.

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore the strategies low-cost airlines use to mitigate passenger complaints. The study encompassed a single domestic low-cost airline operating in and out of Florida. Managers employed by the participating airline answered seven questions in a semistructured interview and were observed on various occasions performing their duties and interacting with passengers at an airport located in Florida. The participating managers are experienced and worked for several years at the airline. The interaction during the semistructured interviews addressed issues of passenger complaint mitigation and current strategies they are using to reduce passenger complaints. This research study provides the low-cost airlines and their manager's insight into certain areas that should be reviewed and updated in efforts to mitigate passenger complaints.

The findings in this research study present strategies airlines could adopt, including more formalized training and monitoring of the results from training programs. The airline needs to enhance training of outside contractors by establishing recurrent training and adding specific policies, procedures, and monitoring guidelines when using outside contractors that represent and service their customers. The result of the findings could mitigate passenger complaints uniformly throughout an airline's numerous locations resulting in greater customer repurchase intentions and the airline's sustainability in the marketplace.

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## Appendix A: Letter of Invitation

Date

[Name of person]

[Title of person]

[Address of company]

RE: Permission to Conduct Research Study

Dear

I am writing to request permission to conduct a research study with your employees. I am currently enrolled and pursuing the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) degree at Walden University, and I am in the research process of writing my doctoral study. My study is entitled, *Strategies for Mitigating Low-Cost Airlines' Passenger Complaints*. I hope you will allow me to recruit six (6) ground service managers from your airline to participate in a semi-structured interview (please see attached interview questions).

Interested employees, who volunteer to participate, will receive a consent form to sign (see attached) and returned to me before commencing of the interview process.

The interview process should take no longer than 30-45 minutes. The results of the interviews will be pooled for the study allowing individual results to remain strictly confidential. I will also observe your employee at their work station. My observation will not interfere with their job performance nor will I interact with your employee during their work shift. All interaction will occur in privacy. Additionally, should this study be

published, only pooled results will be documented in the published study. Either your organization or the individual participants will incur no costs. If you voluntarily agree to participate in my study, the following may occur:

- I will contact you to schedule a face-to-face interview.
- A face-to-face interview will last no longer than 1 hour, usually 30 - 45 minutes.
- All interviews and observations will take place in a convenient, clean, and safe environment of your choice that is not in the vicinity or view of other employees or managers.
- All interviews and observations will occur at a convenient time of your choice.
- All interviews will be audio recorded and transcribed.
- Minimal risks of fatigue or discomfort may occur from participating in this study.
- Your personal information will remain confidential and not identifiable in the study.
- There are no incentives provided to you for participating in the study.

Your agreement and approval to participate in this study will be greatly appreciated. I will contact you with a telephone call next week and would be happy to answer any questions or concerns that you may have at that time. You may contact me at my email address: [REDACTED] or my chair, Dr. Dorothy Hanson that can be reached at [REDACTED] or through email: [REDACTED]. You can also contact Walden's Institutional Review Board by email at [REDACTED].

If you agree, please email me at [REDACTED] or call me at [REDACTED]. Thank you in advance for your consideration to participate in helping me complete my study allowing me to achieve my goal of completing the DBA requirements.

Respectfully,

Michael Jay Price

## Appendix B: Generic Strategies



The figure depicts Porter's generic strategies (Starlit Citadel website, 2012).

Porter (1980a) indicated generic strategies show the relationship between three strategies, cost leadership, differentiation, and focus. Porter (1980b) posited generic strategies was the cornerstone of a company's strategy in their efforts to achieve a competitive advantage. Porter (1980a, 1980b) identifies the essential approaches to achieve a competitive advantage. Rizea (2015) in a study about low-cost airline Ryanair found

joining focus strategy with cost leadership, and differentiation strategies being effective strategies low-cost airlines employed in their operations.

#### Appendix C: Interview Questions

1. What strategies have you found that succeeded in mitigating customer complaints?
2. How did you implement complaint mitigation strategies?
3. What difficulties did you encounter implementing complaint mitigation strategies?
4. How did you approach handling difficulties in the implementation of complaint mitigation strategies?
5. How have you measured the success of complaint mitigation strategies?
6. What benefits has the airline derived from implementing complaint mitigation strategies?
7. What would you like to share that we have not covered in our discussion?

#### Appendix D: Interview Protocol

- I wrote the date, and the time I started time on my notes at the beginning of each interview session.
- I began the face-to-face interview by introducing myself to each participant at a private location convenient for the participant(s).
- I thanked and advised each participant I was cognizant of their time and that I appreciated their participation in my research.
- I presented the consent form, went over the contents of the form, answered all questions and concerns of each participant including their ability to end the interview at any time.
- I gave each participant a copy of the consent form to sign.
- I informed each participant the recording of the interview began.
- I turned on the recording device and introduced each participant with the assigned identification code using a number and letter.
- I began the interview with question # 1; following through to the final question # 7.
- I asked follow-up probing additional questions as warranted.
- I confirmed all recorded responses are to each participant's satisfaction.
- I completed the interview and discussed member-checking with each participant.



- I informed each participant that upon request, I would provide a synopsis of my study including my findings and or a completed copy of my study once it is approved.
- I thanked each participant for participating in my study.
- I provided my contact numbers and email address for follow up questions and any concerns from each participant might have after the interview.
- I informed each participant I used a coded number and letter and the interview had ended, I turned off the recording device.

## Appendix E: Participant Email Invitation

Dear [Participant Name],

It was a pleasure speaking with you on the phone. As we discussed in our telephone conversation, my name is Michael Jay Price, and I am currently pursuing my Doctor of Business Administration degree at Walden University. I am conducting research on strategies low-cost airlines employ to mitigate passenger complaints. I am attaching a consent form explaining the details of my study and your participation in this research. Please read the attached consent form carefully before you agree to the terms. Please feel free to contact me if you have any questions. My telephone number is [REDACTED] or you can email me. Once you have read the attached consent form and agree, please reply to this email by typing the words *I Consent* if you still wish to participate in this study.

Thank you.

Regards,

Michael Jay Price

## Appendix F: Participant Introductory Letter

Date

Dear [Participant Name],

My name is Michael Jay Price; I am a candidate at Walden University pursuing the Doctor of Business Administration degree. Part of the graduation requirements consists of my conducting a study. The study I will be conducting is strategies low-cost airlines employ to mitigate passenger complaints. As an employee employed by a low-cost airline having more than 1-year full time or 2-years part time service with experience mitigating passenger complaints, you are an ideal candidate to provide me with valuable information from your personal experiences.

If you voluntarily agree to this study, you can expect:

- Participate in a face-to-face interview with the researcher.
- Commit to a maximum, 60 minutes for the initial interview.
- Allow the researcher to observe you during normal business hours.
- Answer questions consisting of the following sample questions:
  - What strategies have you found that succeeded in mitigating customer complaints?

- How did you implement complaint mitigation strategies?
- What difficulties did you encounter implementing complaint mitigation strategies?

A copy of the research questions will be provided to you before the start of the interview for your reference.

Please be aware that participating in this study is voluntary and you may stop the interview or participation in the study at any time. Declining to participate or discontinuing participation in the study will not produce a negative impact. Your participation in this study as an experienced manager in mitigating passenger complaints is appreciated. If you would like to participate in this study, please email me at [REDACTED] or phone [REDACTED]

Thank you. I look forward to your cooperation in this study.

Sincerely,

Michael Jay Price

### Appendix G: Letter of Cooperation

Date:

Dear Michael Jay Price

Based on my review of your research proposal, I grant permission for you to conduct the study entitled, *Strategies for Mitigating Low-Cost Airlines' Passenger Complaints*. I understand that the purpose of this study is to explore strategies low-cost airlines ground service managers use to mitigate passenger complaints. As part of this study, I authorize you to interview and observe ground service managers who direct staff and interact with passengers when service issues arise at airports located in South Florida market. I also understand ground service managers participating in this study will be asked to:

- Participate in a 30 – 45 minute off-site face to face interview to share their experiences with passengers regarding customer service issues and strategies employed to counteract customer service dissatisfaction.
- Allow a recording of the interview.
- Allow transcription of the interview along with the opportunity to review the transcription to ensure accuracy.

- Allow the researcher to examine written company policies that are in place to train employees in their response to different types of service failures.
- Allow the researcher to observe employees participating in the study.

I also understand I am granting permission on behalf of my company to:

- Allow the researcher to take notes when examining written company policies.
- Allow managers to provide any additional company policy documents and information and explain how they train employees to respond to different service failures.
- Identify managers having at least 1 year full time or 2 years of part time experience in training employees located in the South Florida market. Each manager participating in the interview will be provided with the researcher's introduction letter and will be instructed to contact the researcher if they are willing to participate in this study.

We reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

I confirm that I am authorized to approve research in this setting and that this plan complies with the organization's policies.

I understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and will not be available to anyone outside of the researcher's supervising faculty/staff without permission from the Walden University IRB.

Sincerely,

Printed Name of Authorized Corporate Representative:

[REDACTED]

Corporate Representative Signature:

[REDACTED]

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Walden University policy on electronic signatures:

An electronic signature is just as valid as a written signature as long as both parties have agreed to conduct the transaction electronically. Electronic signatures are regulated by the Uniform Electronic Transactions Act. Electronic signatures are only valid when the signer is either (a) the sender of the email, or (b) copied on the email containing the signed document. Legally an "electronic signature" can be the person's typed name, their email address, or any other identifying marker. Walden University staff verify any electronic signatures that do not originate from a password-protected source (i.e., an email address officially on file with Walden).

## Appendix H: Observation Data Sheet

Observer: Michael Jay Price

Participant (Use participant identify number, i.e., 1A):

Date and Time:

Description of passenger interacting with participant:

Description of immediate surroundings of interaction between passenger and participant:

Activity:

1. Participant and passenger appearance:
2. Participant and passenger verbal behavior and interactions:
3. Participant and passenger physical behavior and gestures prior to interaction with participant:
4. Participant and passenger physical behavior and gestures during their interaction:
5. Participant and passenger behavior and gestures after interaction:
6. Participant and passenger personal space during their interaction:
7. Participant and passenger time spent during their interaction:
8. Passengers that stand out during participant and passenger interaction:
9. Amount of time spent between participant and passenger.

Participant interactions with other bystanders during passenger interaction: