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MARKETING

Internal marketing and customer-contact employees' attitudinal outcomes

Marketing interno y las actitudes de los empleados de contacto con los clientes

Arleen Hernández-Díaz and Theany Calderon-Abreu
College of Business Administration, University of Puerto Rico, San Juan, Puerto Rico, and
Maria Amador-Dumois and Mario Córdova-Claudio
College of Business Administration, University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez, Puerto Rico

Abstract

Purpose – Higher education institutions, particularly in the case of public universities, face the challenge of creating more value in an environment of increasing requirements and limitations. The purpose of this paper is to explore the relation of internal marketing (IM) with employees' attitudinal outcomes, which aim to stimulate and retain motivated and customer-conscious contact employees.
Design/methodology/approach – Survey data of 94 customer-contact employees in a public higher education institution were analysed using partial least squares path modelling to explore and predict key target constructs.
Findings – The results demonstrate the relationship between customer-contact employees' service empathy (SE), institutional IM initiatives and employees' attitudinal outcomes in the public sector, specifically higher education institutions.
Research limitations/implications – The current study relies on self-reported data and a small sample of customer-contact employees working only on enrolment-related areas. Further studies should be designed for theory confirmation and generalizability of the results.
Practical implications – Top managers in public higher education institutions must encourage organizational identification through IM initiatives, such as well-established internal communication procedures. Academic management should continuously train and retain customer-contact employees that have developed SE and a sense of belonging to the organization. SE must be incorporated in the job descriptions and training of customer-contact employees.
Originality/value – The study contributes to the limited literature on the use of IM and SE in the public sector, specifically higher education institutions.

Keywords Internal marketing, Service empathy, Public sector marketing, Higher education, Human resource management, Customer-contact employees, Partial least squares

Paper type Research paper

Resumen

Propósito – Las instituciones de educación superior, en particular en el caso de las universidades públicas, se enfrentan al reto de crear más valor en un entorno de necesidades y limitaciones en aumento. El propósito de este estudio es explorar la relación entre el marketing interno y las resultantes actitudes laborales de los empleados. El objetivo del marketing interno es estimular y retener empleados de contacto que estén motivados y sean conscientes de la importancia de los clientes.

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Diseño/metodología/enfoque – Se analizaron datos de 94 empleados de contacto de una institución pública de educación superior utilizando modelos de regresión de cuadrados mínimos parciales para explorar y predecir constructos claves.
Resultados – Los resultados demuestran la relación entre los siguientes constructos: niveles de empatía de los empleados de contacto, iniciativas institucionales de marketing interno, y las resultantes actitudes de los empleados del sector público, en particular organizaciones en el sector de la educación superior.
Limitaciones/implicaciones de la investigación – El presente estudio se basa en los datos auto informados de una pequeña muestra de empleados de contacto que trabajan sólo en áreas relacionadas con matrícula. Nuevos estudios deberían ser diseñados para la confirmación de la teoría y la generalización de los resultados.
Implicaciones prácticas – Los altos directivos de las instituciones públicas de educación superior deben fomentar la identificación con la organización a través de iniciativas de marketing interno, tales como procedimientos establecidos de comunicación interna. Los directivos académicos deben continuamente adiestrar y retener a los empleados de contacto que han desarrollado la capacidad de proveer servicios de manera empática y que tienen sentido de pertenencia a la organización. Proveer servicio de manera empática debe ser incorporado en las descripciones de empleo y formación de los empleados de contacto.
Originalidad/valor – El estudio contribuye a la literatura limitada sobre el uso de marketing interno y empatía en los servicios en el sector público, específicamente en las instituciones de educación superior.

Palabras clave Marketing interno, empatía en el servicio, marketing en el sector público, educación superior, gestión de recursos humanos, empleados de contacto, regresión de cuadrados parciales mínimos

Tipo de documento Trabajo de investigación

Introduction

Higher education services are critical to social, economic and infrastructure development. The effectiveness, efficiency and quality of these services have an impact, not just on students, but society in general. As with other public sector organizations, public higher education institutions face increasing pressure to create value for citizens through the development of new services, processes, governance, engagements, goals and strategies (Malik *et al.*, 2010; Mishra, 2010; Proctor, 2010; Silva-Carlos and Gouveia-Rodrigues, 2012; Zampetakis and Moustakis, 2007). Higher education institutions, particularly in the case of public universities, face the challenge of creating more value with stringent limitations, such as compliance regulations and budget cuts (Black, 2001).

The main objective of this study is to explore whether internal marketing (IM) initiatives and employee's service empathy (SE) affect customer-contact employees' attitudinal outcomes in a public higher education institution. For the purpose of this study, IM refers to the combination of human resource (HR) management strategies implemented to integrate employees and overcome their resistance to organizational change (González-Mieres *et al.*, 2012; Iliopoulu and Priporas, 2011; Kaur and Sharma, 2015; Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000). In this context, HR refers to treating employees as internal customers who contribute to the attainment of organizational goals (Coric and Vokic, 2009; Ewing and Caruana, 1999; Rosca, 2015; De Bruin-Reynolds *et al.*, 2015). Therefore, in this framework, IM and HR are viewed as interdependent functions and disciplines anchored in the psychological and organizational behaviour theories (Abzari and Ghujali, 2011; Altarifi, 2014; Coric and Vokic, 2009; Ewing and Caruana, 1999; Yang, 2010).

Although the small sample makes generalizability of the results difficult, the study contributes to limited research on IM in higher education (Altarifi, 2014; Dias and da Silva, 2013; Malik *et al.*, 2010; Oliveira, 2011; Silva-Carlos and Gouveia-Rodrigues, 2012). The setting of this study was a project undertaken to implement a student data and enrolment management computer system, thus making the transition from paper-and-pencil to a virtual environment. The project meant a vast transformation process that required drastic job changes for over 300 customer-contact employees who serve over 15,000 students. Several IM strategies were suggested and adopted by the institution, including diverse communications tactics (personal letters, memos, e-mails, website, etc.), treating employees as experts describing and defining procedures, and different training activities (demonstrations, workshops and other specialized training activities).

Despite the particular context of higher education and the nature of their service, many institutions that want to remain competitive must adapt their services and delivery options to market needs (Altarifi, 2014; Malik *et al.*, 2010; Silva-Carlos and Gouveia-Rodrigues, 2012). As described by Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006), marketers and advertisers could not promote services if customer-contact employees were not responsive to students' needs and expectations. A way of increasing the probability of the success of new services and processes is to have satisfied and committed employees (Malhotra and Mukherjee, 2004). IM centres on improving HRs job behavioural and attitudinal outcomes through the use of marketing practices to motivate and empower employees (George and Grönroos, 1989). Although private firms are the main users of IM, its principles can and are applied to nonprofit and public sector organizations as well (Ewing and Caruana, 1999; Ewing and Caruana, 2000), including higher education (Altarifi, 2014; Dias and da Silva, 2013; Oliveira, 2011; Silva-Carlos and Gouveia-Rodrigues, 2012; Tareef and Balas, 2012).

A review of the IM literature on public higher education shows a serious concern for the impact of increasing competition, as well as the demand for quality in education (Altarifi, 2014; Arnett *et al.*, 2003; Donaldson and Runciman, 1995; Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka, 2006; Schüller and Chalupsky, 2011; Silva-Carlos and Gouveia-Rodrigues, 2012; Siu and Wilson, 1998; Štimac and Šimić, 2012; Tareef and Balas, 2012). Studies in this area focus on communication, relationship marketing, service quality and the lecturing staff's job outcomes (Siu and Wilson, 1998), although none focus on the attitudes of non-lecturing staff. In this study, we focus on (non-lecturing) customer-contact employees' attitudinal outcomes.

In public higher education institutions, students have multiple stakeholder roles. They are customers expected to cooperate actively in the delivery of the educational process, partners in research, part- or full-time employees and members of the institution's governing bodies. As students, they expect a fair exchange between tuition, time and effort, and the value obtained from access (on or off site) to courses, qualified faculty, library materials, information technology, networks and other university support services (Black, 2001). Therefore, the university's customer-contact employees should provide the students the best-perceived value possible.

In higher education institutions, student data management is a vital component of the services offered. If the enrolment process were inefficient, students would have difficulty planning and obtaining courses, which may increase costs and time to degree completion, and limit career opportunities. The study contributes to the limited literature on the use of IM and SE in the public sector, particularly, higher education institutions in Latin America. However, the few studies that have been carried out on Latin America's higher education institutions mostly focus on the programme design and the use of qualitative design approaches (Dias and da Silva, 2013; Oliveira, 2011; Silva Ramones and Batista, 2013). The theoretical framework used in this study is based on the assumption that the use of IM initiatives and the service attitude of employees improve customer-contact employees' attitudinal outcomes.

According to Hemsley-Brown and Oplatka (2006), studies of higher education marketing are in a pioneer stage so research in this area is limited. Moreover, the authors emphasize the need for further research in the area of IM in universities. Despite our efforts in this direction, the current study has limitations, the first of which consists in its reliance on self-reported data and the use of a small sample of customer-contact employees working on enrolment-related areas. Thus the research excluded other customer-contact employees, as well as other direct stakeholders, such as professors and students. The second limitation is that, as partial least squares (PLS) is used to explore and predict key target constructs; further studies should be designed for theory confirmation. A bigger sample would allow for a model with more exogenous variables that better explain the variance of latent endogenous variables. Other statistical tests, such as covariance-based structural equation modelling, might also be used. Finally, generalizability of the results is very difficult.

Literature review

IM

The initial IM proponents were Berry *et al.* (1976). Since then, the IM concept has continually evolved. Rafiq and Ahmed (2000) divided IM evolution into three phases: employee motivation and satisfaction, customer-oriented and sales-minded employees and strategy implementation and change management tools. This study uses their IM definition:

> […] a planned effort using a marketing-like approach to overcome organizational resistance to change and to align, motivate and inter-functionally co-ordinate and integrate employees towards the effective implementation of corporate and functional strategies in order to deliver customer satisfaction through a process of creating motivated and customer oriented employees (Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000, p. 454).

According to Ahmed and Rafiq (2003), scenarios with highly demanding customers require having and retaining high quality, motivated staff. This becomes critical when employees perceive their jobs as a source of self-development, personal growth or self-fulfilment (Pantouvakis, 2012; Walker, 2005). Under these assumptions, jobs must be shaped, the physical environment must be improved, and organizational/procedural structures must be altered to fit the employees' needs in order to increase job satisfaction (JS) and employee commitment, get more committed especially in customer-contact employees (Donavan *et al.*, 2004).

IM implementation can occur at strategic and technical levels (Grönroos, 1981; Lozano-Ramírez, 2016). The former focusses on factors that encourage customer awareness, while the latter includes efforts made in terms of selling initiatives to the personnel. Our study emphasizes IM implementation at the technical level, which includes top management support practices such as internal communication procedures and training programs. The combination of different management support factors is part of the IM initiatives, which Ahmed *et al.* (2003) defined as "the controllable elements inside the organization that can be used to influence and motivate employees" (p. 1222). IM effectiveness has been linked to several job attitudinal outcomes, including JS (Tansuhaj *et al.*, 1991), organizational identification (OI) (Wieseke *et al.*, 2009) and communication techniques (Silva Ramones and Batista, 2013).

OI

Mael and Ashforth (1992) define OI as the "perceived oneness with an organization and experience of the organization's successes and failures as one's own" (p. 103). It refers to the perception of belonging to an organization. OI is generally associated with behaviour devoted to collective rather than personal interests. To explain this phenomenon, researchers use the social identity theory (Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Wieseke *et al.*, 2009) which states that individuals perceive themselves "as an actual or symbolic member of a group […] sharing a common destiny and experiencing its successes and failures" (Mael and Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). Members that identify with the organization regularly engage in cooperative behaviour that benefits the organization (Dukerich *et al.*, 2002) since they see themselves as psychologically associated with the future of the group. If an individual leaves, the group would experience an emotional loss (Tajfel and Turner, 1985). Consequently, for Wieseke *et al.* (2009) OI "should be the ultimate goal of IM" (p. 123). However, there is little empirical research linking IM and OI (Kale and De, 2013).

Previous literature focussed on the impact transfer from the managers' OI to the employees' OI. According to Wieseke *et al.* (2009), the OI transfer process starts at the highest managerial level. The leader's organizational identity has a direct influence on the followers' organizational identity resulting in a cascading effect throughout the organization. Managerial employees are instrumental in the achievement of OI, since they synthesize information, frame the interpretation of said information and align corporate strategies to specific implementation contexts (Wieseke *et al.*, 2009). While the managers' OI is important, this study proposes that IM initiatives, such as top management support, business processes and cross-functional coordination, positively affect OI. Management uses IM initiatives as a way to educate and empower employees. The latter will better understand the job objectives, which will increase their job meaningfulness and their sense of belonging. Hence, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H1. IM positively influences OI.

A review of the management and marketing literature shows that OI increases the employee's drive to improve its productivity and customer orientation (CO) behaviour (Anaza and Rutherford, 2012; Mael and Ashforth, 1992; Wieseke *et al.*, 2007). A study conducted by Homburg *et al.* (2009) also found that employee-firm identification is a predictor of employee-CO.

CO

CO is defined as "an employee's tendency or predisposition to meet customer needs in and on the job context" (Brown *et al.*, 2002, p. 111). This construct includes basic customer service behaviours, such as willingness to assist customers, helping customers to assess their needs, offering services that will satisfy those needs and avoiding manipulative tactics (Brown *et al.*, 2002; Dimitriades, 2007; Donavan *et al.*, 2004; Stock and Hoyer, 2005). Stock and Hoyer (2005) distinguish between customer-oriented attitude and customer-oriented behaviours. In this study, we use Stock and Hoyer's (2005) definition of customer-oriented attitude as "the amount of a salesperson's affect for or against customers" (p. 538).

Regardless of definition or measure, CO positively influences important job attitudinal outcomes' variables like organizational commitment (OC) and JS (Brown *et al.*, 2002; Donavan *et al.*, 2004; Zablah *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, research has also shown that satisfied and committed employees are likely to perform helping behaviours, which are associated with customer-oriented personalities (Chen, 2007; Donavan *et al.*, 2004; Farrell and Oczkowski, 2009; Tanhai *et al.*, 2013). As a result, in the search for improving employees' CO, managers in the service sector will be more likely to hire employees with a customer-oriented personality (Chen, 2007; Donavan *et al.*, 2004; Farrell and Oczkowski, 2009). In this view, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H2. OI positively influences CO.

When looking for a customer-oriented personality, the marketing literature places special emphasis on empathy. There is a general agreement that empathy is a key variable for understanding other people (Ndubisi, 2004).

SE

In this study, empathy is defined as the "capacity to obtain and reflect a reasonably complete an accurate sense of the customer's thoughts and feelings" or cognitive empathy (Stock and Hoyer, 2005, p. 544). Research linking empathy to CO has yielded inconsistent results (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2005; Delpechitre, 2013; Homburg *et al.*, 2009). According to Aggarwal *et al.* (2005), the inconsistencies in the results linking empathy to outcome variables might be an indicator that there is no such link, but rather that empathy might be better viewed as a mediating variable. On the other hand, Stock and Hoyer (2005) found that employees with high levels of empathy are expected to exhibit higher CO in the absence of IM. Employees that have a higher capacity for empathy with the customer's needs and wants will be more predisposed to try to satisfy them. In addition, the hypothesized relationships between the variables follow an IM intervention focussed on improving the reception of a new technology aimed to improve the enrolment process. Therefore, a direct impact on SE as result of the intervention is not expected. Thus, regarding SE, we propose the following hypothesis:

H3. SE positively influences CO.

However, firms recognize the importance of having satisfied employees as a means to deliver high quality services (George, 1990; Piercy, 1998), and, to this end, we proposed a direct link between IM actions and the promotion of employee JS.

JS

According to Curry *et al.* (1986), JS may be defined in several ways, one of which is "the extent to which an employee expresses a positive affective orientation towards a job" (p. 848). Several studies found that the appropriate use of IM initiatives results in positive employee attitudinal outcomes, such as JS (Abzari and Ghujali, 2011; Alshurideh *et al.*, 2015; Altarifi, 2014; Barzoki and Ghujali, 2013; Chen *et al.*, 2015; Dahl and Peltier, 2014; De Bruin-Reynolds *et al.*, 2015; Ewing and Caruana, 2000; Iliopoulu and Priporas, 2011; Joung *et al.*, 2015; Shah, 2014; Tanhai *et al.*, 2013; Tansuhaj *et al.*, 1991; Urrego Guzmán, 2013). Therefore, the following hypothesis is formulated:

H4. IM positively influences JS.

In addition to IM initiatives, several studies state that CO helps service employees satisfy the need to make a difference or help others, as this is instrumental to the achievement of work goals (Bakker and Demerouti, 2007; Zablah *et al.*, 2012). Under this assumption, CO improves service employees' fit with the demands imposed upon their jobs (Donavan *et al.*, 2004). This improved fit both increases JS, and leads to greater employee commitment to the organization since the work is more gratifying (Donavan *et al.*, 2004; Farrell and Oczkowski, 2009; Xanthopoulou *et al.*, 2007; Zablah *et al.*, 2012). Therefore, JS is also expected to be influenced by CO. There is, however, a lack of consensus in this area, since Siguaw *et al.* (1994) found that CO was not related to JS, while Rafiq and Ahmed (2000) propose an inverse relationship. Here, we decided to follow up on the conclusions of the former study by testing the hypothesis:

H5. CO positively influences JS.

Besides JS, another relevant attitudinal outcome is OC, a key element of competitive organizations.

OC

In this study, we use the Anderson and Weitz (1992) definition of OC as "a desire to develop a stable relationship, a willingness to make short-term sacrifices to maintain the relationship and a confidence in the stability of the relationship" (p. 19). The literature on OC relates this concept to several dimensions: affective attachment, perceived costs and obligations. From a standpoint of affective attachment, the OC construct describes an "employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization" (Nikbin *et al.*, 2010, p. 21). As a result, employees who are strongly committed are least likely to leave the organization (Barzoki and Ghujali, 2013; Chen, 2007; Chen and Chiu, 2009; Nikbin *et al.*, 2010; Yafang, 2008). The concept of perceived costs involves the tendency to engage in consistent lines of activity based on individual recognition of the cost associated with discontinuing the activity (Nikbin *et al.*, 2010), while gains are associated with continuing participation when compared with the costs of leaving (Becker, 1960). Finally, obligation is defined as the belief about one's responsibility to the organization based on the internalization of a normative dimension that prompts employees to act in a way that meets organizational goals and interests, and suggests that individuals exhibit behaviours solely because they believe it is the right and moral thing to do (Barzoki and Ghujali, 2013; Chen, 2007; Nikbin *et al.*, 2010; Wiener, 1982; Yafang, 2008).

Although some researchers have treated OI and OC as synonymous (Meyer *et al.*, 2006), there is growing consensus that, in spite of their commonalities, OI and OC are different constructs (Chen *et al.*, 2015; Dávila and Jiménez-García, 2012; Dávila de León and Jiménez-García, 2014; Meyer *et al.*, 2006; Stinglhamber *et al.*, 2015; van Knippenberg and Sleebos, 2006; Wieseke *et al.*, 2007). OI is conceptualized as having an individualistic nature and representing a cognitive/perceptual construct related to membership or sense of belonging and individual attachment to the organization. Meanwhile, OC is more collective in nature and it shows an attitude towards the organization rooted in an affective attachment towards the organization (Dávila and Jiménez-García, 2012; Meyer *et al.*, 2006; van Knippenberg and Sleebos, 2006; Wieseke *et al.*, 2007). Consequently, OI and OC are empirically distinct, even though they are related (Chan, 2006; Chen *et al.*, 2015; Stinglhamber *et al.*, 2015; Riketta, 2005). Most studies believe that OI is an antecedent of OC (e.g. belonging to an organization precedes affective commitment), although others argue that the relationship might be reciprocal and even that in some circumstances, it is possible to be committed to an organization without having a sense of belonging (Chen *et al.*, 2015; Stinglhamber *et al.*, 2015; Meyer *et al.*, 2006). In order to find out which was proven correct in our case, we decided to test the following hypothesis:

H6. OI positively influences OC.

Although there is agreement that OC has an effect on an organization's performance, researchers are divided on the nature of the relationship between OC and psychological variables, such as job engagement and JS (Donavan *et al.*, 2004; Zablah *et al.*, 2012). For instance, several researchers have found evidence of a positive and causal relationship between JS and OC (Barzoki and Ghujali, 2013; Brown and Peterson, 1993; Chen *et al.*, 2015; Joung *et al.*, 2015; Malik *et al.*, 2010; Odeh and Alghadeer, 2014; Rutherford *et al.*, 2009; Tanhai *et al.*, 2013; Tett and Myer, 1993; Zablah *et al.*, 2012). On the other hand, studies focussed on different dyad business relationships find evidence of a relationship in the opposite direction (Becker, 1992; Siguaw *et al.*, 1998). In this study, we expect JS to positively affect OC. Employees satisfied with the organization would be more willing to stay and work towards organizational success (Malik *et al.*, 2010; Silva-Carlos and Gouveia-Rodrigues, 2012). We expect that an investment in IM initiatives should result in satisfied employees who perceive the organization as committed to them and, in turn, will also become committed to it; thus, creating a virtuous cycle, which would facilitate organizational goals (Abzari *et al.*, 2011; Altarifi, 2014; Alves *et al.*, 2015; Chang *et al.*, 2012; González-Mieres *et al.*, 2012; Huang and Chen, 2013; Tsai, 2014). Given the previously discussed empirical research, the following hypothesis is presented:

H7. JS positively influences OC.

The present study integrates and further extends earlier work. Figure 1 shows a model for the relationships between IM initiatives, SE, OI, CO, JS and OC. The framework shows how the use of elements of IM initiatives directly relates to OI and JS. It also suggests that SE and OI directly relate to CO, which impacts JS. Finally, OI and JS directly relate to OC.

Research method

The conceptual framework was tested at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. The UPR is a US state university with 11 campuses. As a public comprehensive

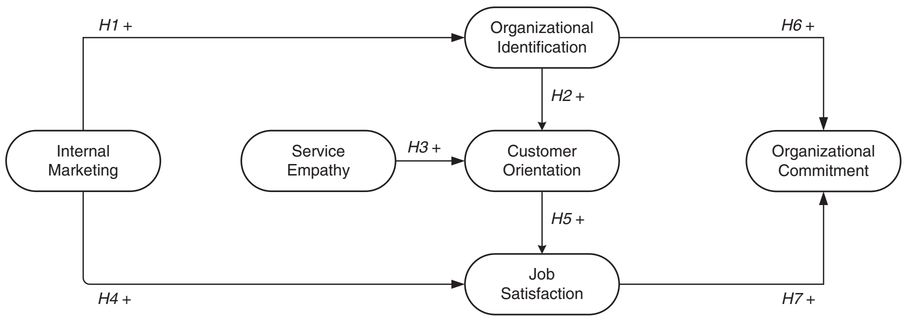


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework

doctoral institution, its academic offerings range from baccalaureate to doctoral degrees. The campus under study has over 15,000 students and 2,000 employees.

The set of customer-contact employees at the university was chosen as the sampling population. The study's sampling frame is the set of managerial and non-managerial employees directly involved with student enrolment services at the institution, consisting of 342 individuals. Data were collected during the summer of 2012, via a questionnaire sent to all employees in the frame. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: five demographic questions, and 31 Likert scale questions related to the model variables IM (Ahmed *et al.*, 2003), OI, SE, CO, JS and OC (Wieseke *et al.*, 2009). The five-point Likert scale ranged from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). The questionnaire was developed and validated in previous studies (Wieseke *et al.*, 2009; Ahmed *et al.*, 2003), and, for our purposes, we translated the English version into Spanish, the participants' primary language. A research protocol was developed to ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of participants before, during and after the survey process.

IM is a reflective latent variable created from a combination of top management support (five items), business process (three items) and cross-functional coordination (three items) presented in Ahmed *et al.* (2003). IM included questions related to areas where top management or the project managers had some degree of control: empowerment (Ahmed *et al.*, 2003; Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; De Bruin-Reynolds *et al.*, 2015; Grönroos, 1981), process changes (Ahmed *et al.*, 2003; Galpin, 1997), internal communication (Ahmed *et al.*, 2003; De Bruin-Reynolds *et al.*, 2015; Galpin, 1997; Gummerson, 1987), and training and development (Ahmed *et al.*, 2003; Cahill, 1995; De Bruin-Reynolds *et al.*, 2015; Galpin, 1997; Grönroos, 1985). The items of other constructs came from Wieseke *et al.* (2009): OI (six items: original items in Mael and Ashforth, 1992 and used also by Wieseke *et al.*, 2009), SE (three items: original items in Barrett-Lennard, 1981 and used also by Wieseke *et al.*, 2009), CO (five items: original items in Thomas *et al.*, 2001 and used also by Wieseke *et al.*, 2009), OC (three items: original items in Allen and Meyer, 1990 and used also by Wieseke *et al.*, 2009) and JS (three items: original items in Hackman and Oldham, 1975 and used also by Wieseke *et al.*, 2009). The scale used, measurement statistics and source of the measurements are reported in Table I.

PLS were used for this study, allowing for confirmatory factor analysis, as well as hypotheses testing. The PLS software used is SmartPLS 2.0. M3. Hair *et al.* (2012) analysed the use of PLS in 30 top marketing journals over a 30-year period and found that its use has increased. Compared to covariance-based structural equation modelling, PLS allows for the use of non-normal data, small sample sizes and the formative measurements of latent variables (Hair *et al.*, 2012, 2014). As an exploratory study, we used PLS mainly to achieve our research goal of explaining endogenous constructs in a small sample (less than 100 observations). Reinartz *et al.* (2009) achieved high levels of statistical power using PLS in

Construct	Items	Mean	SE mean	SD	Loading[a]
Internal marketing (items adapted from Ahmed *et al.*, 2003) CR = 0.9022 AVE = 0.6109	BP1: the UPR-RP has competent staff employees to manage enrolment practices and process	1.891	0.110	1.053	0.417[b]
	BP2: the UPR-RP provides staff employees with effective information technology tools for enrolment management	2.793	0.120	1.153	0.847
	BP3: the UPR-RP communicates the enrolment rules and practices effectively to staff employees	2.966	0.129	1.220	0.882
	CFC1: the UPR-RP has an effective internal communication system for enrolment management	3.180	0.123	1.163	0.874
	CFC2: the UPR-RP enrolment management process provides effective inter-functional coordination among administrative and academic units	2.820	0.127	1.202	0.583
	CFC3: the UPR-RP provides staff employees with continuous training and development for enrolment management	3.593	0.131	1.247	0.262[b]
	TMS1: the UPR-RP empowers academic management for decision making in enrolment management	2.811	0.138	1.306	0.394[b]
	TMS2: the UPR-RP appoints competent leadership for the development of an effective enrolment management strategy	2.600	0.129	1.225	0.480[b]
	TMS3: the UPR-RP makes effective strategic planning for enrolment management	2.989	0.123	1.169	0.788
	TMS4: the UPR-RP recognizes the performance of employees involved in enrolment management	3.449	0.140	1.345	0.364[b]
	TMS5: the UPR-RP has the appropriate technological infrastructure for effective enrolment management	3.703	0.126	1.206	0.667
Organizational identification (items adapted from Wieseke *et al.*, 2009) CR = 0.9213 AVE = 0.7020	OI1: when someone criticizes the UPR-RP, it feels like a personal insult	1.989	0.123	1.166	0.729
	OI2: I am very interested about what others think about the UPR-RP	1.620	0.096	0.924	0.869
	OI3: when I talk about the UPR-RP I usually say “we” rather than “they”	1.543	0.096	0.919	0.808
	OI4: the organizational successes are my successes	1.391	0.074	0.710	0.849
	OI5: when someone praises the organization, it feels like a personal compliment	1.598	0.097	0.927	0.922
	OI6: if a story in the media criticizes the UPR-RP, I feel embarrassed	2.011	0.121	1.147	0.184[b]
Service empathy (items adapted from Wieseke *et al.*, 2009) CR = 0.7537 AVE = 0.5278	SE1: I always sense exactly what students want	2.176	0.095	0.902	0.559
	SE2: I realize what students mean even when they have difficulty expressing it	2.033	0.960	0.912	0.526
	SE3: it is easy for me to see things from the students’ perspective	2.740	0.085	0.810	0.997

Table I.
Indicators’ descriptive statistics and measurement model

(*continued*)

Construct	Items	Mean	SE mean	SD	Loading[a]
Customer orientation (items adapted from Wieseke *et al.*, 2009) CR = 0.8946 AVE = 0.6300	CO1: I try to figure out what students' needs are	1.185	0.051	0.490	0.789
	CO2: I have the students' best interests in mind	1.217	0.046	0.440	0.719
	CO3: I take a problem-solving approach when offering services to students	1.121	0.041	0.390	0.786
	CO4: I recommend products or services that are better suited to solving problems	1.141	0.043	0.408	0.826
	CO5: I try to find out which kinds of services would be most helpful to students	1.152	0.046	0.443	0.844
Organizational commitment (items adapted from Wieseke *et al.*, 2009) CR = 0.9311 AVE = 0.8183	OC1: I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career at UPR-RP	1.667	0.113	1.071	0.910
	OC2: I feel emotionally attached to UPR-RP	1.554	0.994	0.954	0.894
	OC3: I feel strong sense of belonging to UPR-RP	1.495	0.083	0.794	0.909
Job satisfaction (items adapted from Wieseke *et al.*, 2009) CR = 0.7367 AVE = 0.6007	JS1: generally speaking, I am very satisfied with my job at UPR-RP	1.378	0.078	0.743	0.952
	JS2: I am generally satisfied with the kind of work I do in this job	1.467	0.080	0.763	0.234[b]
	JS3: I frequently think in quitting this job (reverse coding)	1.761	0.123	1.180	0.543

Notes: [a]PLS-based confirmatory factor after the elimination of two items; [b]item eliminated due to lower than 0.50 loading. All significant at $p < 0.05$

Table I.

sample sizes of less than a 100 observations. Descriptive statistics and regression analysis for collinearity assessment was performed using Minitab 16. Assessment of the f^2 and q^2 effect size were calculated in Excel 2013.

Results

General

A total of 94 of 342 employees answered and returned the questionnaires, of which 92 were usable. The response rate was thus 27 per cent. Two questionnaires were removed from the data since the amount of missing values exceeded 15 per cent. Missing values in the remaining questionnaires were handled using casewise deletion. The questionnaires did not present any straight-lining (respondent's selection of the same option for a set of items), and the sample profile was of 44 (47.8 per cent) managerial, 45 (48.9 per cent) non-managerial and three (3.3 per cent) considered both managerial and non-managerial. Respondents consisted of 20 men (23.8 per cent) and 64 women (76.2 per cent). Most of the respondents were over 45 years old (67.5 per cent), and about 62 per cent of the respondents had more than 15 years of work experience. Most had university degrees (32.6 per cent doctoral, 27.2 per cent master and 33.7 per cent bachelor).

We evaluated the data in multiple steps. The first step was to perform descriptive statistics including testing for normality. All the indicators were non-normal, which is allowed in PLS. Table I reports the mean, the standard error of the mean (SE mean), and the standard deviation (SD) of each item. The second step was to randomly divide the 92 observations sample into a 28 observations holdout sample (30 per cent of total sample) to refine the measurement model and a 64 observations sample for hypotheses testing.

Evaluation of the measurement model

The third step was to evaluate the measurement model with the holdout sample. In reflective measurement models, we must test for indicator reliability, internal consistency, convergent validity and discriminant validity. We ran the PLS algorithm using case wise replacement missing value algorithm, path weighting scheme, maximum iterations of 300, an abort criterion of 1.0E-5 and initial weights of 1. Indicator reliability was examined through the evaluation of outer loadings. Multidimensional data with lower than a 0.50 factor loading were eliminated because they were not considered to be within the acceptable range (Hair *et al.*, 2010). Seven items were eliminated (BP1, CFC3, TMS1, TMS2, TMS4, OI6 and JS2). The final absolute standardized loadings, ranged from 0.5259 (SE2: SE question number two) to 0.9970 (SE3: SE question number three) were over the 0.5 acceptable level.

Internal consistency was examined via composite reliability (CR), which ranged from 0.7367 (JS) to 0.9311 (OC), all greater than the threshold of 0.7 but not over 0.95 (Hair *et al.*, 2014). Convergent validity was examined using the average variance extracted (AVE), "An AVE of less than 0.50 indicates, on average, more errors remain in the terms that the variance explain in the construct" (Hair *et al.*, 2014, p. 103). AVE values ranged from 0.5278 (SE) to 0.8183 (OC), all above the 0.50 thresholds. Table I reports mean, SE mean, SD and loadings for each item, and CR, and AVE of each construct.

The final stage in measurement model evaluation is discriminant validity. In this study, we used the Fornell-Larcker criterion. As shown in Table II, the measurement model had satisfactory discriminant validity, since all square roots of the AVE were higher than the highest correlation with any other construct in the model (Hair *et al.*, 2014). In short, the reflective model constructs are appropriate for PLS analysis.

Evaluation of the structural model

When evaluating the model, the next step was to assess the structural model results for collinearity, significance of the path coefficient, and predictive relevance of the path model. The regression analysis of each set of constructs resulted in variance inflator factors between 0.20 and 5. Therefore, collinearity among the predictor constructs is not an issue. Finally, we examine the significance of the path coefficient estimates on the seven paths in the model following the bootstrap techniques resampling suggestion of Hair *et al.* (2014). Table III shows the path correlation, SD, *T*-statistics and the significance levels of each hypothesis. Based on the PLS model analysis, all hypotheses are supported at a significance level of 0.10 or less.

R^2 and f^2 were computed. R^2 is to determine the effect of the aggregated exogenous constructs in the endogenous construct, and the latter to assess the contribution of individual exogenous construct contribution on an endogenous construct R^2. Chin (1998) describes R^2 values of 0.67, 0.33 and 0.19 in PLS path model structures as substantial, moderate and weak, respectively. A very weak effect ($R^2 = 0.0489$) variance in OI is explained by IM initiatives. On the other hand, SE and OI explains 24.91 per cent (R^2) of CO variance – considered weak to moderate – of which SE represents medium effect of 15.3 per cent (f^2) and OI represents a weak effect of 4.9 per cent (f^2). A 31.17 per cent (R^2) of JS variance is explained by IM initiatives ($f^2 = 0.184$, moderate effect) and CO ($f^2 = 0.112$,

Item	IM	SE	OI	CO	JS	OC
Internal marketing	*0.7816*					
Service empathy	−0.0701	*0.7265*				
Organizational identification	0.3552	0.0142	*0.8378*			
Customer orientation	−0.1529	0.3421	0.1806	*0.7937*		
Job satisfaction	0.1152	0.3151	0.5967	0.0116	*0.7750*	
Organizational commitment	0.1512	0.4088	0.5406	0.1919	0.7424	*0.9045*

Note: Square root of AVE in italic

Table II.
Correlations and discriminant validity

moderate effect). Finally, OI and JS explains 36.4 per cent (R^2) of OC variance, which is considered moderate. JS represents a medium effect of 13.35 per cent (f^2) while OI represents a strong effect of 31.5 per cent (f^2). Figure 2 shows the path coefficients of the relationship in the model and the endogenous constructs' R^2 values. Even though the relationships among the modelled constructs are statistically significant, the current exogenous constructs contribution to the endogenous constructs is not substantial.

The model's predictive relevance regarding the endogenous latent variables was tested using the SmartPLS 2.0 M.3 blindfolding procedure. The Q^2 values of all endogenous variables were above 0, thus supporting the model's predictive relevance. The q^2 was computed to determine the relative measurement of predictive relevance of an individual exogenous construct on an endogenous construct. The q^2 effects ranged from weak (OI→CO = 0.029, SE→CO = 0.067, CO→JS = 0.062, JS→OC = 0.090), to medium (IM→JS = 0.124, OI→CO = 0.246) and strong (IM→OI = 0.304).

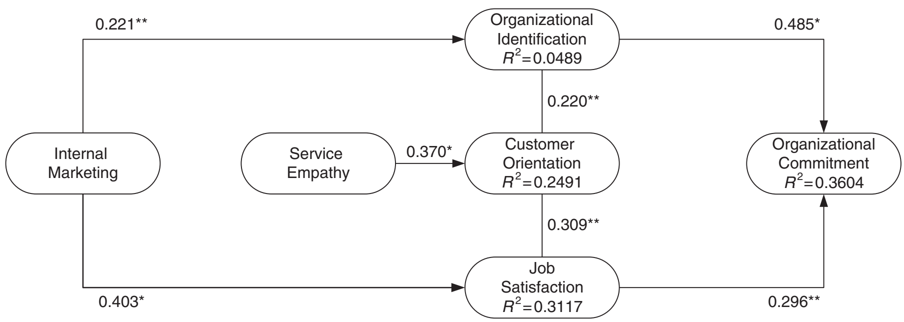
Discussion

The study confirmed the positive impact of IM initiatives on customer-contact employees' OI (*H1*). Although the variance in OI is weakly explained by IM initiatives (4.89 per cent), it is a factor to be taken into consideration, since the predictive relevance is medium to strong ($Q^2 = 0.2330$). These results increase the literature linking IM and OI. While previous studies focussed on the impact transfer between managers' OI to employees' OI (Wieseke *et al.*, 2009), this one focussed on combined IM initiatives, such as top management support, business process and cross-functional coordination.

Also supported were the relationships between OI and CO (*H2*), and between SE and CO (*H3*), which is consistent with previous research. On the other hand, although the relationship was statistically significant, it was the weakest in the model. More studies

	Path coefficient	SD	*T*-statistics (|O/STERR|)	Significance levels	Supported alternative hypothesis
H1: IM → OI	0.2210	0.1013	2.1822	$p < 0.05$	Yes
H2: OI → CO	0.2200	0.1093	2.0134	$p < 0.05$	Yes
H3: SE → CO	0.3704	0.1021	3.6273	$p < 0.01$	Yes
H4: IM → JS	0.4032	0.0984	4.0992	$p < 0.01$	Yes
H5: CO →JS	0.3085	0.1223	2.5216	$p < 0.05$	Yes
H6: OI → OC	0.4846	0.0862	5.6231	$p < 0.01$	Yes
H7: JS → OC	0.2956	0.1253	2.3595	$p < 0.05$	Yes

Table III. Hypotheses' path coefficients, standard deviations and *T*-statistics



Notes: $^{*}p<0.01$; $^{**}p<0.05$

Figure 2. Path coefficients and R^2 results

ought to be carried out in other research contexts and with alternative measures of SE. According to Tran *et al.* (2013), traditional self-reported measures of empathy yield questionable result regarding the structure of the construct. To them, a general measurement of empathy encompassing all its aspects yield better result than measurement that addresses only the real vs fictional scenario and the cognitive or emotional side of empathy, even though the last two components seems to overlap. In this research SE was conceptualized as cognitive empathy.

As for *H3*, SE had a medium effect on CO ($f^2 = 0.153$). This outcome corroborated the conclusions of Stock and Hoyer (2005) and Homburg *et al.* (2009), which found that the more SE the employee had, the higher the CO, even without IM.

Both JS related hypotheses were supported (*H4* and *H5*). The empirical results shown here confirm the studies of Tansuhaj *et al.* (1991), Barzoki and Ghujali (2013) and Silva-Carlos and Gouveia-Rodrigues (2012), which found significant positive relationships between IM and JS. While previous studies in IM strategies showed a positive relationship with JS, CO has conflicting results (Siguaw *et al.*, 1994; Rafiq and Ahmed, 2000). Our results found a significant positive effect of CO on JS. Customer-contact employees working in student enrolment functions that are more predisposed to meet customer needs may be more satisfied due to their type of work. This conclusion is in line with Rafiq and Ahmed's (2000) proposed relationship model.

Finally, the hypotheses related to OC were supported (*H6* and *H7*). Employees are more willing to spend the rest of their career in the organization for which they have a strong feeling of belonging (organization identification). In the framework, OI represented the strongest effect to OC ($f^2 = 0.315$), as in Riketta (2005) meta-analysis of OI. In regard to the relationship between JS and OC, it confirms previous research (Altarifi, 2014; Barzoki and Ghujali, 2013; Brown and Peterson, 1993; Malik *et al.*, 2010; Rutherford *et al.*, 2009; Silva-Carlos and Gouveia-Rodrigues, 2012; Tett and Myer, 1993; Zablah *et al.*, 2012), which indicates that the more satisfied the employees are, the more committed they will be to the organization.

Theoretical and managerial implications

This study contributes to the discussion concerning the application to nonprofit organizations – particularly higher education – of the current – although sometimes conflictive – literature on the relationships between OI, SE, CO, JS and OC. Instead of focussing on the manager-to-employee OI transfer, we explore IM initiatives as a mechanism to influence the aforementioned employees' attitudinal outcomes.

The findings offer some promise for top managers in public higher education institutions. OI, JS and OC can be encouraged through IM initiatives, such as well-established internal communication procedures. In addition, since it was found that SE and CO have a significant impact on JS, academic managers should focus on continuous training and retaining employees that have developed high levels of SE and CO.

Suggestions for future research

This study raises a number of issues for future research, which should analyse other exogenous construct to better explain the endogenous constructs. This could be performed using a qualitative or a mixed method research design adding customer-contact employees' interviews or focus groups (Brannen, 2005). In the current study, we chose to focus on customer-contact employees working in student enrolment functions at one university campus. Nonetheless, prospective research should seek to expand to employees working on different customer-contact environments as well as to other industries.

Another expansion could explore the inclusion of other antecedents or outcomes of the studied construct, such as customer satisfaction, organizational performance, quality of service (Cammarata, 2014) and trust and loyalty (Lozano-Ramírez, 2016). Likewise, the relationship between IM and SE also needs further attention. Moreover, future research should explore the impact of other IM tools, besides the internal communication strategy used in the present study. Finally, future studies could attempt to generalize the model by comparing samples from profit and nonprofit organizations that actively use IM initiatives with samples from profit and nonprofit organizations that do not use IM initiatives.

Conclusion

IM initiatives have a positive impact on customer-contact employees' job attitudinal outcomes. First, investments in IM initiatives are shown to increase OI, JS and OC. Second, we show that customer-contact employees' JS is tied to a combination of factors, such as IM initiatives, SE, CO and OI. Also, we found that by promoting JS and OI, management promotes employee OC. Finally, the study shows the importance of continuous training for customer-contact employees to develop SE, given that this increases CO, which in return increases JS.

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About the authors

Dr Arleen Hernández-Díaz is a Professor of Human Resources Management at the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. She received her Doctoral Degree in Industrial Relations with specialization in Collective Bargaining and Human Resources Management at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. In 2011 she earned a Post-doctoral Degree in Management and Marketing at Tulane University in New Orleans. During her 22 years career as a Full Professor at the University of Puerto Rico, she has served in a number of academic management positions, such as the Director of the Department of Management, an Assistant Dean of Students Affairs, an Assistant Dean of Graduate Students and an Assistant Dean of Academic Affairs. Her research interest and publications are concentrated in the areas of human resources management strategies, part-time employment and labour management relations. Dr Arleen Hernández-Díaz is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: arleen.hernandez1@upr.edu

Dr Theany Calderon-Abreu is an Assistant Professor at the Department of Management, University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. She has a Doctoral Degree in Business Administration with specialization in Marketing. Besides teaching for more than 15 years, during her career she has served as an Assistant Dean for Administrative Affairs and an Assistant Dean for Students Affairs. Also, she has worked on Curriculum Development for an online Master's Degree on Marketing at a virtual university. Her research interests focus on marketing management and entrepreneurship. Her research has been published on several proceedings.

Dr Maria Amador-Dumois is a Professor of Strategic and International Management at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus. She received her Doctoral Degree in Business Administration with specialization in International Business and Strategic Management at George Washington University – Washington, DC. She is a Certified Global Business Professional (CGBP), Internet and Computing Core Certified (IC3) and Certified Associate in Project Management. During her 22 years career as a Professor, she has served in a number of academic management positions at the University of Puerto Rico – Mayagüez, such as a Coordinator of the Business Research Center, Project Coordinator of Campus Export Control Officer and an Associate Director of the Research and Development Center. She also carries out managerial consulting in imports and exports as well as business intelligence for private and public sector organizations. Her research interest and publications are concentrated in the areas of strategic management, international strategy, international trade, international market selection methods, export promotion, expansion strategies and franchising.

Dr Mario Córdova-Claudio is a Professor of Operations Management, Statistics and Business Law at the University of Puerto Rico, Mayagüez Campus. He received his Doctoral Degree in Operations Research at Rutgers University in New Jersey. In 2004, he earned a Juris Doctor from the University of Puerto Rico, Río Piedras Campus. He is also the Certified Associate in Project Management. During his career as a Professor at the University of Puerto Rico, he has served as an Academic Advisor and Academic Senator. His research interest and publications are concentrated in the areas of operations research and management, queuing theory and linear programming applications and accuracy of expert effort estimates in software projects.