

Communicating the brand promise to internal stakeholders in Higher Education Institutions.

Evdoxia Kyriacou^a and Anna Zarkada^b

^a *Department of Public Communication, Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus; Email: evi.kyriacou@cut.ac.cy*

^b *Department of Public Communication, Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus; Email: anna.zarkada@cut.ac.cy*

Keywords: *internal communication, internal marketing, internal branding, higher education, HEIs.*

Most of the marketing of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) literature has focused on external branding activities (Mampaey et al. 2020; Pinar, Girard, and Basfirinci 2020) but neglected inside-out brand development (Sujchaphong, Nguyen, and Melewar 2015) through Internal Marketing (IM). The IM field, however, still faces the challenge of inconsistent conceptualizations of its nature and underlying practices and has largely ignored the particularities of the HE sector, despite its social and economic importance (Qiu, Boukis, and Storey, 2021). So, the aim of this paper is to contribute to both by exploring the meaning and elements of the IM Mix (IMM) as perceived by HEI employees.

IM has been viewed as a set of practices aimed rallying employee support of organizational marketing plans (e.g. Qaisar and Muhamad 2021) and aligning the promises to customers with the willingness and ability of employees to deliver them (e.g. Grönroos and Ravald 2011). There is universal agreement that communication is a core element of the IMM (Gwinji et al. 2020; Lings and Greenley 2009; 2005). We here propose that Internal Communications can be organized under the following key functions:

(a) Disseminating organisational values that shape the relationship with employees (Boukis, Gounaris, and Lings 2017). It is here proposed that basic human values (Schwartz 2012; Schwartz and Butenko 2014) congruence (Posner 2010, p. 536) could make employees feel that they comfortably belong in the organization and support their intrinsic motivation (Gagné 2018).

(b) Communicating the customer brand promise to internal stakeholders so that they understand their role in delivering the expected brand experience (Ahmed and Rafiq 2002; Mosley 2007; Pappasolomou and Vrontis 2006; Sujchaphong, Nguyen, and Melewar 2015). The HEI marketing literature also stresses the important role of faculty and non-academic staff in university branding (Pinar et al. 2014; Pinar, Girard, and Basfirinci 2020) but there is scant research on how this is achieved by employing IM techniques (Sujchaphong, Nguyen, and Melewar 2015; Judson et al. 2009).

(c) Promoting inter-functional coordination (Gwinji et al. 2020) to increase internal value co-creation ability (Mukhtar and Azhar 2020) thus contributing to the achievement of a common set of goals.

(d) Facilitating the achievement of organisational goals (Finney 2011; Finney and Scherrebeck-Hansen 2010; Piercy 2001; Piercy and Morgan 1991) and acceptance of the change required to cope with competitive pressures (Piercy 1991; Finne and Grönroos 2009) by showing internal stakeholders that their work counts (Ruck and Welch 2012).

A two-stage mixed methods design was adopted, comprising 15 semi-structured interviews with a convenience sample of employees of a public HEI and a census of all employees in public and private HEIs in Cyprus.

The teleconferencing interviews which lasted about 45 minutes each were informal discussions about the experience of working in the HE sector and the specific HEI and focused on (a) the participants' sense of belonging, (b) the institutional practices, processes and actions they felt were meaningful for them and c) their perception of the values of the institution and the ones they felt as being motivational. Each interview was recorded and iteratively pre-analyzed after completion. Saturation and convergence occurred at the 13th interview, so a total of 15 interviews were carried out to ensure no additional themes or codes emerged and attitudinal data seemed repetitious. All interviews were converted into text and re-analyzed. Codes were organized into themes, checked for patterns in the responses and examined vis-à-vis the scales in literature to construct the final measures (codes turned to variables) of the emerging constructs (themes in the data).

The scales of (a) IM (Mainardes, Rodrigues, and Teixeira, 2019), (b) internal communication (Joung et al. 2015; Foreman and Money 1995; Yildiz and Kara 2017), (c) inter-functional coordination (Voon, 2007), internal market orientation (Conduit and Mavondo 2001; Conduit, Matanda, and Mavondo 2014) were confirmed as reflecting the lived experience of the HEI employees in Cyprus and the relevant items were adopted with necessary contextual adaptations for the survey. All items were measured of a 5-point Likert scale. The questionnaire was pilot tested using a convenience and snowball sample of (67) academic and administrative employees in HEIs in countries other than Cyprus.

The emails of all administrative and academic staff of the nine HEIs in Cyprus (three public and six private) were manually collected from the websites of the institutions. The questionnaire was uploaded on LimeSurvey and the link was included in the text of an email. The distribution was carried out over two months with two electronic reminders and resulted in a response rate of 22,4%.

Out of the 415 useable questionnaires, 216 (52%) were from academic staff, 241 females (58.1%) and 244 participants (58.8%) working in a Public University. We run an EFA using PCA with VARIMAX rotation (KMO .907, explaining 69% of the variance in the data with four components with all variables loadings above the threshold of .70. and all scale reliability analyses confirming the EFA resulting conceptualisation (Table 1).

The study presented here shows that IM is a function of Internal Communication, Internal Market Orientation and Openness to Change manifested as self-direction towards action and thought. Our study offers valuable insights into what has meaning and gives value to HEI employees, a highly skilled and diverse population. The way these elements are communicated to and espoused by the internal stakeholders can assist organizations in simultaneously offering value to employees and achieving organisational objectives by ensuring they live the brand and convey brand values to external stakeholders.

The research was carried out only in HEIs. Further research should test the proposed internal marketing contextualisation in other contexts. In this paper we have only focused on the conceptualization of IM but our study also explored its antecedents and effects on employee engagement. Future work will explore its effect on organizational performance.

Table 1. Results from EFA (Rotated Component Matrix).

	Internal Communication	Internal Market Orientation	Openness to Change	
			action	thought
Cronbach's α	.93	.77	.70	.66
My University offers employees a vision that they can believe in	.833			
My University provides open and transparent communication channels	.826			
I gain value from my work position in relation to the U. strategic goals	.759			
Information is freely distributed within my University	.755			
My University provides me with a clear career path	.745			
My University trusts me to make good decisions	.740			
My University encourages me to take initiative	.739			
There is good communication between the different departments in my U.	.724			
There is good coordination between various departments/units in my U.	.710			
The principle for serving students as customers applies also in my work for serving my colleagues as customers too		.904		
The training in my U. is linked to my role of serving my colleagues and students as customers		.865		
I feel that my U. allows me to do something my way even if someone might disapprove			.817	
I feel that my U. allows me to act independently without waiting to hear what other people are doing			.787	
I feel that my U. allows me to pay no attention to outside pressures when making a decision			.702	
I feel that my U. allows me to learn something new although it is not related to my own work				.856
I feel that my U. allows me to develop my own opinion on an issue by studying the facts				.786

References

- Ahmed, Pervaiz K., and Mohammed. Rafiq. 2002. *Internal Marketing: Tools and Concepts for Customer-Focused Management*. The Chartered Institute of Marketing, Butterworth Heinemann, Elsevier Science, MA.
- Boukis, Achilleas, Spiros Gounaris, and Ian Lings. 2017. "Internal Market Orientation Determinants of Employee Brand Enactment." *Journal of Services Marketing* 31 (7): 690–703. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JSM-07-2016-0272>.
- Finne, Åke, and Christian Grönroos. 2009. "Rethinking Marketing Communication: From Integrated Marketing Communication to Relationship Communication." *Journal of Marketing Communications* 15 (2–3): 179–95. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527260902757654>.
- Finney, Sherry. 2011. "Stakeholder Perspective on Internal Marketing Communication: An ERP Implementation Case Study." *Business Process Management Journal* 17 (2): 311–31. <https://doi.org/10.1108/14637151111122365>.
- Finney, Sherry, and Mette Scherrebeck-Hansen. 2010. "Internal Marketing as a Change Management Tool: A Case Study in Re-Branding." *Journal of Marketing Communications* 16 (5): 325–44. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13527260903023916>.
- Foreman, Susan K., and Arthur H. Money. 1995. "Internal Marketing: Concepts, Measurement, and Application." *Journal of Marketing Management* 11 (8): 755–68.
- Gagné, Marylène. 2018. "From Strategy to Action: Transforming Organizational Goals into Organizational Behavior." In *International Journal of Management Reviews*, 20:S83–104. Blackwell Publishing Ltd. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ijmr.12159>.
- Grönroos, Christian, and Annika Ravald. 2011. "Service as Business Logic: Implications for Value Creation and Marketing." *Journal of Service Management* 22 (1): 5–22. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09564231111106893>.
- Gwinji, Wedzerai-A., Norman Chiliya, Tinashe Chuchu, and Tinashe Ndoro. 2020. "An Application of Internal Marketing for Sustainable Competitive Advantage in Johannesburg Construction Firms." *African Journal of Business and Economic Research* 15 (1): 183–200. <https://doi.org/10.31920/1750-4562/2020/15n1a8>.
- Joung, Hyun Woo, Ben K. Goh, Lynn Huffman, Jingxue Jessica Yuan, and James Surles. 2015. "Investigating Relationships between Internal Marketing Practices and Employee Organizational Commitment in the Foodservice Industry." *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management* 27 (7): 1618–40. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJCHM-05-2014-0269>.
- Judson, Kimberly M., Timothy W. Aurand, Linda Gorchels, and Geoffrey L. Gordon. 2009. "Building a University Brand from within: University Administrators' Perspectives of Internal Branding." *Services Marketing Quarterly* 30 (1): 54–68. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15332960802467722>.
- Lings, Ian N., and Gordon E. Greenley. 2005. "Measuring Internal Market Orientation." *Journal of Service Research* 7 (3): 290–305. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1094670504271154>.
- . 2009. "The Impact of Internal and External Market Orientations on Firm Performance." *Journal of Strategic Marketing* 17 (1): 41–53. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09652540802619251>.

- Mainardes, Emerson Wagner, Lázaro Silva Rodrigues, and Aridelmo Teixeira. 2019. “Effects of Internal Marketing on Job Satisfaction in the Banking Sector.” *International Journal of Bank Marketing* 37 (5): 1313–33. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJBM-07-2018-0190>.
- Mampaey, Jelle, Vanja Schtemberg, Jos Schijns, Jeroen Huisman, and Arild Wæraas. 2020. “Internal Branding in Higher Education: Dialectical Tensions Underlying the Discursive Legitimation of a New Brand of Student Diversity.” *Higher Education Research and Development* 39 (2): 230–43. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07294360.2019.1674252>.
- Mosley, Richard W. 2007. “Customer Experience, Organisational Culture and the Employer Brand.” *Journal of Brand Management* 15 (2): 123–34. <https://doi.org/10.1057/palgrave.bm.2550124>.
- Mukhtar, Umer, and Tashfeen Mahmood Azhar. 2020. “Inter-Functional Coordination to Co-Create Value within Integrated Value Chains for Competitive Supply Chain.” *Operations and Supply Chain Management* 13 (1): 11–22. <https://doi.org/10.31387/OSCM0400249>.
- Papasolomou, Ioanna, and Demetris Vrontis. 2006. “Building Corporate Branding through Internal Marketing: The Case of the UK Retail Bank Industry.” *Journal of Product and Brand Management* 15 (1): 37–47. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10610420610650864>.
- Piercy, Nigel. 2001. “Market-Led Strategic Change: New Marketing for New Realities.” *The Marketing Review* 2 (4): 385–404. <https://doi.org/10.1362/1469347012863862>.
- Piercy, Nigel, and Neil Morgan. 1991. “Internal Marketing-The Missing Half of the Marketing Programme.” *Long Range Planning* 24 (2): 82–93. [https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-6301\(91\)90083-Z](https://doi.org/10.1016/0024-6301(91)90083-Z).
- Pinar, Musa, Tulay Girard, and Cigdem Basfirinci. 2020. “Examining the Relationship between Brand Equity Dimensions and University Brand Equity: An Empirical Study in Turkey.” *International Journal of Educational Management* 34 (7): 1119–41. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-08-2019-0313>.
- Pinar, Musa, Paul Trapp, Tulay Girard, and Thomas E. Boyt. 2014. “University Brand Equity: An Empirical Investigation of Its Dimensions.” *International Journal of Educational Management* 28 (6): 616–34. <https://doi.org/10.1108/IJEM-04-2013-0051>.
- Posner, Barry Z. 2010. “Another Look at the Impact of Personal and Organizational Values Congruency.” *Journal of Business Ethics* 97 (4): 535–41. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-010-0530-1>.
- Qaisar, Fatima Saman, and Nazlida Muhamad. 2021. “Internal Marketing: A Review and Future Research Agenda.” *Asia Pacific Business Review* 27 (2): 1–34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602381.2021.1858590>.
- Qiu, Jingqi, Achilleas Boukis, and Chris Storey. 2021. “Internal Marketing: A Systematic Review.” *Journal of Marketing Theory and Practice* 30 (1): 1–15. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10696679.2021.1886588>.
- Ruck, Kevin, and Mary Welch. 2012. “Valuing Internal Communication; Management and Employee Perspectives.” *Public Relations Review* 38 (2): 294–302. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2011.12.016>.
- Schwartz, Shalom H. 2012. “An Overview of the Schwartz Theory of Basic Values.” *Online Readings in Psychology and Culture* 2 (1): 1–20. <https://doi.org/10.9707/2307-0919.1116>.

- Schwartz, Shalom H., and Tania Butenko. 2014. "Values and Behavior: Validating the Refined Value Theory in Russia." *European Journal of Social Psychology* 44 (7): 799–813. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ejsp.2053>.
- Sujchaphong, Narissara, Bang Nguyen, and T. C. Melewar. 2015. "Internal Branding in Universities and the Lessons Learnt from the Past: The Significance of Employee Brand Support and Transformational Leadership." *Journal of Marketing for Higher Education* 25 (2): 204–37. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08841241.2015.1040104>.
- Yildiz, Suleyman Murat, and Ali Kara. 2017. "A Unidimensional Instrument for Measuring Internal Marketing Concept in the Higher Education Sector: IM-11 Scale." *Quality Assurance in Education* 25 (3): 343–61. <https://doi.org/10.1108/QAE-02-2016-0009>.