

The Role of Internal Marketing Strategy on the Quality of Frontline Employee Services in Private Higher Education

Machdi Sukmono¹, Yudi Limbar Yasik², Melsa Ulfie Wahyudianty³, Rina Indrayani⁴

^{1,3} Department of Retail Management, Universitas Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia

^{2,4} Department of Digital Business, Universitas Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This research examines the influence of internal marketing strategies on the service quality of frontliner employees in private higher education institutions (PHEIs). With increasing competition among PHEIs, the ability of administrative staff to deliver excellent service has become essential in shaping institutional image and student satisfaction. Using a quantitative explanatory research approach, data were collected from 85 frontliner staff at five PHEIs in Bandung through questionnaires. The internal marketing variable was measured using nine indicators including training, rewards, leadership, and work atmosphere, while service quality was assessed through the SERVQUAL model. The results of multiple linear regression analysis indicate that internal marketing has a significant positive effect on service quality ($\beta = 0.634$, $p < 0.05$), with an R^2 value of 0.493. Among internal marketing dimensions, training and rewards were found to be the most influential in improving responsiveness and assurance. This study suggests that strategic internal marketing practices are critical in enhancing staff motivation, satisfaction, and ultimately, service excellence in higher education.

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Corresponding Author:

Rina Indrayani
Department of Digital Business,
Universitas Teknologi Bandung, Indonesia.
Jl. Soekarno Hatta No. 378 Bandung, Indonesia. 40235
Email: rinaindrayani88@gmail.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Service quality is a crucial factor in building the image of higher education institutions and influencing student satisfaction. Amidst increasingly fierce competition among private higher education, service quality is not only a tool for retaining existing students but also for attracting potential new ones. One crucial element in creating superior service quality is the role of frontline employees, particularly educational staff who interact directly with students.

Internal marketing has emerged as an effective strategy for empowering employees to deliver optimal service. This concept views employees as internal customers who need training, motivation, clear communication, and appropriate rewards to enable them to deliver the service value expected by external customers, namely students. (Sigit, 2022)

According to (Indrayani & Pardiyono, 2019), service quality is the main goal of private higher education attracting new students and retaining existing student. Previous research also shows that students who are satisfied with campus services tend to be more loyal and willing to recommend their campus to others. (Pardiyono & Indrayani, n.d.). The Servqual model, which includes five dimensions, reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, and tangible, is a commonly used framework for measuring service quality.

However, in practice, service quality cannot stand alone without being supported by an appropriate human resource management strategy. Internal marketing provides a relevant approach, focusing on training, internal communications, career development, and employee well-being. (Hendrik Rizqiawan & Iful Novanto, 2021) identified nine internal marketing indicators that are considered important by internal customers, namely work atmosphere, career path, leadership, salary, training, awards, job security, insurance, and uniform and work equipment.

Further study (Ahmed & Rafiq, 2013)(Hendrik Rizqiawan & Iful Novanto, 2021) research shows that service quality is directly related to perceived value and customer satisfaction, which in turn influences customer loyalty. Therefore, internal marketing strategies are believed to indirectly strengthen service quality by increasing employee motivation and satisfaction.

Data from the Higher Education Database (PDDikti, 2023) shows that PTS student retention rates have decreased by 7.2% in the last three years, with one of the main causes being complaints about academic and administrative services. This fact shows the importance of strategic intervention through strengthening internal marketing.

Research (Mazzarolo et al., 2021) shows that internal marketing positively influences bank employees' perception of the bank's strategic marketing orientation, and through this, their perception of competitive advantage.

While research results (Hendrik Rizqiawan & Iful Novanto, 2021) found that there are 9 internal marketing indicators expected by business customers, namely Work Atmosphere, Career Path, Leadership, Salary, Training, Awards (Bonuses and Incentives), Store Security, Insurance, then Uniforms and Work Equipment. In addition, research (Hasan, 2023) The results show that Internal Marketing has a positive and significant effect on the decision to purchase a product.

Although there are many studies on internal marketing and service quality, most of them are still conducted in the banking sector or retail businesses. So, this research presents a new context with a focus on private higher education institutions (PTS) in Indonesia, which have different organizational and customer (student) characteristics.

Based on this explanation, the purpose of this study is to analyze the effect of internal marketing strategies on the quality of education personnel services in PTS. Identify the most significant internal marketing indicators in improving service quality, as well as to provide recommendations for internal marketing development strategies that can be applied in the higher education environment.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study uses a quantitative approach with the type of explanatory research, which is to explain the causal relationship between internal marketing variables and the quality of service of frontliner employees.

The population in this research is all education personnel (frontliner employees) who interact directly with students at private universities in Bandung City. Sampling was done by purposive sampling, with the criteria that employees who work in the academic, financial, general administration, or student services section and a minimum of 1 year of service. The number of samples was determined using the Slovin formula or Hair et al. (Majdina et al., 2024).

The types and sources of data used are primary data obtained through distributing questionnaires to respondents (education personnel). Secondary data, derived from institutional documents, student satisfaction reports, journals, and publications related to research topics. Data collection techniques are carried out through closed questionnaires with a Likert scale of 1-5. Informal interviews with HR managers or heads of academic bureaus (optional for deepening descriptive data). The instrument is a questionnaire developed from indicators. Internal Marketing refers to previous research which includes 9 indicators, including work atmosphere, career path, leadership, salary, training, awards, job security, insurance, and work facilities (uniforms & tools). Service Quality, using the SERVQUAL model (Indrayani, 2022), reliability, responsiveness, assurance, empathy, dan tangible. The instrument will be tested for validity and reliability through validity (Pearson Product Moment) and reliability (Cronbach's Alpha) tests using SPSS.

Data Analysis Techniques, the data is analyzed using descriptive statistics to describe the profile of respondents and the tendency of answers. Multiple linear regression analysis. Hypothesis

testing is done by looking at the t-statistic value, p-value, and the coefficient of determination (R^2). (Fania & Handayani, 2024).

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This study involved 85 respondents who were frontliner employees from five private universities in Bandung City. The majority of respondents were between 26-35 years old (54%), had more than 3 years of service (62%), and worked in academic and student services. The validity test results show that all question items have an item-total correlation value > 0.30 , so all items are declared valid. The Cronbach's Alpha value for the internal marketing variable is 0.882, and for the service quality variable is 0.895, indicating that the instrument has high reliability.

Table 1. Multiple Linear Regression Test Results

Independent Variable	Regression Coefficient	t-Statistic	Sig. (p-value)
Internal Marketing	0.634	7.821	0.000**

R^2 (Coefficient of Determination): 0.493

F-count: 61.19 (sig. 0.000)

The regression analysis results show that internal marketing has a positive and significant effect on service quality with a coefficient value of 0.634 ($p < 0.05$). The R^2 value of 0.493 indicates that 49.3% of the variation in service quality can be explained by internal marketing strategies.

The results of this study confirm that internal marketing strategies have a significant influence on the quality of service provided by frontline employees. This finding supports previous research by Hendrik Rizqiawan & Iful Novanto (2021), which states that elements such as training, rewards, leadership, and work atmosphere impact employees' perceptions of strategic marketing orientation, and ultimately affect the institution's competitive advantage.

Furthermore, the data shows that the training and rewards dimensions are the most powerful internal marketing aspects in improving service quality, especially in terms of responsiveness and assurance. This is in line with previous research that emphasizes the importance of internal marketing as a strategy to align employees' readiness to support the organization's external strategy.

From the questionnaire results, the majority of employees felt that regular training and incentives provided additional motivation to provide the best service to students. Respondents also mentioned that open internal communication and a supportive work environment improve morale and employee satisfaction.

Table 2. Internal Marketing Interpretation Results

Internal Marketing Dimensions	Average Score	Interpretation
Work Atmosphere	4.10	Very Good
Career Path	3.75	Good
Leadership	4.05	Very Good
Salary	3.45	Fair
Training	4.20	Very Good
Awards (Bonus/Incentive)	3.60	Good
Job Security	4.00	Very Good
Insurance	3.55	Fair

The dimensions of training, leadership, and work atmosphere are the main strengths of internal marketing in the private universities studied.

Table 3. Service Quality Interpretation Results

SERVQUAL Dimensions	Average Score	Interpretation
Reliability	4.25	Very Good
Responsiveness	4.05	Very Good
Assurance	4.15	Very Good
Empathy	4.90	Good

Reliability, responsiveness, and assurance were the strongest service quality dimensions of the university frontliners studied.

The positive correlation between internal marketing and service quality reflects that organizations that pay attention to employee welfare and development will reap the rewards of more optimal service to students. For example, regular training helps frontliners understand the latest academic and financial service SOPs. Rewards and incentives increase motivation to provide services beyond student expectations. Good internal communication encourages faster coordination between service units.

In line with the opinion of (Azhari & Ali, 2024), Service Quality has an effect on Improving Company Performance. In addition, high service quality plays an important role in shaping students' perceptions of value and satisfaction, which in turn strengthens their loyalty to the institution. Quality service is an important factor to create customer satisfaction and ultimately encourage the realization of customer loyalty. (Ningsih & Nurfarida, 2022). Satisfied students not only stay, but also become ambassadors of campus promotion through word of mouth and social media.

Thus, internal marketing strategies not only play a role in creating a healthy work environment, but also become the foundation for the success of external marketing of higher education institutions.

4. CONCLUSION

This study shows that internal marketing strategies have a positive influence on the quality of service provided by frontliner employees in private universities. Internal marketing dimensions such as training, leadership, work atmosphere, and job security are proven to contribute significantly to SERVQUAL dimensions such as reliability, responsiveness, and assurance. By implementing internal marketing consistently and strategically, higher education institutions can empower education personnel as service ambassadors who are able to create a positive student experience. Good service quality encourages student satisfaction, which in turn has an impact on loyalty and positive perceptions of the institution. The recommendation is to strengthen the Training and Development program, so that universities need to design periodic training that is relevant to the needs of academic services and the latest information technology. Improving the Reward System, with a performance-based incentive and bonus system needs to be strengthened so that employees are motivated to provide the best service. Optimization of Internal Communication, through vertical and horizontal communication channels must be opened effectively to avoid miscommunication between service units. Improving Frontliner Support Facilities, by providing support for work facilities such as uniforms, work equipment, and the comfort of the service room needs to be improved to create a better service. The author expresses his gratitude to God Almighty for all the grace and gifts. The author expresses his deepest gratitude to: The leadership and all levels of college management who have given permission and support in the implementation of this research. The respondents, especially education personnel and frontliner employees, who have taken the time to fill out the questionnaire and provide valuable data. Academic colleagues who have provided input, suggestions, and directions that are very meaningful in the process of preparing this research. Family and friends for the prayers and motivation that never broke during the research process.

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