

From Inside Out: Internal Marketing as an Engine for Service Promotion – A Secondary Publication

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Abstract: Focusing on “from inside out” means understanding that the driving force behind a successful service promotion campaign lies in a deep connection with the internal team, turning it into the engine that propels a positive brand perception. The University of Panama faces challenges in the effective implementation of strategies involving its internal staff, impacting the coherence and strength of its promotional messages. The research aimed to determine internal marketing strategies as an engine for service promotion at the Central Campus and CRUSAM. The applied study was descriptive, non-experimental field research, and cross-sectional. The sample consisted of 80 individuals using a quota sampling method to measure and quantify the expression of a construct or variable that is not directly observable. A self-administered questionnaire was used to collect information, measuring variables in their various dimensions. Content validity of the questionnaire was ensured through the evaluation of three experts, and the reliability of the Likert-type instrument was assessed using Cronbach’s α coefficient, which was found to be very high (0.918). The results led to the conclusion that establishing internal marketing strategies is necessary for the transformation and innovation process in the university through service promotion.

Keywords: Internal marketing strategies; Service promotion; Marketing

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1. Introduction

In the contemporary academic sphere, the concept of “internal marketing as a driver for the promotion of services” has gained critical relevance in the strategic management of educational institutions. This perspective acknowledges the importance of internal strategies in projecting institutional image and positions academic and administrative staff as key actors in creating and disseminating effective promotional messages. The modern university competes not only for academic excellence but also for attracting and retaining students, academic talent, and external resources, and it is in this context that internal marketing becomes an essential element.

The effective implementation of internal marketing strategies in the academic realm poses a significant challenge, as it involves managing internal perception and aligning institutional values and objectives. The coherence and authenticity of promotional messages are crucial for building a strong and appealing institutional identity. Research focusing on this approach seeks to understand how universities can leverage the engagement

and participation of their internal community to enhance the promotion of educational services and strengthen their position in the competitive global academic landscape.

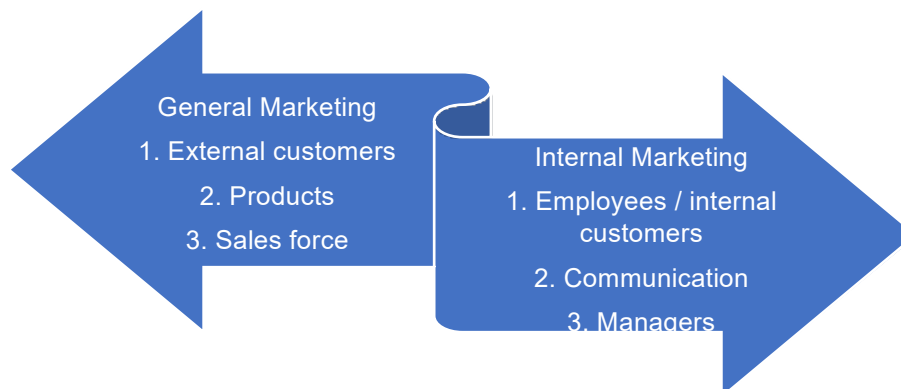


Figure 1. General marketing and internal marketing

In this context, the University of Panama becomes a relevant case study as it faces specific challenges in implementing internal marketing strategies for service promotion. Research in this field aims to examine and determine the specific strategies that could drive significant transformation and innovation in the institution, contributing to general knowledge about the impact of the internal market in the academic sphere. Through a descriptive approach and field analysis, this study seeks to contribute to academic literature and offer practical insights for those involved in the management and promotion of educational services in university settings.

Kotler and Keller defined internal marketing as the actions taken by a company to train and motivate its internal staff, including frontline personnel and those who support services, to work as a team and provide customer satisfaction ^[1]. All members of the organization must have a customer-oriented mindset; otherwise, a high and consistent level of service will not be achieved. In the case of the University of Panama, it is crucial and urgent to review, promote, and market its services, products, and goods, as there are various needs from its internal staff to access these services and products at low prices.

On the other hand, it was established that marketing is “the social process, oriented towards satisfying the needs and desires of individuals and organizations, for the creation and voluntary and competitive exchange of products and services that generate profits.”

1.1. Internal marketing

According to Caridad *et al.*, internal marketing can be defined as a comprehensive program that focuses on understanding the internal customer, their skills, training, and timely satisfaction of their needs ^[2]. This program is based on a set of practices introduced and perfected within the organization to generate greater motivation and commitment in personnel to offer better quality in the development of processes to the external customer.

Marketing today is a fundamental strategic resource that cannot be limited to one department but must be an integral part of the university’s strategy. Resources must be focused on creating positive experiences throughout the student’s lifecycle, ensuring recommendations and repetitions with positive results in their professional development. To carry out effective actions, it is crucial to have a planning framework that serves as a guide for the management and constant optimization of actions supporting the institution’s educational content strategy ^[3].

Based on the above, the University of Panama is not immune to this situation present in companies, so it is necessary to review and inventory the services, products, and goods it offers. Some of them are known

and promoted, while others are completely unknown and do not receive adequate and real communication and marketing both to internal and external customers.

According to Kotler and Stigliano ^[4], marketing is “a social and administrative process through which individuals and groups obtain what they need and want by creating and exchanging products and values with others.”

1.2. Internal marketing as a generator of value and knowledge

In the contemporary academic sphere, the concept of “internal marketing” has evolved beyond being simply a promotional strategy to become an active generator of knowledge and value in universities. The role of internal marketing has expanded to address not only the institution’s projection outward but also the creation of an internal culture that fosters innovation, engagement, and academic excellence ^[5].

In this context, internal marketing acts as a key facilitator for knowledge generation by promoting effective communication among all members of the university community. By driving transparency and participation, channels are created that allow for the sharing of ideas, research, and best practices, fostering an environment conducive to intellectual exchange and interdisciplinary collaboration ^[6].

Furthermore, internal marketing contributes to value creation by consolidating the identity and image of the university among its own personnel. Building a strong internal brand not only enhances the sense of belonging and pride within the academic community but also attracts and retains outstanding talent, students, and strategic partners. Positive internal perception translates into a valuable asset that directly impacts the institution’s external reputation, influencing the decision-making of potential students, researchers, and collaborators ^[7].

1.3. University services

The university services sector has undergone significant changes in the last decade due to various factors such as the globalization of the economy, privatizations of companies, technological innovations, and increasing demands from users. These changes entail constant competition among companies to achieve greater market share, making relational marketing one of the key strategies to become market leaders ^[8].

To properly characterize university services, it is possible to refer to Villalba Sánchez’s study ^[9]. University services have certain distinctive characteristics:

- (1) **Intangibility:** Services are intangible and cannot be physically perceived. Unlike tangible goods, university services such as teaching/learning processes are intangible. They can only be perceived through their results and cannot be physically stored or transported.
- (2) **Inseparability:** University services involve a two-way relationship between the service provider (the university) and the service user (the student). The relationship between the university and the student is inseparable in the provision of services. Any improvement, stability, or deficiency in one affects the other directly. The university’s image is reflected in the image of the future professionals trained within it.
- (3) **Heterogeneity:** Services are difficult to standardize due to their nature. They are highly heterogeneous because they depend on the acts or conditions in which they are transmitted through human interactions. There are no identical services in their content or time.

University services are structured based on a rational/administrative system, which also applies to universities and their services, as explained by McCarthy ^[10]. In this system, the following functions stand out:

- (1) **Provision of resources:** Responsible for providing the necessary resources for the proper provision of university services.
- (2) **Transformation:** Refers to the conversion of acquired inputs into university services.
- (3) **Promotion and recruitment:** Involves the promotion and organization of activities aimed at the

consumption of university services.

- (4) Support: Includes support, counseling, and mentoring actions to improve both academically and administratively the services and meet the needs of users.

These functions are fundamental to ensure the proper provision of university services and user satisfaction ^[11].

1.3.1. Psychographic characteristics of the internal population at the University of Panama

When seeking to construct a consumer behavior model, the first step is to understand the cultural, economic, social, and demographic characteristics of the inhabitants of the countries comprising the region. The current market has changed, and purchasing in the 21st century is a completely different experience from that of past decades. Current competition, new technologies, product innovation, and innovative marketing approaches are altering consumer behavior ^[12].

The study of consumer characteristics is a relatively recent phenomenon, arising from both scientific advancement and the need for analysis in this area. According to Leal Jiménez and Quero Gervilla, this situation has arisen thanks to the incorporation of different research environments in this area, and the contributions of disciplines such as Economic Theory, Psychology, and Sociology have allowed advances in the studies ^[7].

Certainly, those seeking success must know their customers' profiles to meet their needs and achieve recognition and profits. Currently, many institutions base their business strategies on traditional sales models and do not consider the consumer as a dynamic being, leading to the failure of their businesses. According to Carballo ^[13], it is essential to first clarify the scope and definition of a profile, as sometimes, in trying to encompass common typologies and behaviors, the richness of the variables and particularities that constitute the great difference is lost, helping to understand differentiated consumption behaviors.

Understanding consumer characteristics can reveal the most important factors influencing both purchasing and consumption habits, and thus serves as a guide for the design and organization of the consumer management information system. As Kotler and Armstrong affirmed, "understanding consumers is an indispensable task" ^[5]. In the modern world, with more demanding consumers, globalization, the growth of competing companies, and the increase in influential factors, it is necessary to investigate the variables that influence customer and consumer behavior, requiring novel approaches.

The psychographic characteristics of the internal population at the University of Panama reflect a diversity of attitudes, values, and behaviors that influence their perception, engagement, and participation within the academic institution. When analyzing these characteristics, several aspects impacting the internal dynamics of the university can be identified:

- (1) Orientation towards academic excellence: Many members of the university community at the University of Panama may exhibit a prominent orientation toward academic excellence. Their motivation and commitment to quality education are essential psychographic factors contributing to the institution's reputation and position.
- (2) Appreciation of innovation and transformation: The predisposition towards innovation and adaptation to change is another relevant psychographic characteristic. Those who value innovation can influence the acceptance of new internal marketing strategies and actively participate in processes of transformation and innovation at the university.
- (3) Identification with institutional culture: Emotional connection and identification with the values and culture of the University of Panama are fundamental psychographic aspects. Feelings of belonging and pride can influence collaboration and willingness to participate in promotional initiatives.
- (4) Interest in interdisciplinary collaboration: A willingness to collaborate on interdisciplinary projects and joint activities can be a relevant psychographic characteristic. Those with a strong interest in

collaboration can significantly contribute to the integration of internal marketing strategies involving various academic areas.

- (5) Attitudes towards community participation: The willingness to participate in community activities and institutional events may vary among members of the internal population. Those with proactive attitudes towards community participation can play a vital role in promoting university services and events.
- (6) Connection with technology and social networks: The adoption and use of technology, as well as active participation in social networks, are psychographic characteristics that can influence the effectiveness of internal marketing strategies based on digital platforms.

Understanding these psychographic characteristics is essential for designing internal marketing strategies that resonate with the diversity of the internal population at the University of Panama, thus fostering stronger commitment and effective participation in the promotion of educational services.

1.4. Services of an innovative university

An innovative university should be agile in adapting to changing needs, providing services that go beyond traditional teaching to offer a comprehensive educational experience and prepare students for the challenges of the 21st century ^[14].

Here are some key services that an innovative university might consider offering:

- (1) Online education and flexible modalities: Faced with the growing demand for flexibility, innovative universities should offer online education programs and other flexible modalities that allow students to access education from anywhere and at any time.
- (2) Interdisciplinary programs and curriculum personalization: Facilitating curriculum customization and promoting interdisciplinarity allows students to design their educational experience according to their interests and professional goals, thus promoting innovation and creativity.
- (3) Mentorship and professional development programs: Offering mentorship programs that connect students with industry professionals can enrich their learning and facilitate their transition into the workforce. Additionally, professional development services and career guidance may be crucial ^[15].
- (4) Innovation labs and collaborative spaces: Creating innovation labs, collaborative workspaces, and environments that foster creativity and collaboration among students from diverse disciplines can be key to driving innovation and entrepreneurial spirit.
- (5) International experience programs: Facilitating opportunities for study abroad, international internships, and cultural exchange programs provides students with a global and enriching perspective on their studies.
- (6) Support for research and innovative projects: Fostering research among students and faculty, as well as providing resources and support for innovative projects, contributes to the development of creative solutions and advancements in various disciplines.
- (7) Student welfare services: An integral approach to student welfare, including mental health services, academic counseling, and recreational activities, contributes to a healthier and more balanced university environment.
- (8) Industry connections and employment opportunities: Establishing strong collaborations with industry, offering internship programs, and facilitating post-graduation employment opportunities are services that can enhance students' employability.
- (9) Training in digital and technological skills: Given the increasing importance of digital skills, offering programs that promote digital literacy and the development of technological skills is essential in the current era.
- (10) Social responsibility and sustainability programs: Integrating social responsibility and sustainability initiatives into academic programs and extracurricular activities helps to shape conscientious citizens

committed to social and environmental well-being.

The university faces a significant challenge, as despite multiple social pressures, it cannot simply become a tool serving exclusively the economy and market demands. Its role should not be limited solely to providing practical knowledge for immediate application in the workplace. Academics must also maintain their dedication to coherence and the generation of new knowledge, regardless of its immediate utility. However, the university cannot close itself off to society's needs; it is the responsibility of professors to foster in students the competencies demanded by society, in addition to cultivating academic competence that involves reflective and critical appropriation of knowledge, along with ethical commitment to society ^[16].

Aligning university research and innovation interests with commercial interests brings tensions. On one hand, university internal structures hinder the transfer of knowledge at the speed and agility required by the business sector. Various solutions are being implemented to facilitate knowledge transfer between the university and industry, such as specialized technology transfer offices, scientific and technological parks, research centers with mixed funding (public and private), and spin-offs, among others.

2. Relevant evidence obtained from the collection of quantitative data

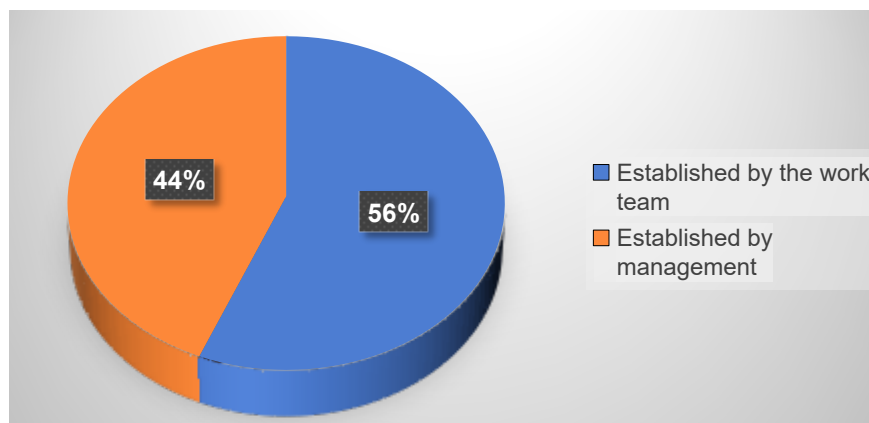


Figure 2. University services in general.

Regarding how university services are received, respondents indicate that 56.3% positively accept the services established by all technical teams, while 43.8% by management. This percentage indicates a lack of alignment between the management levels and non-participatory administration.

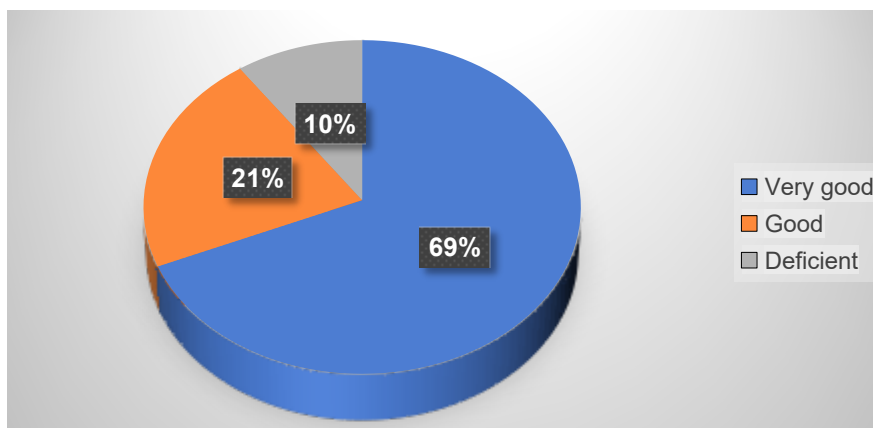


Figure 3. Library service

Regarding how users evaluate library services, of the respondents, 68.6% state that it is very good, 21.6% good, and only 9.8% consider this university service as deficient.

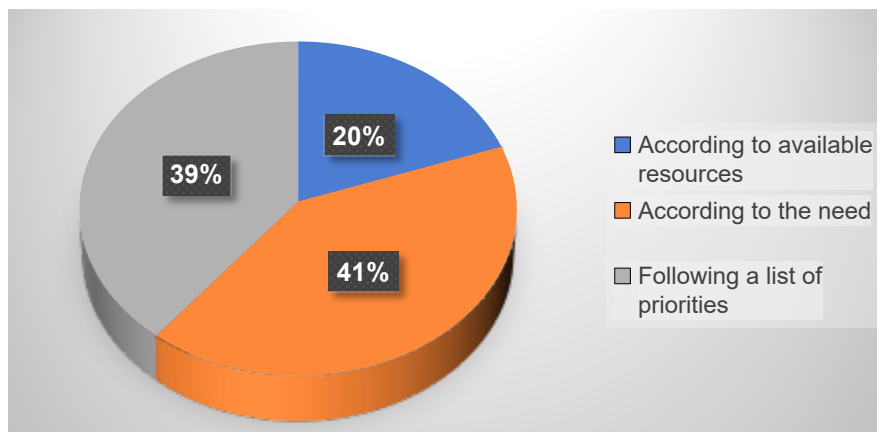


Figure 4. Tutoring service

19.6% of the tutored students' staff mention agreeing that academic advisories are given when resources are available, while 41.2% according to the need, and following a priority list 39.2%, indicating that internal communication strategies within the institution need to be reviewed. The high percentage, 41%, indicates organizations that work without planning.

2.1. The internal marketing strategies to achieve success in promoting university services

Internal marketing strategies play a crucial role in achieving success in promoting university services, as they focus on cultivating a positive internal environment that is reflected externally. Firstly, it is essential to actively involve the university community in understanding and adopting the institutional identity. This can be achieved through internal awareness campaigns, participatory events, and effective communication of the institution's mission, vision, and values. When staff, faculty, and students internalize these elements, they become natural ambassadors who contribute to the attractiveness and reputation of the university^[3].

Additionally, the establishment of a culture of collaboration and participation is key. Fostering open and transparent communication, as well as promoting participation in interdisciplinary projects and extracurricular activities, strengthens the sense of community and belonging. Creating spaces to share academic achievements, research, and outstanding projects reinforces the university's positive image, attracting potential students and strengthening the loyalty of the existing community^[17].

Lastly, according to Roa Rivera, in times of COVID-19, the strategic use of digital platforms and social networks has become imperative in the current landscape^[18]. Successful universities implement internal marketing strategies that leverage these tools to share achievements, highlight university life, and effectively connect with different audiences. Creating engaging and authentic content on these platforms contributes to building a strong and attractive university brand, which positively impacts external perception and, therefore, the success of promoting educational services. Together, these strategies not only generate a positive institutional image but also contribute to attracting and retaining students, recruiting talented faculty, and establishing strategic partnerships with industry and the community at large^[19].

2.2. Design of a prototype for the loyalty program and promotion of services at the study sites of the University of Panama

A loyalty program in an organization that has overlapped customer attention and *raison d'être* must create an

impactful strategy in internal marketing. The diagnosis in loyalty programs begins with the lack of rigor on the part of the organization to generate a response to the following questions such as:

- (1) Who is the customer?
- (2) How do they purchase?
- (3) When do they purchase and/or consume and/or use?
- (4) Why do they purchase?
- (5) Where do they purchase?
- (6) How much do they purchase and/or consume and/or use?

2.3. Justification of the program

One of the main reasons that lead an internal client of the University of Panama, whether faculty, administrative staff, or students at its Central Campus and the CRUSAM, to maintain loyalty towards service is related to the competitiveness of prices offered in the market. Particularly, this is evident in university self-management services. The customer's preference leans towards the organization that offers the necessary service or product at a lower cost than others in the market. Offering a product or service at a lower percentage than the competition acts as an incentive for the customer to become part of the organization's fixed and loyal clientele, which, in turn, translates into superior attention to these internal customers and contributes to repeat generations of purchases, thus driving profitability and competitiveness over time.

The perceived value by the consumer plays a fundamental role in their decision-making, guided by subjective perceptions, emotions, and personality attributes associated with the offering of products or services. Trust in the company is also a valuable asset that the customer places in the organization. Currently, participants in a commercial relationship often underestimate the importance of marketing, seeing it as a business crisis rather than recognizing it as the essential tool it is. Marketing, being the most crucial department in a company, drives product or service prescription by generating service acquisition through factors such as price, quality, product, and brand image, thereby contributing to the achievement of organizational objectives.

Regarding the description, this becomes essential, as a product is not simply sold for being the best, but for its utility that generates value, either through word of mouth or social networks, which today are viral communication tools. These platforms allow companies to efficiently reach consumers, provide the best service at a reduced cost, and consequently achieve desired profit objectives and achieve strong customer loyalty. It is crucial for companies to constantly monitor their customers, gathering valuable information about their purchasing behaviors, to continue offering their range of products promptly. These strategies, commonly used in more developed countries, allow them to effectively promote and disseminate their products and services at a lower cost compared to their competitors, thereby contributing to the creation of continuous added value.

2.4. General objective of the program

To establish a loyalty program for the direct and current consumers of the University of Panama.

2.5. Impact

The loyalty program will contribute to positioning the University of Panama as one of the most important higher education institutions in the country, by providing strategies that improve the relationships between the organization and its clients, primarily through efficient service.

2.6. Feasibility

Through all the results obtained in the market research, the need to create a Loyalty Program for the University

of Panama has been proven, to guarantee the loyalty of its clients.

2.7. Scope of the proposal

The customer loyalty program is intended to reach both current and potential clients, offering them differentiating elements in relation to the services offered by the University.

2.8. Implementation route of the loyalty program and promotion of services at the study sites of the University of Panama

Generating long-term customer improvement and strengthening the bond between the customer and the institution; to minimize weaknesses and threats and make better use of opportunities, it is necessary for the proposal to start as a business strategy, with positive and appropriate changes, specifically in the administrative processes that are in direct contact with the internal public. Finally, we can make use of information technology in such a way that it maximizes the value of the relationship with the external customer, benefiting and adding value to the company ^[20].

2.8.1. Business strategy for customer loyalty

Obtaining a business strategy for the University of Panama fundamentally requires focusing on customer retention and portfolio growth. These two dimensions will be interrelated, and each of them will have a different impact on the existing relationship with customers. Through excellent communication, which we must carry out through an analysis of the three proposed phrases, and adding value to the dimensions, the company will build its reputation and new market strategies ^[21].

2.8.2. Customer retention

To achieve this strategy, the University of Panama should focus its efforts on retaining its best customers. To simplify, to earn more money, it is healthiest for the entity to hold onto its best customers.

2.8.3. Acquisition of new customers

The University of Panama can acquire new customers by promoting leadership in its best services and pushing boundaries of performance regarding convenience and innovation.

2.8.4. Lost customer recovery strategy

Recovering lost customers from the institution is more suitable than seeking a new customer base, which may be loyal to our current competitors. This recovery is initiated by extracting the database of all our consumers who have not generated any income value in the last 4 months, thus reaching out to these customers with a new suggestion from our service portfolio, to show them that the university cares about them and accepts their suggestions.

2.8.5. Graphical representation

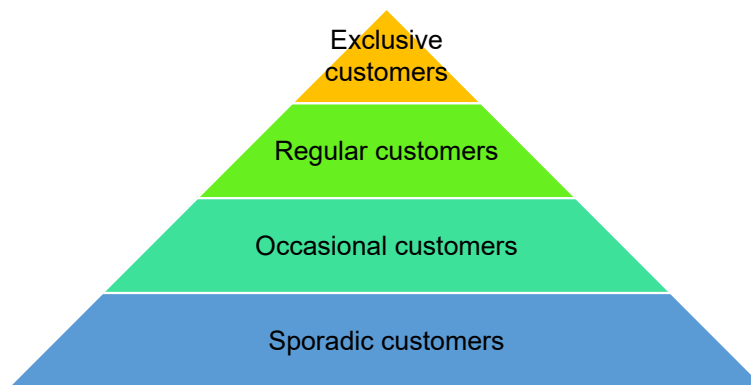


Figure 5. Triangle of types of internal customers

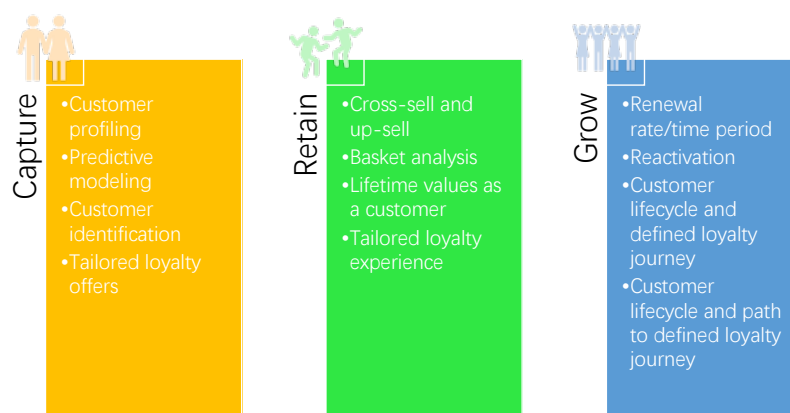


Figure 5. Loyalty scaling of university service

2.8.6. Increase customer base through referrals

The most important thing for a business is to keep selling more and the University of Panama aims to gain social recognition from its potential customers. Through this strategy, the organization should utilize its active customers as an information channel to reach new channels that connect us with new customers ^[22].

A referral database should be built so that after any type of negotiation, staff can request two to four referrals from each customer. Record the personal data of our current customers in the database, contact potential customers, and arrange a meeting or get them interested in learning about our range of educational services with their respective competitive value.

2.8.7. Attract new customers

Promote the services of the University of Panama by participating in vocational school fairs, concerts, open houses, and visits to primary and secondary education institutions, among others.

Start promotional activities door-to-door or through word-of-mouth, organized by sectors of the city and province, planning visits to schools, institutions, and public and private organizations.

3. Methodological approach

The methodology used for the research is crucial to obtain the information required for the study of the

phenomenon under investigation in the thesis to be developed. The debate on how to study the phenomenon and the technique to be used will be a matter of analysis and selection by each researcher:

The production of data (collection, analysis, interpretation, and textualization) is closely linked to the theoretical construction that illuminates the research, which is both an empirical act (addresses observable phenomena) and theoretical (poses hypotheses about the underlying structure of the observed relationships). The choice of a method/technique of work implies a decision (conscious or unconscious) that is sought to be made conscious through reflection, to overcome or attenuate partialities such as the social origin of the researcher, the researcher's profile and location as an analyst in the academic context, and the intellectualist partiality that makes us perceive the world (and the organizations within it) as a spectacle.

3.1. Paradigmatic and epistemological approach

The paradigmatic approach is positivist, which frames the route of the scientific process. A researcher needs to know in which of them they position themselves to have clarity in the conception of the reality of their study phenomenon, the relationship they must maintain with the phenomenon of interest and the methodology they must follow to answer the proposed research questions.

4. Conclusions

In conclusion, the effective implementation of internal marketing strategies at the University of Panama proves to be a determining factor in achieving success in promoting its educational services. The creation of a strong institutional identity, rooted in the values and culture of the university, is essential for influencing both internal and external perception. The active engagement of the university community, including staff, faculty, and students, as brand ambassadors, plays a crucial role in crafting a positive narrative that will resonate with future students and collaborators.

Furthermore, a culture of collaboration and internal participation not only contributes to a more enriching academic environment but also strengthens internal cohesion and projects a unified image outward. Transparency and effective communication are fundamental pillars in this process, allowing the university community to align with institutional goals and values, which, in turn, translates into more authentic and persuasive promotion.

Finally, in a constantly evolving digital environment, the University of Panama should strategically capitalize on digital platforms and social networks to amplify its message and reach wider audiences. Creating engaging and relevant content on these channels will contribute to consolidating a positive online presence and keeping the university at the forefront in terms of promoting educational services. Together, these internal marketing strategies will not only strengthen the University of Panama's position in the competitive educational landscape but also solidify its reputation as an innovative institution committed to academic excellence.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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