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## **Internal Marketing (IM): a literature review and research propositions for service excellence**

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**ABSTRACT:** The role of service employees is indeed relevant for the success of any service organization, especially those that process people and internal marketing can help firms to deliver service excellence. Even though it is not a new concept, since it was first mentioned in the literature more than 30 years ago, confusion still exist on what exactly internal marketing (IM) is. This theoretical paper reviews the IM literature and relates it to the service excellence at the same time that presents some research propositions to the development of the knowledge in this marketing area. A desk research methodology was adopted, and data base on international academic journals was accessed for the construction of this article. As a conclusion it was possible to speculate that something has to come before IM application in a company, that is a service orientation. Without that, it is impossible to have a successful IM program. Also, the variety of interpretations as to what IM constitutes did result to a diverse range of activities grouped under the umbrella of IM.

**Keywords:** Internal marketing, human resources management, service excellence.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

**A**

bout 34 years ago internal marketing (IM) was first proposed as a solution to the problem of delivering consistently high service quality by Berry et al. (1976). "There is a great deal of confusion in the literature as to exactly what IM is, what it is supposed to do, how it is supposed to do it, and who is supposed to do it.

One of the main problems contributing to this is that there does not exist a single unified concept of what is meant by IM" (MOHAMMED; AHMED, 2000, p. 449). The variety of interpretations as to what IM constitutes has led to a diverse range of activities being grouped under the umbrella of IM. The purpose of this paper is to examine the IM concept and present its scope by tracing the evolution in the concept from its beginning to the current time. Another objective is to present some research propositions as a way to stimulate further development of the knowledge in this marketing area. The term IM appears to have been first used by Berry et al. (1976) and later by George (1977) and Thompson et al. (1978, p. 243) and Murray (1979). Today, there is still some confusion on what IM is, and this is the start point for this paper. Kollat et al. (1970) talking about the importance of standardized definitions, claim that "so many definitions make it difficult and hazardous to compare, synthesize and accumulate finds" (p. 329). On the other hand, Jacoby (1978, p. 88) says that "nothing is so practical as a good theory". Neglecting theory can lead to error in interpreting data and poor research results. So, reviewing the literature on IM can help researchers interested in this topic to better comprehend this marketing tool.

A considerable body of research in the marketing literature has focused on the "service encounter," which is defined as "the period of time during which a consumer directly interacts with a service" (JOSEPH, 1996, p. 55). Every episode where a customer or key buying influence interacts with a service company, its products, people, facilities, or communications represents a moment of truth because each episode can shape a customer's impressions and judgments about the firm (JOSEPH, 1996). Berry et al (1976, p. 8) affirm that IM is "concerned with making available internal products (Jobs) that satisfy the needs of a vital internal market (employees) while satisfying the objectives of the organization". On the reality a service organization's capability for satisfying the needs of its external customers depends in part on that firm's ability to satisfy the needs of its internal customers. According to Berry (1981) there are several forms of IM. "What they all share in common is that the customer is inside the organization. One can think of internal marketing as pioneering

employees as internal customers, jobs as internal products and offering internal products that satisfy the needs and wants of these internal customers, considering the objectives of the organization” (p.34). The people who buy goods and services in the role of consumer, and the people who buy jobs in the role of employee, are the same people, and the “exchange takes place between employers and employees is no less real than the exchange that takes place between consumers and companies” (p. 34).

Bansal et al. (2001, p. 61) indicate that “an increasingly service-oriented economy asks companies to attract and retain customers to ensure a sustainable competitive advantage”. To achieve this goal, organizations must focus their efforts on developing and sustaining an organizational “culture that emphasizes internal customer well-being as a means to attract and retain external customer patronage. In service-providing organizations, the quality of service is embedded in the quality and performance of human resources” (p. 61). Such critical marketing events as “first encounter” and “moment of truth” are the works of frontline employees (p.64). Most of the initial work on IM focused on employee motivation and satisfaction. It was believed that a firm must have satisfied employees in order to have satisfied customers, because so much of what customers of service companies buy is labor. The basic way of achieving employee satisfaction was to treat employees as customers (BERRY et al., 1976, p.8). This is what is called the employee satisfaction phase on the development of IM (Mohammed & Ahmed, 2000). Later it was recognized that the relationship between buyer and seller not only affects the customer's decision to buy a service or go back for more, but also provides a marketing opportunity for the company. Employees should, therefore, “be sales-minded as well as customer-orientated. The object of IM was therefore to get motivated and customer conscious employees, and to achieve good co-ordination between employees dealing directly with the customer and the company's support staff” (Mohammed & Ahmed, 2000, p.9). This phase of IM theory is called the customer-orientation.

According to Mohammed and Ahmed (2000) some authors now explicitly began to recognize that IM could help a company to achieve its strategy. In particular, it was believed that if strategies are to be implemented more effectively, internal conflicts must be overcome and internal communications improved. IM today is seen as “a way of reducing departmental isolation, reducing internal friction and overcoming resistance to change. It is now applied to any type of organization, not merely service companies”. This characterizes what is called the strategy implementation and change management phase on the evolution of IM literature

(MOHAMMED; AHMED, 2000). IM lacks a widely accepted definition, but usually it encompasses three main themes: “service-mindedness and customer-oriented behaviors, focusing staff attention on the internal activities that need to be changed in order to enhance marketplace performance and creating motivated and customer-oriented employees” (MOSLEY, 2007, p. 128).

Ahmed and Rafiq (2003, p. 1177) indicates that employees as customers concept that was proposed by Berry (1981), leads to the premise that just as external customers, internal customers desire to have their needs satisfied. “Fulfilling employee needs enhances employee satisfaction. The higher the employee satisfaction, the higher the possibility of generating external satisfaction and loyalty” (p.1177). This variety of interpretations as to what IM constitutes to do have resulted to a diverse range of activities grouped under the umbrella of internal marketing. In Brazil some terms illustrate this confusion: “endomarketing” and “Marketing applied to Human Resources”. In addition, the scarcity of implementation models that was evident in the literature reviewed by Papasolomou (2006) “has resulted in a variety of implementation formats, which confuse and create ambiguity rather than clarity and understanding” (p. 197). Such a proliferation of definitions “merely underscores the growing interest among service providers to get employees to adopt the marketing concept of customer orientation and to become part of the company's team” (JOSPEH, 1996, p.54).

## **2. INTERNAL MARKETING DEFINITION**

The term internal marketing (IM) is used to describe the application of marketing internally within the organization. “Every department and every person is both supplier and a customer, and the organization’s staff works together in a manner supporting the company strategy and goals”. IM relates to all functions within the organization, but it is vitally concerned with the management of human resource (COLLINS; PAYNE, 1991, p. 261).

Greene et al. (1994, p. 5) offer a definition of IM as the “promoting of the firm and its product(s) to the firm’s employees, and for this strategy to be successful top level management must fully embrace it”. “IM means applying the philosophy and practices of marketing to the people who serve the external customer so that the best possible people can be employed and retained and they will do the best work possible” (p. 8). More specifically, “IM is viewing employees as internal customers, jobs as internal products, and endeavoring to design these products to meet the needs of these customers better” (p. 8). Joseph’s (1996, p. 55) definition of IM is “the application of marketing, human resources management, and allied theories, techniques, and principles to motivate, mobilize, appoint, and manage

employees at all levels of the organization to continuously improve the way they serve external customers and each other" (p.55). Many definitions of IM view it as either a concept, a philosophy or a management practice, as either relating to human resources management, services marketing or change management (LINGS; BROOKS, 1998, p. 327). Figure 1 presents a perspective of the IM definition in terms of its interaction with external marketing. It is possible to see that “interactive marketing” is what links IM and external marketing during the service encounter. Front-line employees are responsible for ultimately delivering the service (product) to external customers. In services, like it is exemplified here, the production and consumption take place on the service encounter.

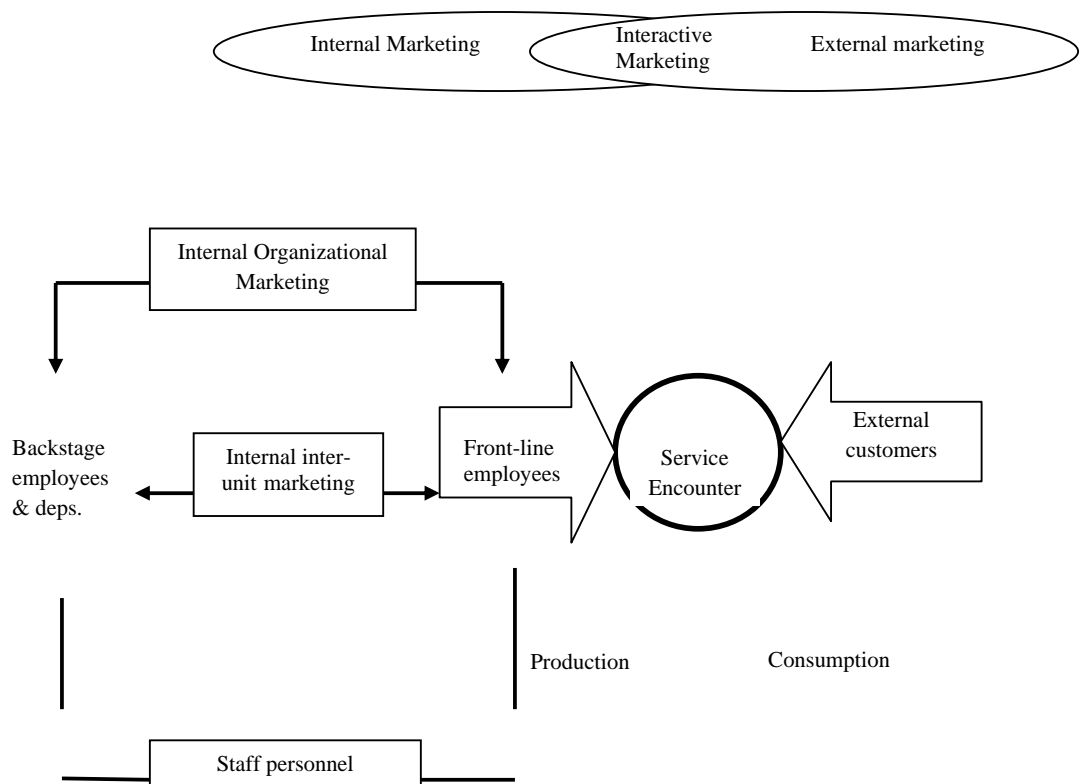


Figure 1 - The internal Marketing Interaction  
Source: Joseph (1996, p. 56).

Initially the impetus behind the development of the IM concept was the “concern that because contact employees involved in services become involved in what is called interactive marketing, it is essential that they are responsive to customers’ needs” (RAFIQ; AHMED, 1993, p. 220) Bowers et al. (1990) present the perspective that the “customer-contact position has been noted for its importance in delivering service quality. Contact employees are service marketers as well as service providers” (p. 58). How they interact with customers is often

contact employees are the company to the customers. Particularly for the service organization, “marketing has an additional, internal, role that is to ensure that service employees are customer conscious and also satisfied with their job” (GOUNARIS, 2008p. 403).

Figure 1 points out that to the correct management of IM, backstage employees are important resources since they make it possible for front-line employees to deliver the service. Internal organizational marketing goes from backstage and front-line employees, and also impact what Joseph (1996) calls staff personnel. The figure pictures a chain that links IM to external marketing through interactive marketing, a concept related to the service encounter that needs both IM and external marketing to succeed.

Papasolomou (2006) suggests that “people are critical to the success of organizations. Companies that select, develop, manage and motivate their workforce to produce outstanding business results have an extraordinary competitive advantage that others cannot copy” (p. 195). The objective of IM is to get motivated and customer conscious employees in order to achieve service excellence. The use of marketing in the IM context suggests an emphasis on the application of marketing techniques, approaches, concepts, and theories aimed at achieving customer satisfaction in the context of internal customers, in order to achieve success in the external market (p. 195).

It appears that the results regarding the employee satisfaction – customer satisfaction relationship are controversial, it should be noted that the empirical findings in favor of this relationship are derived based on multilevel analysis (GOUNARIS, 2008, p. 403). But this does not take away the relevance of IM for the “right” employee management, based on marketing philosophy. George (1990, p. 69) points that “IM can be used in the three following ways: assistance in developing a service culture, maintaining a service culture, and introducing new products as well as new marketing activities”.

Cardy (2001) points that customer service holds great potential as a means for managing the internal work environment. “Focusing on people rather than on jobs can be a difficult transition, but it may be critical for the survival and success of the organization” (p. 13).

This way, one can define IM as proposed initially by Berry et al (1976, p. 8) since they point out that it is “concerned with making available internal products (Jobs) that satisfy the needs of a vital internal market (employees) while satisfying the objectives of the organization” and it is complemented by Greene et al. (1994, p. 8) when they say that IM is

“viewing employees as internal customers, jobs as internal products, and endeavoring to design these products to meet the needs of these customers better”.

### **3. HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT AND INTERNAL MARKETING**

Collins and Payne (1991) affirm that IM “relates to all function within the organization, but it is vitally concerned with the management of human resources” (p. 261) and describes the application of marketing internally in the organization. By now, we understand that every department and every person inside an organization is both a supplier and a customer. Also, supplier and customers must work together “in a manner supporting the company strategy and goals” (p. 261).

IM has been described as a philosophy for managing the organization’s human resources based on a marketing perspective. “A market-oriented human resources manager is more likely to make an impact on the success of a company, considering it tends to be more effective in both demonstrating the relevance of human resources to all the company, helping other managers to increase their productivity”. Marketing provides an “action framework and a practical approach by which the human resource manager can offer effective solutions to key corporate problems” (COLLINS; PAYNE, 1991, p. 269).

Rafiq and Ahmed (1993) identify the main elements of IM as: employee motivation and satisfaction; customer orientation and customer satisfaction; inter-functional coordination and integration; marketing-like approach; and implementation of specific corporate or functional strategies. According to George (1990) IM operates as a holistic management process to integrate the multiple functions of the organization in two ways: “1) to ensure that the employees at all levels understand and experience the business and its various activities and campaigns

in the context of an environment that supports customer consciousness, and 2) to ensure that all employees be prepared and motivated to act in a service oriented manner” (p. 64). The base of this philosophy is that management wants employees to do a great job with customers, then it must be prepared to do a great job with its employees.

That is, internal exchanges between the organization and its employee groups must be operating effectively before the organization can be successful in achieving goals regarding its external markets. Thus, “the internal marketing concept states that the internal market of employees is best motivated for service-mindedness, and a customer-oriented behavior by an



active, marketing approach, where marketing like activities are used maternally” (GEORGE, 1990, p. 64).

Mudie (2003, p. 1263) tells us that the customer has been the focal point of marketing, the very reason for its existence. “Being a customer is about pleasure, happiness and satisfaction” (p.1272). The notion of an internal customer suggests that “every employee is both a supplier and a customer to other employees within the organization. Internal customers generate goods and services for the end customer and, as such, are crucial to providing customer satisfaction” (CONDUIT; MAVONDO, 2001, p.12).

Having satisfied and motivated employees will influence positively customer satisfaction, through more satisfactory encounters with contact personnel. From this viewpoint, “employment” (job description and employee-related policies) is the internal “product” and first-line employees the company’s internal “customers” (GOUNARIS, 2008a, p. 69).

Encouraging the organization’s employees to “buy their own services and products in both consumption and psychological terms can boost sales and confidence for customer service delivery”. It requires considerable co-ordination since promotion to external customers will also largely influence employees (VAREY, 1995, p.50). Paraskevas (2001, p.285) affirms that in an ideal working environment, internal service encounters would result in successful interdepartmental relationships. Several important components for implementing an internal marketing process require attention: “management support, training, internal communications, personnel administration, and external activities” (GEORGE, 1990, p. 68).

Vasconcelos (2008, p.1255) says that people do not simply “buy” a job description. “Actually, the process of exchange between employers and workers are much more complex than that. Although it is believed that assurances of reasonable job security, continual training, and development aid to establish a social exchange relationship”. Employers should offer pleasant job experiences and receive, in exchange, employees’ expertise and dedication. “Such premise – and there is no reason to believe on contrary – can lead to satisfying organizational performance.

Theoretically, it will fulfill both parties since it is managed in a proficient manner”. It is a task for the human resource manager to closely work with the marketing manager in an attempt to make it work as expected. By that we mean, IM and Human Resource are separate entities, but must work together for the success of the program implementation and results.

George (1990, p. 68) indicates that one of the marketing like activities necessary to implement an IM program is “market research activity, that could bring an understanding of employee capabilities (attitudes, skills) to participate in an internal marketing strategy, necessary to the success of internal marketing practices”. Services marketing and management pose special challenges because services deal with "processes rather than things, with performances more than physical objects". Three management functions— marketing, operations, and human resources—are intimately joined in what it has dubbed the "service trinity" to create and deliver services (JOSEPH, 1996, p. 55).

Making everybody a customer in his relations to others inside the organization allows one to view what happens in a firm from a true process-management perspective (GEORGE, 1990, p. 67). According to Bansal et al. (2001) some relevant aspects of human resources management practices in achieving internal customer commitment, job satisfaction, and trust are relevant to the success of IM management. “Internal customer commitment deals with the employee’s involvement and attachment to their company. Job satisfaction is the evaluation of the job characteristics and emotional experiences at work. Trust in management can be described as having trust in the words and actions of those in management” (p. 66).

It was possible to see that IM and human resources management are closely related, but different concepts. One works in a way to help the other so that the firm is able to deliver service excellence, the next topic here discussed.

#### **4. ELEMENTS OF INTERNAL MARKETING AND SERVICE EXCELLENCE**

The boom of service industry in the 80s has led to the development of a theoretical corpus specific to this sector, and the work of Gronroos (1982, 1989), Lovelock (1983) and Parasuraman et al. (1988), for instance, have contribute a lot to the understanding of specific characteristics of the service business, that includes IM.

One of the elements of IM presented by Bansal et al. (2001, p. 67) is employment security, that is defined as “providing employees with the reasonable assurance that they will not be laid off, even during tough economic cycles. Any slowdowns in productivity or profitability may result in transfers, retraining, or job rotation, thus avoiding the necessity of layoffs”. Another element is extensive training since almost all “descriptions of IM practices emphasize the importance of training because frontline employees need the requisite knowledge and ability to recognize and solve problems and to ensure high-quality products and services” (p. 68).

If an organization is serious about attracting and retaining the best and brightest candidates, “providing them with a higher-than-industry-average salary is one way of accomplishing this objective. What is the message that paying people well sends? Higher pay is a way of communicating the value of employees to the organization” (p.68). This way, “higher-than-industry-average salaries and pay partially contingent on performance will be positively associated with job satisfaction, loyalty to the firm, and trust in management” (Bansal et al., 2001, p. 69).

In order to build trust, it is important that organizations function in a transparent manner, with a service focus. To do so, companies must be prepared to openly share with their members, “information on their strategy, financial performance, and expenditures – sharing information is a key factor to IM. Employee empowerment is an essential way to impact employee attitudes and behaviors and, hence, the level of service provided to the external customer” (BANSAL et al., 2001, p. 69). Finally, consistent with a focus on information sharing and empowerment, organizations with an emphasis on internal customers should also work to reduce the status distinctions that make some people feel more or less valued than their colleagues.

Service excellence means delivering what the customer wants at the first encounter. In an external marketing perspective this is related to service quality, to exceed customer expectation, to make it right the first time. For that to happen, internal customers must also have what they want, since they are customers.

It is believed that internal customer satisfaction will lead to external customer satisfaction, which represents a way to offer service excellence. “Although the importance of internal customer satisfaction levels on external customer satisfaction levels has been increasingly emphasized, there remains a dearth of literature that comments on the exact nature of the relationship between the two” (BANSAL et al. 2001, p. 71).

By satisfying the needs of its internal customers, an organization upgrades its capability for satisfying the needs of its external customers. This is true for most organizations (GREENE et al. 1994, p. 8). Service excellence calls for a marketing plan. Figure 2 presents a service plan with IM mix and external marketing mix.

The organization must have clear at a strategic level the importance of customers (both internal and external), for the success of the service production and deliver. Issues like employee empowerment, customer satisfaction and more important, the marketing mix

management. IM mix consists of the programme, product, price, communication and distribution, according to Pierce and Morgan (1991).

The plan should link the mission, objective, strategic audit and marketing tactics to both IM and External marketing. Services are intangible and people dependent on nature. Having employees satisfied is a key topic for service excellence. What we are trying to stress is that, with the application of IM a service organization would be able to deliver service excellence better than the ones that do not have it a service philosophy or as a strategic tool.

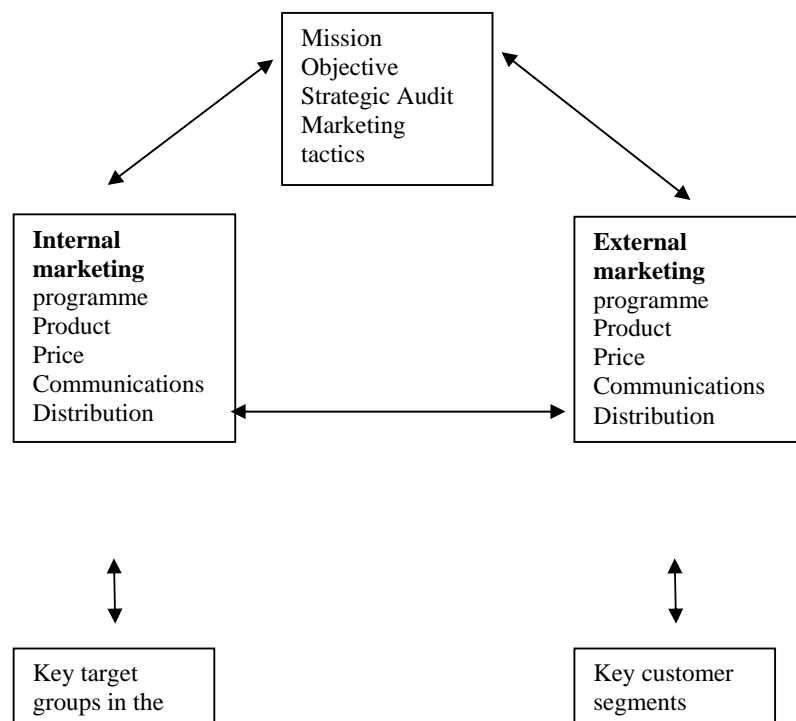


Figure 2 - Marketing Plan  
Source: Pierce and Morgan (1991, p.84)

Gremler et al. (1994) claims that “successful service organizations understand well the importance of carefully monitoring and managing customer satisfaction” (p. 34), and service encounter can play an important role whether customer satisfaction will occur or not. The satisfaction of internal customers can be influenced by service encounters with service suppliers internally in the organization. Internal service encounters are the interaction between customers within a firm. “In order to have their needs met, employees often depend upon internal services provided by others in the organization. Like external customers, internal customers engage in numerous service encounters to satisfy the many needs they have in the course of carrying out their job responsibilities” (p. 37).

Service excellence is a subjective concept, like perceived quality; it is in the eyes of the beholder. Despite of its subjective character, excellence can be achieved by offering a superior service, with committed employees, willing to serve external customer better than the competition. IM has an important role in service excellence.

Before presenting the research proposition it is interesting to remind of the key elements present on the definitions of IM presented before:

- Making available internal products to employees and satisfying organization's objectives (BERRY, 1976).
- Application of marketing internally in the organization, a marketing oriented human resource management (COLLINS; PAYNE, 1991).
- Promoting product and firm to employees; Applying the philosophy and marketing practices internally the organizations; Employee as customers and jobs as products (GREENE et al., 1994).
- Applying marketing and human resources management to motivate and manage employees (JOSEPH, 1996).
- The concept or philosophy or management practice applied to human resources management, service marketing or change management (LINGS; BROOKS, 1998).
- Jobs as products and employees as customers (GOUNARIS, 2008a).

Taking in account the elements presented, we proposed that IM is applying marketing management to the relationships between employees and their organization, where in an internally perspective, jobs are products and employees are customers and suppliers, with the support of human resource management.

## **5. RESEARCH PROPOSITIONS FOR IM AND SERVICE EXCELLENCE**

Based on the literature review, we now present some research proposition that could help develop knowledge on this area of marketing and also improve service excellence on the practical side. This was the second objective of this paper. The propositions are not exhaustive, they only seek to encourage more research in this subject often relegated to a secondary position in the marketing academy in Brazil.

The first research proposition deals with IM orientation of a firm and how it relates to employee job satisfaction. Gounaris (2008) examined the impact of IM orientation on the

application of IM practices and employee job satisfaction. Even though it is not clear that satisfied internal customers will lead to external satisfied customer, there is some evidence for that. This way: **P1** – Investigate the relationship between IM orientation and employee satisfaction and external customer satisfaction.

This topic needs to be clarified and probably positivist methods with the application of a survey with the right measurement of the constructs will help to verify the power and validity of this relationship.

The second proposition takes in account the service quality literature, more specifically the SERVQUAL model (PARASURAMAN et al., 1988), and brings it inside the organization with the work of Frost and Kumar (2000), that proposes INTSERVQUAL (Internal service quality model), where they imply that service quality is a key for the success of IM. Considering this, we propose **P2** – Verify the validity of INTSERVQUAL in different service sectors in search for its dimensions stability and validity.

Lings and Greenley (2005) worry about the operacionalization of IM. They proposed the development of the IM orientation scale and its measurement as a multidimensional construct. Jou et al. (2008) presented a scale to asses “employee’s perception of their company’s internal marketing measures” (p. 66).

Considering this, we state **P3** – To apply Lings and Greenley scale in the Brazilian context to validate it, and also to verify the impact of IM orientation on service quality. IM seems to make more sense to be applied in private companies where exists flexibility to empower customers, to make changes in a fast pace and to adapt to the customer’s demands.

Papasolomou (2006) found that the bureaucracy present in banks in UK was a barrier for the IM implementation. This way, we propose **P4** – Very the possibility to apply IM in governmental owned organizations in Brazil, identifying the obstacles, if they exist, for a successful IM program in governmental organizations.

Service excellence is a complex construct that needs to be investigated in conjunction with IM. **P5** – Identify what leads an organization to be considered as having excellence in service and the role, if any, IM has on this.

Finally, we propose that **P6** - a research to be conduct using meta analysis to verify how academics are studying IM in the Brazilian context, and if the term “endomarketing” is a good one to represent IM in the academic literature.

## 6. CONCLUSION

IM can be an important allied to service marketing management in a scenario of global competition. Service excellence is a goal for most service organizations, and it heavily depends on employees' performance to deliver high quality products on service encounters. This paper aimed to review the literature on IM and to attempt to clarify its scope and theoretically discuss some issues related to IM concept, scope and its relationship with human resources management. The ultimate objective of IM is to motivate employees in order to achieve service excellence. The use of marketing in the IM context suggests an emphasis on the application of marketing techniques, approaches, concepts, and theories. This has the objective of achieving customer satisfaction in the context of internal customers, which could lead to the success in the external market context.

The variety of interpretations as to what IM constitutes to do have resulted to a diverse range of activities grouped under the umbrella of internal marketing. In Brazil some terms illustrate this confusion: "endomarketing" and "Marketing applied to Human Resources".

The international literature here reviewed is clear about the use of only one term: internal marketing. Maybe it is the time to the Brazilian marketing academy to unify the term and its concept, avoiding confusion and helping the advance of the knowledge in this service literature field. IM is an important topic that needs more research and proper application on the real world, considering the benefits presented on the papers here analyzed.

After reviewing more than thirty academic papers, it was possible to clarify the IM concept, its elements, its relationship with human resource management, and also to present some research propositions for the development of the knowledge in the scientific field. As a conclusion it is possible to speculate that IM concept is still applied only partially in most organizations and its concept plurality to date, is one of the key element for this to happen.

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