



# The influence of internal marketing by airlines on customer-oriented behavior: A test of the mediating effect of emotional labor



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## A B S T R A C T

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Deep acting

Most studies on internal marketing and customer-oriented behavior have not examined the correlation of these factors with emotional labor, and there are even fewer papers focusing on this subject with respect to airlines in particular. Thus, this study is to include flight attendants' emotional labor in the model and test its mediating effect between internal marketing and customer-oriented behavior. This study treats two measures of internal marketing as antecedent variables and treats surface acting and deep acting in emotional labor as mediators to construct a model of customer-oriented behavior. A survey of flight attendants from six airlines was conducted, and the research validated the model by SEM, demonstrating that internal marketing significantly and positively influences customer-oriented behavior. In the analysis of the mediating effects of emotional labor, surface acting and deep acting show a partially significant mediating effect on the "relationship between value of needs and customer-oriented behavior". However, surface acting and deep acting show a more significant mediating effect on the "relationship between authorized autonomy and customer-oriented behavior". Finally, this study proposes managerial implications and suggestions for future research.

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## 1. Introduction

Many studies on the implementation of marketing remain dominated by their external focus on customers. For the most part, researchers have ignored the need to focus internally on service employees, especially those who come into contact with customers (Lings, 2004). While the body of knowledge on internal marketing has been continually increasing since the 1970s, there is still relatively little empirical research on this subject (Gounaris, 2006). For this reason, an empirical study of internal marketing on customer-oriented behavior was conducted.

Internal marketing has become a tool that firms use to enhance their employees' abilities to match their organizational goals. As suggested by Gronroos (1981), firms should treat their employees as internal customers, introducing the organizations to them and enhancing their satisfaction. These actions will result in customer-focused, market-oriented companies that encourage all employees to recognize their roles in addressing customers' needs, thus adopting customer-oriented service.

Technological advances have resulted in the globalization of economic activities. International business travel is increasing, and it is now common for people to travel by air. Thus, the aviation industry has evolved from its traditional role as a mode of transportation into a service industry that focuses on providing value to customers. In airline companies, flight attendants have more contact with the customers than any other employees. Instilling service consciousness and customer orientation in flight attendants is the ultimate goal of internal marketing (Hsiao, 1997).

Flight attendants are the front-line service personnel of airlines, and they impress people with their elegant manners. In accordance with the responsibilities assigned to them by the airlines, they demonstrate their expertise and provide gracious, friendly, comfortable and satisfying in-flight service (Hochschild, 1983). However, flight attendants also experience physical and mental stress from aircraft take-offs and landings, jet lag after long flights, radiation exposure while in flight, and the need to maintain a friendly attitude while they are busy providing food service. All of these experiences increase the mental pressure on flight attendants, which is reflected in their emotional reactions. According to Morris and Feldman (1996), when engaging in interpersonal interactions, employees will make an effort to exhibit the emotions expected by the organization. When the degree of

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emotional labor required by the flight attendants' specific role at work is higher, they will encounter more difficulty. Furthermore, in considering the typical characteristics of flight attendants' work, Williams (2003) found that these characteristics readily lead to emotional exhaustion due to low job autonomy and long working hours.

Emotional labor is different from physical labor and intelligent labor. To create interest in the organization, management should seek to manage how employees show their emotions. Lin (2000) studied emotional labor and found that it could be measured using five dimensions: emotional display rule (EDR), surface acting (SA), deep acting (DA), variety of emotions required (VER), and frequency and duration of interactions (FDI). According to Ekman (1973), display rules are norms and standards of behavior indicating what emotions are appropriate in a given situation and how these emotions should be publicly expressed. In surface acting, employees modify and control their emotional expressions. For example, employees may fake a smile when in a bad mood or interacting with a difficult customer. In other words, the act of expressing sanctioned emotions during interpersonal interactions becomes more demanding when expression requires increased effort to control true feelings (Morris and Feldman, 1997; Lin, 2000). Hochschild (1983) defined deep acting as individuals trying to influence what they feel in order to fulfill the role they are asked to play. In other words, deep acting is when an employee must expend effort to regulate emotions. There is a need to actively invoke thoughts, images, and memories to induce a certain emotion (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993) and that involves treating a customer as someone deserving of authentic expression, with the positive feedback from a customer increasing personal efficacy (Broheridge and Grandey, 2002). In sum, employees must manage these reactions through either surface or deep acting in order to adhere to organizational rules about emotional displays. When emotional display rules are inconsistent with or even contrary to the employee's feelings, they must modify outward emotional displays, often by suppressing their own emotions (e.g., anxiety, unhappiness, tiredness, anger, hopelessness) and faking the required expression (e.g., cheerfulness). This is indicative of surface acting (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993; Broheridge and Grandey, 2002). In contrast, if the emotions of service employees are relatively well attuned to emotional display rules, they might be inspired to internalize those rules, understand the reasons behind them, and thus acknowledge and experience the expected emotions (Naring et al., 2006); this reaction, in essence, is deep acting (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993).

Most studies on internal marketing and customer-oriented behavior have not examined the correlation of these factors with emotional labor, and there are even fewer papers focusing on this subject with respect to airlines in particular. The following studies relate to airlines, Ng et al. (2011) tested the job satisfaction of flight attendants with antecedents and outcomes. Chen and Kao (2011) investigated the job stress of flight attendants with antecedents and consequences. This study intends to investigate flight attendants' emotional labor in the model to test its mediating effect between internal marketing and customer-oriented behavior for the first time. Additionally, to make up for the lack of empirical evidence and identify the mediator variable for internal marketing and customer-oriented behavior, this study employed a two-stage focus group interview. To ascertain the actual experience and feeling of attendants, and to assist in the design of the questionnaire, the first stage was to hold an informal discussion with senior managers of various airline companies. In the second stage, after having collected and sorted the questionnaires, we interpreted the reasonability of the questionnaire by inviting scholars and experts to discuss the results.

## 2. Theory and hypotheses development

### 2.1. Relationship between internal marketing and customer-oriented behavior

Kotler and Armstrong (2012) define internal marketing as training employees who have contact with customers to work as a team and develop customer-oriented behavior. Cahill (1996) indicated that in large-scale service industries, organizational members treat each other as customers. Thus, service providers treat their external customers with customer consciousness. Piercy and Morgan (1991) emphasized that marketing skills can be applied to firms' internal markets to trigger employees' service consciousness and customer-oriented behavior; Hartline et al. (2000) suggested that organizations should design sound organizational structures, processes and incentives to encourage employees to practice customer-oriented behavior. They found that to increase employees' customer orientation, organizations must implement a customer orientation strategy along with formal procedures in which supervisors attempt to empower employees and employees can become committed to the organization. Conduit and Mavondo (2001) examined three international enterprises in Australia, and determined that the internal marketing process includes educational training, management support, internal communication, human resource management and external communication. All of these elements are related. For example, there is significant correlation between internal communication, human resource management and customer orientation. Gounaris (2006) suggested that adopting an internal marketing orientation influences the degree to which companies implement internal marketing strategies as well as the effectiveness of such efforts. Consequently, employees have the "power" to void management's attempt to focus on their customers (Conduit and Mavondo, 2001; Harris and Ogbonna, 2000).

In addition, Bansal, Mendelson and Sharma (2001) propose a model that relates six key internal marketing practices (i.e., employment security, extensive training, generous rewards, sharing information, employee empowerment, and reduced status distinctions) to external customer satisfaction and loyalty, mediated by internal customer attitudes (i.e., loyalty to the firm, job satisfaction, and trust in management) leading to extra role behavior directed at external customers. Lings (2004) further noted that internal marketing has implications for: (a) internal aspects of organizational performance, such as employee retention (see e.g., Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; Comm, 1989; Tansuhaj et al., 1988), employee motivation and morale (see e.g., Piercy, 1995; Van Haastrecht and Bekkers, 1995), employee satisfaction (see e.g., Piercy, 1995; Bowen, 1996) and organizational commitment (see e.g., Berry and Parasuraman, 1991; Piercy and Morgan, 1990); and (b) external aspects of performance such as service quality (see e.g., Gronroos, 1981), customer satisfaction (see e.g., Piercy, 1995) and, ultimately, financial performance (e.g., Tansuhaj et al., 1988; Crawford and Getty, 1991).

Based on the first stage survey, in which we held informal discussions with senior managers of various airline companies, we received valuable information regarding the approach toward internal marketing of flight attendants at airline companies. For the dimension in value of needs, airlines adopted the following actual practices: (1) Arranging annual training courses, (2) Arranging vigorous camps to enhance team cooperation, (3) Providing psychological counseling services and listening to the requirements of team members, (4) Inviting professionals to speak on various topics, such as basic cosmetology, wine tasting, language study, artistic and cultural appreciation, and so on (airline companies would like to enhance flight attendant character through these above-mentioned activities.), and (5) Participating in many public

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