



Winning Internal Customers

by Jim Payne



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In considering the title of this article, the obvious questions that come to mind are: Who are my internal customers, and why must I win them over? Aren't we all on the same team if we work for the same company? Certainly everyone is aware of the needs and methods for marketing to external customers, but few specifically identify and implement effective marketing to their internal customers. However, the best external marketing programs may never get off the ground without strong internal support from the top down and out to the field.

When I initially took on the role of a global marketing manager for the services business within a large corporation, I assumed that I would be a contributing member of the team that managed the business. I thought that I would share objectives, strategies, and motivations with my hardware and software counterparts and that we would work together toward making the business as a whole a success. At my first official product team meeting, I immediately felt like an outsider as I acquired the (not so affectionate) nickname, “the service guy.” In the words of the late actor Rodney Dangerfield, I quickly realized that the service guy “don’t get no respect.”

Unfortunately, the environment that many professionals in services management face each day can make them an outsider when it comes to serious consideration for resources, priorities, and funding. All too often, our hardware and software counterparts avoid discussing service wherever possible, and many feel that it adds cost to the price of their products and

makes them uncompetitive in the marketplace. They also want to avoid mentioning that their products could fail, and they find services difficult to position.

In the real world, we all know that the services segment of the business provides frequent touchpoints with the customer, maintains strong customer credibility, provides differentiation, develops upsell opportunities, and creates ongoing annuity for the business. So how do we raise our level of significance in the business and help our counterparts to understand that we can and do provide real benefits? The answer is to exert a conscious effort to market to your internal customers the value that the services business brings to the company.

Although we all have heard the term “internal marketing” and may feel that we do a certain amount of it, few of us really have considered it as an important strategic tool for our business. Internal marketing should be used to establish a positive image of the services business across all facets of the corporation. With a general foundation of support established, internal marketing also can be used to obtain increased commitment for specific projects when additional resources and funding are



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needed. From my experience, as much as 50 percent of marketing efforts should be internal campaigns aimed at developing adequate foundation and ongoing support for the external marketing campaigns. Internal marketing must be a conscious effort that is applied to all levels of management and employees.

So how do you begin to improve your services business status in the company through internal marketing? The first and most critical step is to approach the initiative as a marketing project and take it on with all of the elements that are used for marketing to your external clients. This means that you should do some research in order to understand your internal customers' needs, build a strategic plan, define a budget, specify communications tactics, document implementation plans, and create timelines. This may sound like a lot of work, but just like your external marketing campaigns, the return on your investment can be substantial.

Growing the Services Marketing Budget

Traditionally, services marketing budgets are thin when compared to our hardware counterparts. In most cases, services marketing budgets don't provide the funding that many services marketing executives need in order to market their value adequately. Contrary to what some might believe, services can be marketed effectively using traditional tactics that have been designed to communicate the real benefits of the service product to the client. In fact, using well-designed marketing materials creates

tangibility for the invisible product and provides an ongoing reinforcement.

One key objective of the internal marketing campaign could be to obtain a greater share of the marketing budget in order to allow more effective communications strategies and tactics. This requires efforts to clearly define the services business value for the internal customer, which may include increased revenue, improved differentiation, and greater customer loyalty.

Building the Services Message

Be prepared with your internal marketing messaging, and be sure that it is based on "benefits." You can use PowerPoint presentations, research summaries, financial projections, and handout materials at meetings to help communicate your message. With on-demand printing technology, robust sell sheets and tools can be created in small quantities without the cost of offset printing. Provide elevator speeches for service employees so that they are prepared to communicate their value to others when the opportunity arises. The objective of the message is to help your internal customers realize that services don't add costs, that services help to sell hardware/software, and that services can improve the bottom line.

Who Are Your Internal Customers?

The list of internal customers can and should be very broad, as there are mutual benefits for both services and non-services employees to truly understand the value that services bring to the business. Certainly there are tiers of significance to your internal marketing, but benefits still exist at all employee levels.

Your internal customers could include:

- Non-services employees.
- Services employees.
- Management/executives/owners.
- Marketing.
- Hardware and software sales teams.
- Finance.
- Services sales force.
- Design teams.
- Production employees.
- Anyone and everyone in the company—up, down, and sideways.

When and Where to Market Internally

Don't wait for a reason to begin marketing to your internal customers. The sooner you get started, the sooner you will begin reaping the benefits. Key times for targeting your internal campaigns could include:

- **Business strategy sessions.** Take these opportunities to position how the services segment of the business can help to build increased value and differentiation.
- **Prior to submission of budget justifications.** Be sure to do some internal marketing early on in order to ensure that your significance is understood.
- **Product commercialization.** This can be a good time to discuss and continually reinforce the services message with hardware and software teams.
- **Product launch team meetings.** These meetings provide the opportunity to explore integrating services and hardware/software messaging.
- **Every day and everywhere.** Any event or any point of contact, from conversations at the coffee pot to a ride on the elevator, can provide opportunities to communicate and reinforce the services value.

Key outlets for marketing to your internal customers include:

- **Management meetings.** These meetings can be the key to ultimate success in improving the services perception throughout the company. Convince the leader, and the troops will follow.
- **Internal newsletters.** Include a regular section on the services segment of the organization so that employees see services as an integral part of the business.
- **Internal group meetings.** Speaking at other internal group meetings offers the opportunity to present the services message, get feedback from employees, and obtain further understanding during question-and-answer sessions. Contact the facilitator of other team meetings and invite yourself to be a guest presenter.
- **National/regional services meetings.** Attending and speaking at national and regional services meetings is an excellent way to ensure that field employees understand the company's direction. In addition, field employees have a wealth of voice-of-the-customer information that is often untapped. Be sure to incite discussions and seek their input on customer perceptions, needs, and concerns.
- **Sales meetings.** These events can offer valuable opportunities to present the services message. Get with your sales team to discuss working in your message around or during keynote presentations, educational sessions, and exhibitions.
- **Conference calls.** Many teams use regularly scheduled conference calls to discuss project status, business strategies, and outstanding issues. You can offer to become an ongoing resource for the group on services issues.
- **Business trips.** Take advantage of

opportunities to speak with other employees about the services business during travel, meals, and after hours.

Don't wait to be invited to meetings and internal marketing opportunities; invite yourself. Develop opportunities to convey the services message and to become part of as many teams as possible.

How to Market Internally

It is important to do your homework and know the numbers and trends so that you are prepared to market your message to internal customers. You must convey the "right" message, or they will create their own.

Corporate ladders are hard to climb, so starting your messaging at the bottom requires broad and sustained efforts in order to build significant momentum in changing mindsets and obtaining support. The key is to start at the top (or as high as possible in the corporation) and recruit believers at high levels. Executives are always looking for opportunities that can offer a significant return on their investment and provide short- and long-term benefits to their business. With executive buy-in, the message will trickle

down and significantly improve your likelihood of broad support of the masses.

Be sure you have done your homework before you make your pitch to management. Knowing the numbers and trends and identifying any risk creates strong credibility. Be sure to identify and sell the value and benefits in your messaging. Using tangible samples and graphical figures creates a clearer picture in their minds. Leave behind hardcopy materials highlighting key points that will reinforce your message. Define your specific needs in terms of funding, resources, management support, and timelines. Be sure to confirm the details of their support so that it is clear what is expected of them. Finally, thank them for their support and continue to keep them informed of progress and any significant roadblocks that may occur.

Before proceeding with marketing to additional internal audiences, take some time to further develop and improve the message based on feedback from the management meeting(s). Evaluate and refine objectives and adjust strategies as needed. Then supplement your knowledge with additional



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research studies and refine the numbers if necessary.

Begin to draft and improve internal and external marketing and implementation plans. Define your internal audiences in logical order of importance, taking into account those who are the decision makers and who takes direction from whom. Create an internal marketing schedule that supports the logical order of hierarchy. Evaluate and improve your presentation and develop marketing materials for your program or campaign.

Concentric Marketing Rings

With top management support intact, the key is to continue to communicate the message into expanding concentric rings of employees based on their relative significance to the business. (See

Figure 1.) If you consider top management as the core of the concentric rings, the first ring should include those employees who have the next most significance to the business. Then go on to additional rings of employees based on their importance.

The first concentric ring of influence typically should include employees who are the key players. This group generally includes services business owners, services sales teams, hardware/software business owners, and marketing/sales and financial managers. These managers have significant stakes in the business that may include a direct link to their compensation plans. They also respond to good return on investment and well-designed business cases based on as much research and facts as possible.

With the first ring of support in your court, expand to the next rings of employees. These could include inside sales, contract administration, call centers, parts management, service support staff, newsletter editors, branding department, Web site developers, product design, and manufacturing. Increasing awareness and understanding of the services business among a broader internal audience will further promote and solidify support.

Close-Loop the Campaign

As with external marketing, be sure to listen, learn, and adjust. Refine the strategy, scope, and messaging based on what has been learned from employee feedback. Report back to management on the level of support and anything learned that resulted in changes to the initial plans. Be sure to notify internal employees of any external launch activities and significant marketplace events.

Key Conclusions

Winning internal customers is not only a process for the marketing department; it is the responsibility of all services management. It is a way of doing business and not just a one-time event. Building internal credibility for your services business allows the company to take full advantage of the value that service brings. Everybody wins with positive internal perception of the services segment. Development of integrated strategies and campaigns can create product differentiation and ultimately increase the share, strength, and stability of the entire business.

Begin winning internal customers today, and you will be the winner in the long run with improved credibility, support, funding, and confidence in your services business. ▼

Figure 1

