Managing Internal Communication for Employee Engagement Towards Customer Satisfaction: A Case Study of a Thai Restaurant Chain

Panet Serirungsun*

Abstract

This qualitative research investigates how employee engagement towards customer satisfaction can be driven through internal communication at a Thai restaurant chain. The study delves into mechanisms the company uses to internally communicate customer-centered issues to its members, how internal communication brings customer-focused employee engagement to the firm, and the approaches to overcome potential barriers to internal communication. Data collecting methods mainly consist of in-depth interviews with five top executives and four focus-group discussions with five employees in each group. With qualitative data analysis, results show that the indispensable off-line communication formats include the highest-ranking executive's being good role model of customer-satisfaction enthusiast, training center, mobile teaching, and informal face-to-face meeting while e-mail and Line application are on-line channels particularly working for management-level employees. To drive employee engagement in customer-centered activities and overcome internal communication barriers, the firm exploits communication mechanisms and tactics, including implementing Kaizen projects and Im-Jai group meetings as two-way communication, delivering clear and easy-to-understand messages to employees, and making contents truly audience-oriented by applying the WIIFM concept. The communication framework proposed in this study suggests research potentials for communication and organization disciplines and can be used as a guideline by corporate communicators for designing internal communication strategies to drive employee engagement in any business-related concerns.

Keywords: Internal Communication, Communication Barriers, Employee Engagement, Customer Satisfaction, Thai Restaurant Chain

* Research Coordinator and Lecturer, Faculty of Business Administration at Chitralada Technology College
  The Bureau of Royal Household, Sanam-Suepa, Sri-Ayutthaya Rd., Dusit, Bangkok 10300, THAILAND
  E-mail: panet.ser@cdtc.ac.th; panet.sen@gmail.com

การจัดการการสื่อสารภายในเพื่อการมีส่วนร่วม
ของพนักงานในการสร้างความพึงพอใจให้แก่ลูกค้า:
กรณีศึกษาเครือข่ายร้านอาหารสัญชาติไทย

ปเนต เสรีรังสรรค์*

บทคัดย่อ

งานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพชิ้นนี้ศึกษาเครือข่ายร้านอาหารสัญชาติไทยแห่งหนึ่งว่าสามารถขับเคลื่อน
การมีส่วนร่วมของพนักงานในการสร้างความพึงพอใจให้แก่ลูกค้าผ่านการสื่อสารภายในได้อย่างไร
การศึกษาลงรายละเอียดถึงกลไกที่บริษัทใช้สื่อสารประเด็นที่มีลูกค้าเป็นศูนย์กลางไปถึงพนักงาน
เหตุใดการสื่อสารภายในจึงนำมาซึ่งการมีส่วนร่วมของพนักงานที่เน้นลูกค้าเป็นสำคัญให้แก่
องค์กรได้ ตลอดจนแนวทางในการเอาชนะอุปสรรคที่มีต่อการสื่อสารภายใน วิธีการเก็บข้อมูล
ส่วนใหญ่ประกอบด้วยการสัมภาษณ์เชิงลึกผู้บริหารระดับสูง 5 ท่าน และการสนทนากลุ่ม 4 กลุ่ม
แต่ละกลุ่มมีพนักงาน 5 ท่าน ผลการวิเคราะห์ข้อมูลเชิงคุณภาพแสดงให้เห็นว่า รูปแบบการสื่อสาร
ออฟไลน์ที่จำเป็นอย่างยิ่ง ได้แก่ การเป็นแบบอย่างที่ดีของผู้บริหารสูงสุดในฐานะผู้ที่กระตือรือร้น
ต่อการสร้างความพึงพอใจให้แก่ลูกค้าอย่างแรงกล้า สถาบันฝึกอบรม การสอนเคลื่อนที่ การประชุม
แบบเห็นหน้าอย่างไม่เป็นทางการ ขณะที่อีเมลและไลน์เป็นช่องทางการสื่อสารออนไลน์ที่ใช้ได้
ผลเฉพาะกลุ่มพนักงานระดับบริหาร เพื่อขับเคลื่อนการมีส่วนร่วมของพนักงานในกิจกรรมที่มี
ลูกค้าเป็นศูนย์กลางและเอาชนะอุปสรรคต่อการสื่อสารภายใน บริษัทใช้กลไกและกลยุทธ์การสื่อสาร
อาทิ การใช้โครงการไคเซ็นและการประชุมกลุ่มอิ่มใจในฐานะการสื่อสารสองทาง การส่งข้อความ
ที่ชัดเจนและง่ายต่อความเข้าใจถึงพนักงาน การทำเนื้อหาที่เน้นผู้ฟังอย่างแท้จริงโดยใช้
แนวคิด WIIFM กรอบการสื่อสารที่นำเสนอในการศึกษานี้สามารถใช้ต่อยอดงานวิจัยด้านการ
สื่อสารและองค์กร ตลอดจนใช้เป็นแนวทางสำหรับนักสื่อสารองค์กรในการออกแบบกลยุทธ์การ
สื่อสารภายในเพื่อขับเคลื่อนการมีส่วนร่วมของพนักงานในประเด็นต่าง ๆ ทางธุรกิจได้

คำสำคัญ: การสื่อสารภายใน อุปสรรคในการสื่อสาร การมีส่วนร่วมของพนักงาน ความพึงพอใจ
ของลูกค้า เครือข่ายร้านอาหารสัญชาติไทย

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* ผู้ประสานงานการวิจัยและอาจารย์ประจำคณะบริหารธุรกิจ วิทยาลัยเทคโนโลยีจิตรลดา
สำนักพระราชวัง สนามเสือป่า ถนนศรีอยุธยา ดุสิต กรุงเทพฯ 10300
อีเมล: panet.ser@cdtc.ac.th; panet.sen@gmail.com

1. Introduction

Mom: "Whenever we want to have this kind of food style, why do we've to come to this Thai restaurant chain again and again? Don't you want to try the others?"

The researcher: "So, are you going to change your selection next time?"

Mom: "Come on! You know that my answer is absolutely "No." I love the ways service staff serve us, and I'll still come back to this restaurant definitely. Hahaha!"

The above conversation between the researcher and his mother provoked his curiosity whether similar answers would come out from different people. So, the researcher did an experiment by sending a question to more than hundreds of his friends via the Line application asking "Which restaurant are you going to pick or recommend for this particular food style?" The researcher received feedback from almost all contacts, and about 90% would go for the same Thai restaurant chain for their choice. The most provided reason for choosing the place was because they felt very satisfied with staff services when eating there every time. Undoubtedly, the researcher's initial trial was not properly conducted in accordance with statistical methodologies and principles; its results, however, have sparked the researcher's inquisitiveness about what corporate philosophy this restaurant has instilled into its employees and how it has used internal communication to engage all staff members in the firm's policies and activities rooted from such value.

Though all human beings must eat to live their lives, it does not mean every business operating in the food-related industry will survive, or even staying alive, it may not last long. In Thailand's food service industry, very few restaurants can continuously run their business and consistently expand new branches nationwide; nonetheless, this situation is not the case for this Thai restaurant chain.

After conducting preliminary research by reviewing the company's published information, the researcher finds that, by the end of September 2017, the firm has been serving a variety of food products to customers for more than two decades, and, in terms of market share, it is the first leader with significant growth surpassing all of its main competitors in the same business. Currently with more than 300 restaurant

outlets, the firm plans to open new branches every year. The key resources, including the mushrooming branches countrywide, the sophisticated central factories for food preparation and distribution with ISO 9001:2015, Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Point and Good Manufacturing Practices certifications, and over 10,000 well-trained staff, are good predictors of the company's future growth.

Looking at this Thai restaurant chain through the academic lenses, the researcher also discovers that the organization appears to meet all three criteria for sustainable enterprises (Avery, 2005). First, the company has shown strong financial performance of two-digit net profit margin, return on equity, and return on assets for many consecutive years. Second, the firm has demonstrated the capability to withstand several economic and social difficulties, including the 1997 Tom Yum Goong crisis as well as the 2011 flooding disaster and years-long political conflicts in Thailand. Third, the organization has continuously maintained a leadership position in the Thai food service business. It has been one of the most powerful brands in the opinion of Thai people, which can be proved by a number of awards received from numerous institutions.

With academically and practically fascinating characteristics, this Thai restaurant chain is an interesting business that is worthwhile further studying.

It has been discovered that this restaurant's central corporate philosophy is "to always pay close attention to and care about customer satisfaction." The belief sounds simple, but it helps pave the way for guiding all employees' behavior unique in the perception of customers and answer why the researcher, his mother, most of his friends, and a substantial number of clienteles, once again, are very pleased and joyful with staff services when having meals there every time. The most interesting matter left for investigating is how the company has used internal communication to drive customer-focused employee engagement.

The customer satisfaction is the key to future corporate success; the evidence is the changing nature of competition—decreasing brand loyalties and buyer focus on price versus quality—and the increasing emphasis of companies on keeping customers happy (Müller, 1991). Therefore, it is worth researching how sustainable organizations utilize internal communication's functions and manage its limitations to

successfully engage employees in customer-satisfaction philosophy and activities. The study is significant and can be considered one of the appealing areas of organizational research since it can help companies gain and maintain their competitive advantage over rival firms.

However, there is very little literature linking three issues of customer satisfaction, employee engagement, and internal communication altogether; there is no such study in the Thai food service industry, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, as well. To add further knowledge on the subject and gain valuable practical information on internal communication design and strategies, this research, thus, investigates how employee engagement in building customer satisfaction can be driven through internal communication using the Thai restaurant chain in the above stories as an actual case study.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Customer Satisfaction

One of the few things linking many disparate recommendations made to business executives over the last several decades has been the advocacy and insistence on achieving a focus on customer satisfaction as the most important route to high sustained performance for companies (Piercy, 1995). Kotler (1968) and Levitt (1960) have brought the marketing concept of devoting all corporate efforts to customer satisfaction to the fore in their marketing management literature. The ultimate goal of quality and service strategies suggested by many scholars (e.g., Berry & Parasuraman, 1991; Crosby, 1979; Garvin, 1988; Oakland, 1979; Parasuraman, Zeithaml, & Berry, 1988) is to satisfy customers. Day (1990) and Piercy (1992) suggest putting customer satisfaction issues at the very top agenda for all firm members is an absolute must for market-driven strategy that can create value for organizations.

Customer satisfaction has become an important focus of corporate strategy. In the past, many executives trusted their intuitive sense that higher customer satisfaction would lead to improved company performance (Homburg, Koschate, & Hoyer, 2005). There have been a variety of researches supporting the belief that customer satisfaction

has a positive relationship with financial performance (e.g., Anderson, Fornell, & Rust, 1997; Chi & Gursoy, 2009; Hallowell, 1996; Reichheld & Sasser, 1990; Rust & Zahorik, 1993). It is because customer satisfaction has shown a significant impact towards the improvement of financial performance of for-profit organizations and is also a key driver of firm's long-term profitability and market value (Gruca & Rego, 2005) that most companies have recognized it as an indispensable part of their corporate strategy (Fornell, Mithas, Morgeson, & Krishnan, 2006).

2.2 Employee Engagement

Employees, in the eyes of customers, are ambassadors for the organization (Hulberg, 2006) and generate the greatest impact to customers' interaction with the business (Ram, Bhargavi, & Prabhakar, 2011). In the service industry, customers will become unsatisfied if they feel that they receive poor services from the direct frontline employees and the indirect backline staff members. To compete on customer satisfaction, companies must engage employees in their own responsibilities properly (Schneider, Macey, & Barbera, 2009).

The term "employee engagement" has obtained substantial popularity for several years; yet, it remains defined inconsistently. For this study, it is not the researcher's intention to propose a newly grounded definition of employee engagement; instead, the researcher examines how a company convinces its members to participate in customer-focused strategy. Among several others, Robinson, Perryman, and Hayday (2004) propose that "employee engagement is a positive attitude held by the employee towards the organization and its values. An engaged employee is aware of business context and works with colleagues to improve performance within the job for the benefit of the organization. The organization must work to develop and nurture engagement, which requires a two-way relationship between employer and employee." Their definition of employee engagement is chosen for and fits to this study since it implies the need of two-way interaction from both employer and employees.

Many researchers have tried to determine the drivers of employee engagement. Research report by Penna (2006) states five categories of engagement drivers ranked in ascending order: pay, working hours, and benefits; learning and development;

opportunity and promotion; leadership, trust, and respect; as well as value, meaning, and purpose at work. Development Dimensions International (DDI) (2005) suggests five things a manager must do to form a highly engaged workforce: aligning efforts with strategy; empowering; promoting and encouraging teamwork and collaboration; helping people grow and develop; as well as providing support and recognition where appropriate. The top three employee engagement drivers reported by Towers Perrin (2003) include senior management's interest in employee well-being, challenging work, and decision making authority. Robinson et al. (2004) specify six attempts that can help create employee engagement: two-way internal communication, good quality line management, effective internal co-operation, a development focus, commitment to employee well-being, and clear HR policies and practices. Here, the researcher explores only one key driver of employee engagement by Robinson et al. (2004)—"internal communication."

2.3 Internal Communication

Effective internal communication is a crucial and challenging area for successful organizations as it affects the ability of strategic managers to engage employees and achieve objectives (FitzPatrick, 2004; Robertson, 2004; Welch & Jackson, 2007). Organizations are increasingly sensitive to the importance of their reputation and their vulnerability to their own employees' behavior; they understand both the risk of not communicating with their people and the need for communicating well. By creating more engaged staff members through effective internal communication, firms can tap into emotional commitment overtime (Quirke, 2008).

Internal communication defined as the first frontier in the battle for the customer (Chong, 2007) can be divided into two main formats: traditional, or off-line, and on-line. The prior includes face-to-face and written communications (Kataria, Kataria, & Garg, 2013); the latter consists of e-mail, e-forums, intranet, on-line chat rooms, and social media (Miller, 2012). Each channel's effectiveness depends on its fit in a strategic communication process and its contribution to the business goal's bottom line (Kalla, 2005). Barrett (2002) argues face-to-face communication is the best way to reach employees probably because it enables receivers to listen and observe non-verbal communication transmitted by senders and respond with instant feedback

(Daft & Lengel, 1986; Lee, 2010). Besides, companies should emphasize bottom-up communication as well (Vaaland & Heide, 2008).

One crucial concern when internal communication is implemented is that communication contents should be targeted towards internal stakeholders; well-defined messages may encourage employee engagement in companies' activities (Kataria et al., 2013). In addition, rather than treating employees as a single public, they should be segmented based on structural levels of demographics (Welch & Jackson, 2007); by doing this, firms can ensure the information directed to any audiences is as relevant and meaningful for them as possible (Barrett, 2002). The overlaps between the values of individuals and those of the companies themselves are also essential since they enable employees to behave in meaningful ways to them personally, which, in turn, results in their commitment to the organization; this can be achieved by using the concept of "What's In It For Me?" or "WIIFM" whenever communicating to workforce (Sullivan, Sullivan, & Buffton, 2002).

Cho, Bonn, Han, and Lee (2016) argue that restaurant employees have more possibility of confronting demanding customers than staff members in other industries and must repeat great service performances more frequently because of customers' excellent service requirements. Additionally, in the restaurant industry in particular, employee services are a key component making customers satisfied (Chow, Lau, Lo, Sha, & Yun, 2007; Namkung & Jang, 2008; Ryu & Han, 2010). Moreover, according to Slåtten and Mehmetoglu (2011), employees, especially frontline people, play a vital role in customer satisfaction in the hospitality industry. All these indications imply that restaurateurs need engagement from employees, inevitably. King (2010) finds that informed employees are critical to excellent service provision, which makes effective internal communication more crucial in the intensely competitive environment existing in the service industry (Wan, 2010). Despite such a need, research regarding effective communication practices in the hospitality workplace is lacking (King & Lee, 2016).

As there have been not many studies on the key issue of how firms achieve customer satisfaction by engaging employees in their duties through effective internal communication, practically, this research reduces the gap in the literature by giving insight into the communication practices of the successful Thai restaurant chain.

3. Research Objective and Questions

This study aims at investigating how employee engagement in building customer satisfaction can be driven through internal communication at the Thai restaurant chain. To complete the purpose, the researcher formulates research questions as follows: (1) How does the company internally communicate customer-centered issues to its staff members?, (2) How can internal communication bring customer-focused employee engagement to the firm?, and (3) What can be potential barriers to effective internal communication and the ways to overcome them?

4. Methodology

The firm has three business operations: restaurant branches, central factories, and head office. By the nature of business, the branches and the factories are key drivers of this Thai restaurant chain's success since the former represent the main profit-generating units while the latter deal directly with the major costs of preparing, cooking, and distributing food for all branches. This research, thus, focuses on internal communication in these two sections only. Data collecting methods consist of in-depth interviews, focus-group discussions, and review of information published about the organization.

Conducting in-depth interviews with the top management allows the researcher to identify the company's corporate philosophy and policies. It also provides guidance on how the firm's internal communication has evolved over time. The five top management interviewees comprise the chief executive officer (CEO), the human resources (HR) director, the HR manager, the assistant director from the branch operations department, and the director of the central factories.

Considering the lines of management in restaurant branches and central factories in Table 1, the researcher arranges four focus-group discussions. Since more than 80% of all employees work in the branches, this study, therefore, organizes three groups from the first-tier outlets in terms of customer-satisfaction scores, evaluated by the company itself, and one group from the factories. Two restaurant managers and three assistant restaurant managers compose the first discussion group; this group

is necessary because these people play a crucial role of medium communicators between top executives and middle-level management or supervisors in the branches. The second group includes five supervisors responsible for ensuring that all staff members in his/her outlet are aware of the company's strategies and activities. The third and fourth groups hold shop-floor employees with different job responsibilities from the branches and the factories. All participants have worked at the restaurant for at least two years before the time of this study, so they get accustomed to the firm's internal communication and can provide insightful information for the study. Tables 2 to 5 detail brief information about participant backgrounds in each discussion group.

Table 1 Lines of Management in Restaurant Branches and Central Factories

Restaurant Branches	Central Factories
Chief Executive Officer/Chief Operating Officer/Chief Human Resources Officer	Chief Executive Officer/Chief Operating Officer/Chief Human Resources Officer
Director	Director
Assistant Director(s)	Assistant Director(s)
Regional Managers	Department Managers
District Managers	Assistant Department Managers
Restaurant Managers	Functional Managers
Assistant Restaurant Managers	Assistant Functional Managers
Supervisors	Senior Officers
Staff Members: Receptionists/Order Takers/Servers/Cooks/Cashiers/etc.	Staff Members

Table 2 Participant Background for 1st Focus Group: Restaurants' Managers/Assistant Managers

Participant	Position	Age	Period of Employment	Educational Degree
1	Restaurant Manager	25-30	6 Yrs 4 Mos	Bachelor
2	Restaurant Manager	25-30	5 Yrs 8 Mos	Bachelor
3	Assistant Restaurant Manager	35-40	14 Yrs 7 Mos	Bachelor
4	Assistant Restaurant Manager	25-30	3 Yrs 6 Mos	Bachelor
5	Assistant Restaurant Manager	25-30	2 Yrs 3 Mos	Bachelor

Table 3 Participant Background for 2nd Focus Group: Supervisors

Participant	Position	Age	Period of Employment	Educational Degree
6	Supervisor	35-40	15 Yrs 6 Mos	Grade 9
7	Supervisor	40-45	22 Yrs 11 Mos	Grade 9
8	Supervisor	25-30	7 Yrs 10 Mos	Grade 9
9	Supervisor	25-30	2 Yrs 1 Mos	Grade 9
10	Supervisor	25-30	6 Yrs 11 Mos	Diploma

Table 4 Participant Background for 3rd Focus Group: Restaurant Branches' Employees

Participant	Position	Age	Period of Employment	Educational Degree
11	Receptionist	25-30	2 Yrs 3 Mos	Grade 12
12	Order Taker	30-35	6 Yrs 9 Mos	Grade 12
13	Server	40-45	5 Yrs 1 Mos	Grade 12
14	Food Preparation Staff	35-40	7 Yrs 10 Mos	Grade 9
15	Cook	40-45	10 Yrs 8 Mos	Grade 6

Table 5 Participant Background for 4th Focus Group: Central Factories' Employees

Participant	Position	Age	Period of Employment	Educational Degree
16	Quality Control Officer	40-45	14 Yrs 5 Mos	Grade 12
17	Store Officer	35-40	14 Yrs 9 Mos	Grade 12
18	Driver	40-45	24 Yrs 10 Mos	Grade 12
19	Production Officer (Vegetable Kitchen)	25-30	3 Yrs 5 Mos	Grade 6
20	Administration	25-30	4 Yrs 3 Mos	Vocational Certificate

After obtaining the qualitative data, the researcher uses the template analysis to investigate how internal communication is used by the Thai restaurant chain to drive employee engagement in corporate philosophy and activities.

5. Findings

With qualitative data analysis, the results show that there are four main communication parts in this restaurant; their communication entities, type, and objectives are detailed in Table 6. Although each part has its own main objectives, combining those purposes helps bring the ultimate goal of driving employee engagement in customer-satisfaction philosophy and activities.

Table 6 The Thai Restaurant Chain's Four Main Communication Parts, Together with
Their Communication Type and Main Communication Objectives

Part	Communication between		Type of Communication	Main Communication Objectives
	1st Entity	2nd Entity		
1	Top Management	Branches' Employees	One-Way (1st --> 2nd)	• To create awareness of customer-satisfaction information for employees
2	Top Management	Factories' Employees	One-Way (1st --> 2nd)	• To engage employees in customer-satisfaction philosophy and activities
3	Top Management	All Employees	Two-Way	• To receive staff members' feedback and thoughts on customer/employee-related issues • To motivate employees to firmly commit to customer satisfaction
4	Branches' Employees	Factories' Employees	Two-Way	• To have staff members exchange knowledge and experience of customers' needs and behaviors • To encourage teamwork between branches' and factories' employees

To complete the communication objectives, each part has its own communication channels or approaches visualized in Figure 1. The figure is the proposed framework that links customer satisfaction, employee engagement, and internal communication altogether. To encourage employee engagement in customer-satisfaction philosophy and activities, well-crafted messages, the WIIFM concept, and monetary rewards are needed; these three factors are, thus, included into the framework. The framework can be used as a guideline by corporate communicators for designing internal communication strategies to drive employee engagement in any business-related concerns.
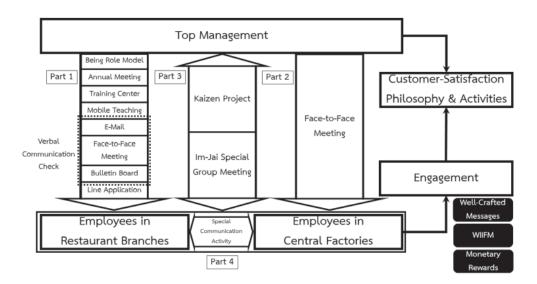

Figure 1 **Proposed Customer Satisfaction-Employee Engagement-Internal Communication Framework**

The following subtopics explain details of internal communication in each part and communication barriers, together with the solutions.

5.1 Internal Communication in Restaurant Branches (Part 1)

The corporate philosophy of customer satisfaction has deeply rooted in this restaurant since the first day of its opening. In the beginning when there are less than ten branches, conveying such idea to all employees is not difficult. Nonetheless, when it reaches about thirty outlets, the challenge of internal communication emerges. The internal communication approach that the company has used is delivering the customer satisfaction philosophy to the management-level employees in branches first. Employees in this level include chief officers, directors, assistant directors, regional managers, and district managers. The "customer first" concept has been passed on to these people through the CEO's speeches during the company's formal annual meetings and being good role models of customer services of the CEO, the other chief officers, and their heirs. The HR director shared a story of CEO's customer services as follows:

"During public holidays, CEO is not going anywhere. He randomly goes to some restaurant branches to see whether their operations smooth. When in a branch, he doesn't want his employees to take care of him, but customers, instead. Many times, he does serve meal to customer by himself. Learning from the CEO's practices, his descendants and the company's management, thus, naturally absorb the importance of customer attention. Being a good role model of customer services of the CEO is the best way of internal communication; no approach is better than this."

To communicate the focus on customer satisfaction to huge numbers of employees at branches, the management decide to establish the "Training Center" as a main internal communication channel. The center's major goal is to ensure that all employees commit to the best possible service to fulfill customers' needs. All restaurant managers, assistant restaurant managers, supervisors, and other service-level staff members have to go through training and capability building courses specially designed around the theme of "customer first." Trainers include the management-level employees already receiving the corporate principle of "customer satisfaction" from the CEO.

A question "If a restaurant branch is extremely far from the training center, and going to the center is not reasonably practical for employees, how can all staff members in that restaurant absorb the philosophy of customer satisfaction?" may now arise. An on-line education is one way to solve the problem; nevertheless, it cannot provide emotional sensitivity and people interaction. Alternatively, the organization chooses to create the "Mobile Teaching" system as a communication way for far away employees. The mobile teaching system here refers to sending well-trained and experienced teachers who deeply understand the company's philosophy and customer service practices to spend some time teaching employees at distant outlets.

When working in a branch, employees have continually received the company's activities or issues related to customer satisfaction through on-line and off-line channels summarized in Table 7.

Table 7 Internal Communication Channels Used by the Restaurant Branches' Employees

Channels	Major Characteristics
E-Mail (On-Line)	• E-mail helps the company reach all branches in a very short time. • The firm has sent e-mails containing corporate information only to restaurant manager, assistant restaurant manager(s), and supervisor(s). After getting e-mails, they will have a meeting to form a sound understanding of received news together. Supervisor(s) will next thoroughly inform the rest of employees about information through face-to-face meeting. • E-mail is not suitable for other lower-level staff members since: (1) they are so busy servicing customers that they usually do not have time to get connected with on-line channels. (2) some employees, especially the old ones, do not use smart phones or are not familiar with e-mail or internet technology.

Table 7 Internal Communication Channels Used by the Restaurant Branches'
Employees (Cont.)

Channels	Major Characteristics
Face-to-Face Meeting (Off-Line)	• Face-to-face meetings have done daily and informally. • Face-to-face interaction should be done in a small group or even in an individual setting to ensure every member's acknowledgement of information.
Bulletin Board (Off-Line)	• Bulletin or notice board is used to give updating notifications for less important information.
Line Application (On-Line)	• Line application is widely utilized by top executives and management-level employees to quickly communicate information during days off. • The application does not work for lower-level staff members because: (1) they need privacy and want to take a break from day-to-day work (2) they have a mindset that Line groups are for management-level employees only; they should not involve themselves too much in those channels.

To ensure all members in a branch well recognize the company's information, regional and district managers responsible for the branch's operations will regularly go to that outlet and let some of its employees, in a random manner, tell them what information they had received from the above channels during the recent period of time. According to the Assistant Operation Director, this verbal communication check is considered one of the key communications for all branches.

In outlets, there are two main features of communication contents that encourage employee engagement in customer-satisfaction activities: contents relating customer satisfaction to employees' benefits and to employees' jobs. Table 8 details contents' characteristics and evidence.

Table 8 Contents' Characteristics and Evidence: Restaurant Branches

Contents' Characteristics	Evidence
Relating "Customer Satisfaction" to "Employees' Benefits" • This follows the WIIFM concept: People often think of their own interests first. So, management-level employees motivate staff members by convincing that the organization's core value of customer first is truly aligned with their benefits.	• Customers will be satisfied if they pay the reasonable meal price. One way to keep the price is to reduce the cost through the energy cost savings program. • To engage employees in such program, a supervisor chooses to address their benefits, instead of talking about customer satisfaction. She persuades her subordinates that saving water and making every effort to conserve the electricity can save a lot of money, leading to more profits for the branch. As a result, profit share to each employee will surely be increasing. • It turns out that this approach make employees commit to the assigned policy seriously since they believe they will get more profit share in the end.
Relating "Customer Satisfaction" to "Employees' Jobs" • The findings suggest employees feel happy and motivated in their work if they know their responsibilities create customer satisfaction.	• A focus-group participant working in the kitchen has learned from his seniors that customers will enjoy their meals and not complain about his branch's services if he works with accuracy to prevent mistakes of providing customers with wrong dishes. • Since he has realized that his responsibility is crucial, he has been very proud of his jobs and truly committed to work standards set by the company.

5.2 Internal Communication in Central Factories (Part 2)

Before passing the philosophy of customer satisfaction to employees, the factory executives first explain the term in their own way. They interpret customer satisfaction in three dimensions: quality, cost, and delivery. First, quality of food prepared by the factories prior to distribution to restaurant branches is the most vital factor affecting customer perception. The management believe that high food quality leads to customer satisfaction.

Another thing related to customer satisfaction is food costs. If customers can have quality food at reasonable prices, the company believes they will come back to restaurants again and again. For that reason, the factories have determinedly kept food costs along its supply chain down.

The last dimension is the delivery of prepared foodstuffs to restaurant outlets. All branches have received food products from the factories only, and if foods cannot be delivered in time or with correct and complete sets of orders, these situations will affect the branches' operations and services. In addition, delivery costs will be hiking up if processes of food delivery are not fully effective.

Interestingly, there has just been a newly-created key performance indicator posted to staff members at the factories; it is the body mass index or BMI, a measure of body fat based on each individual's height and weight, which one may think that it is not directly related to customer satisfaction. However, this indicator can help increase a number of vigorous people working at the factories over time. Subsequently, not only can the company reduce costs of medical insurance for employees, but it can also relate this initiative to some type of indirect consumer protection activities.

Once the customer satisfaction is clarified in terms of quality, cost, and delivery, the next step for the factory director is to call for a meeting with his assistant directors and all department managers and set the sound goal and the key performance indicator for each dimension together. After that, each department manager, together with his/her assistants, has freedom to create their own customer-focused plans and activities. All ideas will be returned to the director for approval before communicating to staff members for actual implementation. The director shared his thought how to engage his employees in such activities when he had to make a decision whether an inadequate proposal would be approved as follows:

"I let them do it. If a plan can help reduce the cost of the department, even just hundreds, I never reject. They'll be so proud of themselves that they can achieve the goal little by little."

Soon after the plans and activities are accepted, the executives of each department will arrange an initial face-to-face meeting with staff members to inform about what they need to do. Later, the management will communicate with employees through face-to-face meeting detailed in Table 9.

Table 9 Internal Communication Channel Used by the Central Factories' Employees

Channel	Major Characteristics
Face-to-Face Meeting (Off-Line)	• Informal face-to-face team meetings will be held every morning for the main purpose of sharing good practices and problems among workforce as well as finding solutions to the difficulties together. • In all departments and among the factories' management, monthly meetings will be scheduled to evaluate performance and address the execution issues.

Noticeably, news and information on notice boards are often ignored by employees in the factories because the boards can only give one-way communication of messages that are sometimes difficult for them to understand and require further explanation from a relevant person. This is the major reason why face-to-face communication is useful, applicable, and regarded as the most effective dissemination channel for the plants and why bulletin board is excluded from Figure 1.

On-line communication channels, e-mail and Line application, are hardly practical for the factories, especially for labor. By the nature of time-limited work condition, an individual has to be in a hurry and racing against the clock, so employees do not have time to check out their electronic device while working in the production line.

The communication contents can be used to engage staff members at the factories in customer-centric activities. Table 10 shows their characteristics and evidence.

Table 10 Contents' Characteristics and Evidence: Central Factories

Contents' Characteristics	Evidence
Be Very Clear	• When communicating the targets to department managers, the director emphasizes they have to be very clear; that is, the targets should be in the numeric format, for example, a 5% decrease in electricity costs. • If the targets are not numbers, the firm cannot track progress of each department, and managers will also lack motivation of getting closer to achieving the goals.
Easy-to-Understand	• The target that is set to "percent" may be difficult for workers to comprehend. • To make employees better understand percent, the director suggests percent should be converted into baht. • Below is an example of easy-to-understand statements from the director: *"Assuming I set the goal of five percent decrease in costs. I need to convert percent into baht since workers may not understand the meaning of five percent. We've to communicate that five percent is equivalent to, say a million baht, instead. Next, with how many hundred thousand, ten thousand, and thousand bahts that the specific department, the unit, and the single person, respectively, have to save in order to attain a targeted saving of one million. It must be so easy and deep like that so that the factories can accomplish the goal."*

Table 10 Contents' Characteristics and Evidence: Central Factories (Cont.)

Contents' Characteristics	Evidence
Relating "Customer Satisfaction" to "Employees' Benefits" (WIIFM)	• The factory executives have applied the WIIFM principle to persuade employees to turn customer satisfaction policies into execution. • Like in branches, there is the energy cost savings program focusing on electricity at factories. The management have convinced staff members that if they help save money on electricity bills, the factory cost will be decreasing while the profit will be higher. At the year end, they will get more bonuses. • It turns out that this approach is also effective at plants.

5.3 Two-Way Communication in the Company (Part 3)

This Thai restaurant chain also provides two-way communication channels for its employees through Kaizen projects and special group meetings called Im-Jai. The top management have adopted Kaizen, a Japanese business philosophy built on the core principle of continual improvement, as a method to stay in touch with their employees. All staff members in branches and factories can communicate what they think the firm should do to better serve customers, reduce costs, or improve business operations by writing their concerns, problems, thoughts, or ideas on the Kaizen forms provided at every business unit and sending them to the Kaizen unit, which directly reports to the top executives. Rewards in monetary and honorable formats are necessary to motivate employees to take part in this communication channel.

The other two-way communication channel is Im-Jai face-to-face group meetings. The basic concept of Im-Jai is that if employees are happy, they are most likely to give their best services to customers, which will eventually satisfy customers. "Im-Jai" is the Thai word the meaning of which is "be delighted." This implies that every attendee will feel very pleased after the meetings. Representatives from all departments join these special events once a month to raise, share, or discuss the issues that happened and

needed to be solved in their own units with the HR management team. During the sessions, the firm also has great opportunities to update employee agents on what the company is doing for staff members and ask for their opinions openly. Afterwards, those representatives will go back and communicate all stories in the meetings to colleagues in their departments.

The Im-Jai channel does not overlap with the Kaizen projects since Im-Jai tends to give more emphasis on basic needs of employees while Kaizen focuses on finding ways to continuously improve services and manufacturing operations. To put it in the simple way, Im-Jai concentrates on people while Kaizen drives prioritization on processes.

The Im-Jai setting and the company's training center can be linked together to form a chain of communication. The training center nurtures, educates, and communicates the company's customer satisfaction philosophy, visions, policies, and activities to new comers at the beginning. When time has passed, the Im-Jai special meetings help call staff members to mind their feelings of strong commitment towards customer satisfaction. The Im-Jai meetings, therefore, can be considered as a friendly motivational reminder in this regard.

5.4 Communication between Restaurant Branches' and Central Factories' Employees (Part 4)

Every year, the company organizes a special event in a way that the supporting staff at the factories have to go to an assigned restaurant outlet and work as a frontline employee serving and servicing customers for several days or a week. Initiated by the firm's CEO, this idea is under the simple concept of "putting yourself in somebody's shoes," so one can deeply understand and be emotionally involved with employees who directly experience the difficulties in dealing with customers. Conversely, during the occasion, staff working at branches can also learn from the backline employees about how the factories well prepare and send foodstuffs to the outlets so that, once asked about the quality of meals served, they can give customers detailed answers about the food products with more confidence. Learning from one another by stepping into somebody's shoes is considered to be a good communication practice for this Thai restaurant chain.

5.5 Internal Communication Barriers and Ways to Overcome Them

Four themes concerning the potential barriers to effective internal communication emerge across all four discussion groups. The ways to cross the barriers are suggested accordingly.

Theme 1: Busyness at work

Employees at branches and factories are usually busy servicing their customers or spending a lot of time on their own duties, so a shortage of time for going through all received e-mails as well as news and information on notice boards is the main barrier of internal communication.

For the discussion group of restaurant managers and assistant restaurant managers, when they go through a large number of e-mails from various departments each day, they have to decide which ones are in urgent need of announcement by themselves. E-mails with colored buttons—red, yellow, and green—indicating the urgency level in front of the subjects will potentially help them keep eyes on the top priorities and better manage the sequence of communication messages.

The above concept used for e-mails can also be applied to bulletin boards by well organizing zones of urgency on the boards and adding corresponding colors and visual appeals to them. This can make the boards more interactive to staff members and helps increase their interests in the bulletin boards' new materials.

All participants in all discussion groups seem in favor of having informal daily face-to-face meetings to deliver, share, and discuss customer-centric initiatives; they consider such meetings as the most effective mode of communication to save their working time.

Theme 2: Differences in education level of senders and receivers

Education level differences between messengers and receivers sometimes cause communication problems in this workplace. The higher the level of education, the more likely it is that those individuals use more complicated messages, particularly in the writing format. On the contrary, staff members with a low education level do not often have high ability to decode or interpret the meaning of messages correctly.

Hence, there are possibilities that, while communication on a single subject, the understanding of messengers and receivers in such a matter may not be consistent. Moreover, less-educated workers usually tend not to listen to corporate news or activities that are not related to their own responsibilities. With these regards, an improved method of communication proposed by the participants, as receivers, is putting well-crafted messages which are clear and easy-to-understand to employees and making them truly audience-oriented contents (WIIFM).

Theme 3: Differences in the number of years working at the firm and in ages of senders and receivers

Especially for message senders who are in the superior position, communication challenges within the operations units arise when there are significant differences in work experience and ages between communicators and recipients. If senders' experience at the company or ages are lower than those of subordinates, there are chances that senders fall in a challenging situation where their staff members may be disobeyed.

One way to help higher-level senders reduce the problems is to set up trust for their lower-level message receivers who are more experienced or older. The managers, assistant managers, or supervisors can achieve trustworthiness from their followers by showing that they are able to completely implement all customer-related tasks given to subordinates as well. Acting as role models, demonstrating capabilities to complete their own orders, and showing willingness to help out their employees whenever they need are all considered good practices to overcome the challenges.

Theme 4: Acknowledgement of customer-satisfaction execution success with monetary rewards

The last theme, per se, is not an internal communication barrier, but it rather addresses the suggestion that all participants in the discussion groups believe will help develop engagement of individuals in customer-focused activities. They would like to see a strong feedback-driven culture that the top management express their recognition of employees' success in customer-centric contribution and implementation.

Receiving an indication of the impacts of their actions and a positive reinforcement for concentrated behaviors at work is critical to make employees stay more engaged in the company's customer-satisfaction practices. Additionally, the acknowledgement of implementation success with little rewards on their pay slips would be the great influential motivation for them towards the organization's concentration on customers.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

The research objective is to investigate how the Thai restaurant chain drives customer-oriented employee engagement through its internal communication. Research questions are designed as follows: (1) How does the company internally communicate customer-centered issues to its staff members?, (2) How can internal communication bring customer-focused employee engagement to the firm?, and (3) What can be potential barriers to effective internal communication and the ways to overcome them? Data collecting methods consist of in-depth interviews with five top executives, four focus-group discussions with five employees in each group, and review of information published about the firm.

Findings from template analysis provide clear evidence that customer satisfaction has been adopted by the company's executives as the most essential focus of corporate strategy, and they strongly believe that customer satisfaction is the true source of its sustainable performance and growth. These are in line with the studies done by Fornell et al. (2006), Homburg et al. (2005), and Piercy (1995). With the realization of the importance of customer satisfaction, the management make every effort to generate and improve business operations and activities in both branches and factories to eventually satisfy customers. This fact supports the suggestions of Berry and Parasuraman (1991), Crosby (1979), Garvin (1988), Oakland (1979), and Parasuraman et al. (1988).

This study reveals how the company puts the customer satisfaction issues at the first agenda for all employees (Day, 1990; Piercy, 1992) through its internal communication. The restaurant's first communication step is to seek for clarification of the company's core value among the top executives because having a consistent understanding of the central belief helps them convey the message of customer

satisfaction to lower-level employees more clearly and powerfully. This way of managerial thinking supports one of the factors creating employee engagement proposed by Robinson et al. (2004)—having clear policies and practices. The best internal communication way to accomplish the mission is the highest-ranking executive's being good role model of customer-satisfaction enthusiast for his/her juniors. No approach is better than this method. This action creates notable stories that deserve to be followed by the management-level employees and the rest of all-level staff members. Not much literature has taken notes on this point.

Due to a large number of employees and restaurant branches, there is a great opportunity that not all employees are aware of the chief executive's good practices. When the firm reaches about thirty branches, the training center, together with mobile teaching, is truly critical and necessary to help solve this problem. It should be used as an internal channel to communicate the firm's customer-satisfaction philosophy and activities to more than ten thousands of employees as well as encourage them to commit to the best possible standardized service to fulfill customers' needs.

The busyness at work prevents service-level staff from using on-line communication channels, i.e., e-mail and Line application. When working at branches and factories, employees are in favor of having informal face-to-face meetings because they can save their time of going through all news and information on bulletin boards. Moreover, this off-line communication is practical and useful for staff members when receiving difficult messages that requires further explanation from a relevant person. This knowledge can be added on to the work by Daft and Lengel (1986) and Lee (2010). To ensure all employees in branches recognize the need-to-know information, the firm is in need of the verbal communication check by regional and district managers.

The organization provides two-way communication channels for employees through Kaizen projects and Im-Jai special group meetings, which help drive engagement of individuals in customer-satisfaction philosophy and activities. These practices align with the recommendation of having two-way communication by Robinson et al. (2004) and Vaaland and Heide (2008).

Since the company runs its business in the food service industry, employees' understanding of the needs and behaviors of customers is extremely important. In order for factory employees to get direct experience of putting customers first, the special activity is arranged for them to perform duties as a frontline staff member serving and servicing customers in a designated branch for some days. This annual event of stepping into somebody's shoes is a good communication practice that promotes and encourages collaboration (DDI, 2005) between branches and factories.

At the factories, the executives' effort of using BMI as a new benchmark to help control staff members' weight reflects their interest in employees' well-being. Additionally, the factory director actively empowers his subordinates by giving them opportunities to create customer-oriented plans and activities and implement the thoughts in their own ways. These two practices can enhance employees' sense of being valued and involved, ultimately leading to employee engagement (DDI, 2005; Robinson et al., 2004; Towers Perrin, 2003).

When implementing internal communication, the firm experiences difficulties due to the differences in senders and receivers' education level, which leads to misunderstanding on the delivered contents and then lowers the work engagement of less-educated staff members. Due to huge numbers of employees, the attempt to develop messages based on different structural levels of employees' demographics advised by Welch and Jackson (2007) may be difficult. One easier and practical way to improve the situation is providing staff members with only well-crafted messages (clear and easy-to-understand) (Kataria et al., 2013). The use of the "What's In It For Me?" concept makes the communication contents truly audience-oriented; this results in employee engagement in customer-satisfaction activities as suggested by Sullivan et al. (2002).

At this restaurant, staff members are in need of a strong feedback-driven culture that the top executives express their recognition of employees' success in customer-focused contribution and implementation. The acknowledgement with little monetary rewards on their pay slips would make employees stay more engaged in the firm's customer-satisfaction practices. These findings support the important engagement-driving factors stated in DDI (2005) and Penna (2006) research reports.

To conclude, the study contributes to a better understanding of how the successful Thai restaurant chain incubates its customer-first mindset to staff members and encourages employee engagement in customer-focused activities through internal communication. The framework proposed in Figure 1 suggests research potentials for communication and organization disciplines and can be used by corporate communicators as a guideline for designing internal communication strategies to drive employee engagement in any business-related concerns.

7. Limitation and Recommendation

This research examines how employee engagement towards customer satisfaction can be propelled through internal communication at a Thai firm in the food service industry between May and September 2017. It should be aware that the selected Thai restaurant chain may have different characteristics from other restaurant settings, particularly foreign ones. Besides, the study concentrates solely on a single organization. The results, hence, cannot yet be generalized to other firms in the same or across industries. Additional studies are in need to make the findings more subtle.

Future studies can be conducted in various ways. Researchers can further explore internal communication that takes place in many other food service companies in Thailand. Such researches can provide comparative data on systems and processes of internal communication on corporate issues, which will be very useful when designing communication strategies for employee engagement. This approach can be applied to other food-related or totally dissimilar industries as well.

In addition, many Thai companies in the food-related industry are likely to hire workers with diverse races, languages, cultures, and ethnic backgrounds. It is worthwhile looking into in-depth researches on how these organizations internally communicate strategies to all employees to facilitate their full engagement in turning strategy policies or plans into real actions.

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