Outsourced marketing: it's the communication that matters

Matthew Walker

University of Florida, Gainesville, Florida, USA, and

Melanie Sartore and Robin Taylor

East Carolina University, Greenville, North Carolina, USA

Abstract

Purpose – Outsourcing has been promoted as one of the most powerful trends in the modernization of marketing operations. The rationale for such an undertaking includes a variety of factors but is generally predicated on fiduciary considerations. The purpose of this article is to examine the issues with, and the empirical consequences of, outsourcing within the intercollegiate marketing context.

Design/methodology/approach – This is an exploratory mixed-methods study incorporating qualitative and quantitative data to investigate outsourcing specifically related to the communication-employee commitment relationship.

Findings – Results from study 1 reveal that marketing directors perceive outsourcing as critical but also experience dissatisfaction with the level, frequency, and direction of communication. Results from study 2 indicate that an explicit and positive relationship exists between employee satisfaction with communication and their resultant commitment to the organization.

Research limitations/implications – Owing to the exploratory nature of the study and a relatively small sample, the conclusions are tempered until subsequent studies have been performed. As well, specific moderating variables (e.g. size, culture, budget) were not included in this initial inquiry and as such may add considerable variance explained to the proposed relationship.

Practical implications – First, the authors suggest that managing the "right commitment" is essential for marketing departments when working with an outsourcing agency. Second, the authors call attention to the importance of certain contextual factors (e.g. shared knowledge, mutual dependency, and organizational linkage) that may serve to improve the outsourcing partnership.

Originality/value – Few papers have explored the communication-commitment relationship, particularly with regards to outsourcing. Consequently, this study adds to the research by examining how intercollegiate marketing employees perceive and react to an outsourcing partnership. Building on additional work in this area, the research focuses on several aspects of the communication-commitment framework not previously examined.

Keywords Marketing, Outsourcing, Partnership, Universities

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The idea of marketing a product or service to the public is a function so central to a business that it requires careful nurturing and a considerable amount of personal attention. Accordingly, businesses who wish to convey the salient aspects of their product or service offerings may do so in a creative but sometimes costly manner. As a more cost effective alternative, outsourcing has become an extremely popular modern business development. Once thought of as an alternative for only large multinational corporations (Sharpe, 1997), outsourcing has now evolved into a viable business solution for any organization serious about improving its market position, reducing costs, and improving overall quality (Burden *et al.*, 2006). While many corporate

activities such as information technology (IT) and human resource management (HRM) have traditionally been performed "in-house", advocacy for outsourcing the bulk of these efforts is steadily increasing (Klaas *et al.*, 2001) and more and more they are becoming a global business trend (Leverett *et al.*, 2004).

> Outsourcing refers to a contractual relationship for the provision of business services by an external provider [...] in other words – a company pays another company to do some work for it (Belcourt, 2006, p. 269).

Simply put, outsourcing is turning over to a supplier those activities outside the organization's chosen core competencies (Sharpe, 1997). Advocates of outsourcing argue that the practice can reduce costs, increase service quality by producing greater economies of scale, increase incentives and accountability for service providers, and increase access to experts in specialized areas (cf. Greaver, 1999; Hendry, 1995; Laugen *et al.*, 2005; Mowery *et al.*, 1996; Rimmer, 1991; Uttley, 1993). Despite these suggested benefits, others claim that hiring an outside agency to do the "right-brain" (McGovern and Quelch, 2005, p. 1) work of internal employees may lead to disharmony, distrust, and diminished employee commitment levels (e.g. Bhagwati *et al.*, 2004; Cox, 1996; Kessler *et al.*, 1999; Lei and Hitt, 1995). A firm's management must therefore be cognizant of these potential tradeoffs when entertaining the idea of outsourcing. As such, senior management must identify the best marketers with the best vision for the product while simultaneously attending to any consequences that may result.

The purpose of this article was to explore the aforementioned idea within the intercollegiate marketing context. Using a mixed-methods research design, the researchers sought to examine the issues, antecedents, and empirical consequences associated with outsourcing among university rights holders[1] and intercollegiate marketing department employees. The following section discusses the antecedents, theoretical underpinnings, and scope of the decision to outsource, in terms of both the progression of collegiate marketing practice and strategic implementation approaches. Subsequent sections discuss the consequences (based on the empirical findings), the various implications, and boundary conditions of outsourcing for university athletic departments.

Outsourced operations

As a reflection of outsourcing as the natural progression of business (see Embleton and Wright, 1998), the outsourcing of sports marketing rights and operations is now common practice among university athletic departments. According to Li and Burden (2002), more than half of the NCAA Division I athletic programs have outsourced some or all of their marketing efforts. The primary reason for this seemingly "mass-undertaking" has been due to the increased complexity and dynamics of the college athletic environment. Further, the various operational and strategic advantages (e.g. core competency foci) that may accrue are particularly attractive to financially struggling university athletic programs. From a general HRM perspective, there are innumerable areas that can be outsourced (see Belcourt, 2006; Goldfarb and Naasz, 1995; Klaas *et al.*, 2001). Within university athletic departments and equally large number of their operations can also be outsourced. Radio game broadcast, call-in shows, game day programs, website production/management, sale of media advertising and venue signage, and sale of "official sponsorship" rights to

corporations, for example, can all be performed by a qualified outside agency (Burden and Li, 2002).

Outsourcing the aforementioned areas provides the athletic department with a chance to work with experts who can offer a professional and objective viewpoint in many areas (e.g. Belcourt, 2006; Burden and Li, 2002). Likewise, it allows them to gain new knowledge, access new markets, establish traction in the industry, reduce the threats and barriers of competition, enhance resource efficiency, and acquire new skills (Klaas *et al.*, 2001). Outsourcing can also free up valuable resources that, in turn, allow for crucial resource reallocation toward core business activities to better serve organizational goals (Burden and Li, 2005), while providing greater access to leading-edge technology and limiting the focus to core competencies (Harris *et al.*, 1998). Informing this strategic management process is that of core competencies theory (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). This theory suggests that certain business activities should be performed either in house or by suppliers. While some have sought to operationalize the concept formally (e.g. Gallon *et al.*, 1995; Henderson and Cockburn, 1994), for our purposes the most important aspect of core competence is its popular encapsulation of an emerging and increasingly influential approach to strategic management. Hence, we refer to core competencies as activities beyond the scope of the marketing staff that should be considered for outsourcing, which, if performed to the expected level, have the ability to deliver a competitive advantage to the athletic department.

Hence, in this context, the key feature of core competencies is the focus on organizational knowledge rather than decision-making processes as the engine of competitive performance (Scarbrough, 1998). Therefore, the primary impetus for outsourcing is strategic to build a competitive advantage based on financial considerations and streamlining other operational areas (Belcourt, 2006). From a human resources perspective, the potential for increasing staff size without adding new individuals to the payroll is both financially attractive and operationally viable for many athletic departments. Within this context, though, McKindra (2005) and Johnson (2005) noted that the promise of considerable financial return may serve as the primary thrust to outsource some component of the marketing department's operations. Burden and Li's (2003, 2004) articles provided evidence for the importance of such factors as annual operating budgets and total expenses for men's teams, particularly amongst programs with large budgets. Given all of the aforementioned positives for outsourcing, it is clear that this decision is a critical tool for attaining and fostering a competitive (albeit financial) edge amongst intercollegiate athletic departments.

In light of the evidence to support outsourcing (see Burden *et al.*, 2006), many researchers still question why institutions decide to formulate such partnerships. For some organizations experienced with outsourcing, there are hints that the process is not all that cost-effective or moreover problem-free (cf. Rochester and Douglas, 1990, Lacity and Hirschheim, 1993). Research has indicated the majority of respondents found it was more expensive to manage the outsourced activity than originally expected and in several cases, service levels were not nearly as high as anticipated (cf. Albertson, 2000; Lacity and Willcocks, 1996; Lacity *et al.*, 1995). Thus, for some institutions there are potential downfalls to outsourced operations. The degrading of marketing services, biased business dealings, a lack of management input, loss of departmental control, and problems related to selecting the right service provider have

all been forwarded as consequences of the practice (Burden and Li, 2005). Ultimately, by becoming dependent on the outsourcing agency, the existing marketing department's climate, skills, and relationships may become severely strained, thereby leading to organizational disharmony. As Belcourt (2006) noted, outsourcing alienates and "deskills" employees which can lead to the disintegration of an organization's culture through diminished employee commitment.

Agency theory and the communicative partnership

The partnership between an athletic program and a rights holder is the most crucial factor in ensuring that the outsourced partnership will be successful (Burden and Li, 2002). A well-thought out strategic plan (long-term considerations) followed with the support from the institutional hierarchy is critical to achieving desired outcomes (Burden *et al.*, 2006). Top managers (in the case of college athletics, the Athletic Director) will decide what areas to concentrate on (based on what the department does best – competencies), and contract everything else out to outside vendors (Belcourt, 2006). Therefore, core functions or competencies are in fact the real source of competitive advantage as the administration's ability to consolidate skills and technologies allows for greater flexibility and improved organizational efficiency (Prahalad and Hamel, 1990).

From an agency theory perspective, a problem occurs when two parties have different goals and labor is divided (Eisenhardt, 1989). One party, the principal (i.e. the customer or outsourcing user) delegates work to another, the agent (i.e. the provider) who performs the work. Agency theory uses the "contract metaphor" to help describe this relationship. Agency costs include the costs of structuring, monitoring, and bonding a set of contracts among agents and principals with conflicting interests. They also include the value of output lost when the cost of enforcing the contracts exceeds the benefits of the contracts (Logan, 2000). Eisenhardt (1985) remarked that agency theory is concerned with resolving two problems that can occur in agency relationships. The first is when the desires or goals of the principal and agent conflict and it is difficult or expensive for the principal to verify what the agent is actually doing. The second is the problem of risk sharing that arises when the principal and agent have different risk preferences. Thus, McKindra (2005) and Burden *et al.* (2006) both posited that in order to properly facilitate this agency/provider relationship, a strategic balance point between the university's organizational mission and the rights holder's mission must be maintained. As such, many schools and rights holders have worked to create various partnerships with other corporate sponsors that target appealing experiences for the student-athletes, fans, and alumni. In order to successfully implement these experiences, risk sharing, communication, and above all verification of objectives between key all of the "key players" is paramount. Everyone involved in the partnership needs to regularly and clearly communicate particularly in terms of turnaround time, risk, and debt (cf. Fisher, 2003; Mohr and Spekman, 1994).

Given the difficulties of behavior-based contracts suggested by agency theory, it is reasonable to assume that the overwhelming majority of clients would insist on outcome-based contracts when acquiring marketing services. Such a strategy can only succeed if the client can confidently specify current and future requirements (i.e. communicate them accurately). As Embleton and Wright (1998) contended, there are two main areas that have to be addressed when outsourcing – the foremost of which is

communication. These authors found that nearly 80 percent of employees will initially view outsourcing negatively. Hence, benefits to an outsourcing partnership will only accrue if active planning and communication take precedent (cf. Fisher, 2003; Mohr and Spekman, 1994), particularly in terms of specific marketing channels (Mohr and Nevin, 1990) but moreover, interfirm relationships (Mohr *et al.*, 1996). Therefore, the AD, the University President, the marketing employees, and the rights holders will need to establish healthy communication lines for the partnership to be successful and more importantly, implication free.

Study 1

As highlighted above, athletic programs are becoming increasingly reliant on external providers for a number of services. The purpose of this article was to explore the aforementioned idea within the intercollegiate marketing context. Using a mixed-methods research design, the researchers sought to examine the issues, antecedents, and empirical consequences associated with outsourcing among university rights holders and intercollegiate marketing department employees. The following section discusses the antecedents and scope of the decision to outsource, in terms of both the progression of collegiate marketing practice and underpinning reasons. Subsequent sections discuss the consequences (based on the empirical findings), the various implications, and boundary conditions of outsourcing for university athletic departments.

The working environment

For this initial phase of the study, the conference under examination consisted of NCAA Division I-A institutions who have all fully embraced the outsourcing option. Currently, there are numerous right holders who conduct (in part or all) of the respective department's marketing operations. Within this dynamic, the Marketing Director serves as the facilitator, initiating the directives of the rights holder in addition to providing valuable reciprocal input to the agency. However, the Marketing Director also initiates his/her own programs based on what the outsourcing agency is or is not contracted to do. The Marketing Director maintains a staff (sizes vary based on the number of operations outsourced) composed of Assistant Marketing Directors, graduate students, and interns who all serve the department in various capacities. Thus, Marketing Directors are the "ring-masters" (McGovern and Quelch, 2005, p. 2) who help to develop and monitor this integrated network of outside suppliers and internal employees to create both immediate and long-term value for the athletic department.

Methods

Procedure. As noted by Glesne (2006), focus group research is useful in studies that are exploratory in nature. Consistent with the purpose of Study 1, the researchers conducted semi-structured focus group interviews with marketing directors housed within one Division I-A intercollegiate conference. Of this census sample, all 16 Marketing Directors (eight female, eight male) within the conference were contacted prior to the interview date, informed of the purpose of our inquiry, and asked to voluntarily participate. All 16 Marketing Directors agreed to take part and have their discussion audio recorded. The focus group facilitator guided the conversation-style

interviewing with "talking points" surrounding the topic of rights holders and departmental marketing operations. Sample talking points included: "concerns of working with rights holders", "improving satisfaction in the relationship between rights holders and the marketing department", and "identifying/aligning the priorities of the rights holders and the marketing department". The focus group interview was approximately one hour in length, was audio-recorded, and subsequently transcribed verbatim.

Morgan and Spanish (1984) identify focus group as an advantageous research tool well-suited to both precede and triangulate data collected using several other methodologies. Operating from this rationale, we followed up our focus group interview by sending a series of open-ended questions to each marketing director one week after the initial focus group interview was conducted. These questions allowed each Marketing Director to discuss the emergent themes from the focus group within his or her respective athletic departments. Thus, coupled with the focus group data, this latter stage was implemented as a means to sharpen the definitions and properties of the emergent concepts. Sample questions included: "How long has your marketing department been with the current rights holder?", "How satisfied are you with the relationship that your marketing department has with the rights holders?", and "What do you think could promote a better relationship with your rights holders?". Responses were compiled and analyzed as described below.

Analysis. The researchers adopted a "grounded, a posteriori, inductive, context-sensitive scheme" (Schwandt, 2007, p. 32) approach to analyze all the data. Specifically, two members of the research team utilized the method of constant comparison, whereby the data were coded and analyzed simultaneously to develop an understanding of emergent concepts and their relationships (Glaser, 1965). The sequencing of the data collection led the researchers to first code the interview data for the initial categories. Both researchers coded the transcripts individually and then met to discuss any opposing or divergent views. Upon reconciling these discrepancies the researchers then compared initial categories with the responses from the follow-up questions. As with the focus group data, comparisons were first performed individually and then jointly by two members of the research team as a means to refine emergent themes.

Results and discussion
Two primary themes emerged from the focus group and interview data:

(1) control; and

(2) communication.

Firstly, however, and closely mirroring that of previous literature (Burden and Li, 2002, 2003), the data from Study 1 revealed that marketing directors perceived outsourcing as crucial in providing revenue for the athletic department and allowed for enhanced promotions and coverage of athletic events. Most marketing directors were generally satisfied with their current rights holder and felt that it would be in the best interest of the athletic department to continue the relationship. Despite these positive feelings, the directors also expressed some frustration and dissatisfaction with their current rights holders. Specifically, there emerged a perceived lack of control that prevented them from fully addressing the needs of their respective programs. Subsequently, it was

supposed that the needs of the rights holders were not always being met and the majority of the directors felt that there existed an "us against them" dichotomy which impeded departmental progress.

Overwhelmingly, the marketing directors felt that the primary "solution" to the above-mentioned frustration was to improve the communication between the marketing department and rights holders (see also Li and Burden, 2002). Therefore, communication was selected as the factor most important to the analyses. Despite the integral role of communication in this dynamic, most marketing directors expressed dissatisfaction with the level, frequency, and direction of the existing communication – a finding previously absent from the literature.

In line with this finding, research on the management of relationships has increasingly focused on channel communication as a central tenet to effective organizational functioning (cf. Gastpar *et al.*, 2003; Mohr and Nevin, 1990). In particular, these communicative behaviors between channel members have been linked to trust (Anderson and Narus, 1990), coordination (Guiltinan *et al.*, 1980), and especially commitment (cf. Anderson and Weitz, 1986; Morgan and Hunt, 1994). Given this line of research and the popularity of outsourcing in terms of the identifiable benefits (e.g. additional revenue, streamlining HRM, and core competencies), this result led the authors to ask some important additional questions:

- Could dissatisfaction with communication result in a level of frustration that may lead to unintended outcomes among the internal employees?
- Could the employees' commitment to their department/organization be affected as result of outsourcing?

Study 2
Based on the initial exploratory results compiled in Study 1, a questionnaire was constructed in order to examine whether the qualitative findings support the general contention that lack of communication between rights holders and the collegiate marketing department may result in unintended outcomes. Specifically, the authors argue that communication satisfaction may likely be an inhibitor to the marketing employees' commitment (see Figure 1). These arguments are based on the aforementioned "dichotomized" relationship and the literature suggesting negative consequences of the practice (cf. Albertson, 2000; Bhagwati *et al.*, 2004; Burden and Li, 2005; Cox, 1996; Lei and Hitt, 1995; Kessler *et al.*, 1999). In addition, it has often been
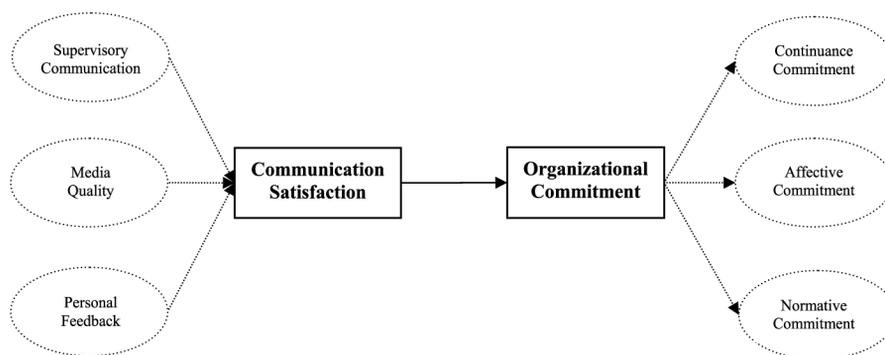

Figure 1.
Hypothesized model of communication satisfaction and commitment

observed that communication creates the conditions for commitment, and hence should be seen as one of its important antecedents (cf. Foy, 1994; Katz and Kahn, 1972; Meyer and Allen, 1997). However, of more importance is what aspects of communication are particularly good predictors of commitment. The authors propose that if the communicative relationship is ongoing and structured, the result will yield general positivity on the employee's responses. To support testing these ideas, hypotheses have been developed which are elucidated below.

Communication satisfaction

Most experts and researchers in the areas of management and leadership assert that communication is the foundation for effectiveness in any type of organization (Church, 1994). Moreover, organizational communication is underscored by the importance of several other concepts such as understanding, interpersonal warmth, trust, and openness (Goldhaber *et al.*, 1978), all of which may effect several organizational outcomes, including job satisfaction and employee commitment (cf. van Vuuren *et al.*, 2006; Yadegar, 2006). How an employee perceives a supervisor's communication style, credibility, and content as well as the organization's overall communication system will, to some extent, influence the amount of satisfaction he/she receives from the job (cf. Pettit *et al.*, 1997; van Vuuren *et al.*, 2006). It therefore stands to reason that the employee must be satisfied, not only with an organization's internal communication environment, but also with the external communication lines that impact the organization (e.g. outsourcing agencies, suppliers, other stakeholders, etc.). Hence, the communication processes may impact the potential quality of relationships that may develop between employees and outside agencies, as communication experiences are the mechanisms from which trust develops (Mueller and Lee, 2002).

Exploring the extent to which employee satisfaction with organizational communication is important because it encompasses communication channels with external service providers. These communication channels have the potential to seriously impact organizational outcomes; hence, this inquiry is particularly germane for a number of reasons. First as previously mentioned, outsourcing is fast becoming a common business practice having significant implications (both positive and negative) for the organization (e.g. Burden *et al.*, 2006; Klaas *et al.*, 2001). Second, outsourcing can create a competitive advantage within many industries including intercollegiate athletic departments via cost reduction, profitability, productivity, and risk control (cf. Anderson and Weitz, 1986; Burden and Li, 2005; Jiang and Qureshi, 2006; Perry, 1997; Quinn, 1999; Roodhooft and Warlop, 1999). As such, the perceived financial necessity to outsource is unlikely to subside thereby warranting research attention. Finally, what little work that does exist has suggested that information sharing and employee commitment are fundamental components to fostering a strong partnership between an outsourcing agency and the organization (see Lee and Kim, 2005). Such a partnership couched in sound communication is paramount for success (cf. Johnsen *et al.*, 2006; Lee and Kim, 2005).

Guided by the aforementioned reasons, we focused on communication satisfaction (as it pertains to rights holders) and its impact on employee commitment. Consistent with our rationale, we utilized the communication satisfaction construct, which is highly regarded as a successful multidimensional research tool in organizational communication (Varona, 1996). The researchers considered three important

dimensions of the construct derived from Study 1 and inferences drawn from previous research in this area (cf. Clampitt and Downs, 1993; Clampitt and Girard, 1993):

- supervisory communication (i.e. upward and downward communication aspects);
- media quality (e.g. well-organized meetings, clear directives, and proper communication); and
- personal feedback (i.e. an understanding of problems faced on the job).

Organizational commitment

Within the modern OB literature, substantial advances have been made in the developments and applications of organizational commitment (Brooks, 2002). These advancements have illustrated that employee commitment can be channeled in multiple directions, is centered on a range of foci (e.g. the organization, management, business sector, etc.), and is influenced by a number of antecedents (see Mowday, 1998). As such, organizational commitment has emerged as a central concept in the study of work attitudes and behavior amongst scholars (cf. Cohen, 1991; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Randall, 1990; Riketta, 2002; Wright and Bonett, 2002). The construct is generally defined as a psychological link between the employee and their organization, making it less likely that they will voluntarily leave (cf. Allen and Meyer, 1990, 1996; Meyer and Allen, 1991). While early work on commitment was typified by various unidimensional views (e.g. Angle and Perry, 1981; Mayer and Schoorman, 1992; Meyer and Allen, 1984; Morrow, 1993), the construct is now widely recognized as a multidimensional work attitude resulting in a three-component model (cf. Allen and Meyer, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1991). From this perspective, commitment is conceptualized in three ways:

(1) affective commitment (i.e. desire and emotional attachment);
(2) continuance commitment (i.e. need); and
(3) normative commitment (i.e. obligation).

Employee outcomes (e.g. increased morale, reduced stress, and improved productivity Meyer and Allen, 1997) and organizational outcomes (e.g. decreased absenteeism, lateness, and turnover) have been associated with increased organizational commitment (cf. Brooks, 2002; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Meyer and Allen, 1997; Mowday, 1998; Randall, 1987). Conversely, if employee commitment has waned, dissatisfaction may result and deleterious employee behaviors may follow (cf. Ferris and Aranya, 1983; Jaros *et al.*, 1993; Stumpf and Hartman, 1984). Williams and Hazer (1986) concluded that commitment has a more important effect on employee behavior than does satisfaction. Cotton and Tuttle (1986) and Mathieu and Zajac (1990) identified commitment as a highly significant correlate of negative employee behavior. Some empirical work has identified organizational commitment as both a negative consequence (e.g. Brockner *et al.*, 1987; Knudsen *et al.*, 2003) and an antecedent to turnover (Tett and Meyer, 1993).

Research has also suggested that organizations that encourage communication may indirectly enhance employee commitment by affecting the members' felt responsibility and role involvement within the organization (e.g. Salancik, 1977; Stumpf and Hartman, 1984). If employees are satisfied with communication processes they are likely to develop positive working relationships, increase their performance (Clampitt

and Downs, 1993), and be more committed to the organization (Varona, 1996). Relatively few studies have explored the relationship between communication and commitment. However, those that exist have illustrated a positive relationship between constructs (cf. Downs, 1991; Downs *et al.*, 1995; Putti *et al.*, 1990; Varona, 1996). Therefore, higher levels of employee satisfaction with ongoing communication processes may lead to increased levels of commitment to the organization.

H1. Overall communication satisfaction among the marketing employees will positively influence their levels of continuance, affective, and normative commitment.

H2. The marketing employees satisfaction with supervisory communication, media quality, and personal feedback will positively influence their levels of continuance, affective and normative commitment.

Measures
Communication satisfaction. Communication satisfaction was initially operationalized by Downs and Hazen (1977), who subsequently developed the Communication Satisfaction Questionnaire (CSQ). The CSQ served as the primary means of assessing the level of communication satisfaction the marketing employees have with their rights holders. The original questionnaire consisted of eight factors; however, only three were utilized in this investigation (i.e. supervisory communication, media quality, and personal feedback) due to the results obtained from Study 1 and the contextual nature of the design (see the Appendix). Other areas such as "subordinate relations" and "organizational integration" were simply not applicable to the current framework.

Several studies support the reliability and validity of this particular instrument (e.g. Crino and White, 1981; Downs and Hazen, 1977; Mount and Back, 1999; Pettit *et al.*, 1997; Zwijze-Koning and de Jong, 2007). The three subscales all demonstrated acceptable levels of internal consistency (supervisory communication $\alpha = 0.93$, personal feedback $\alpha = 0.84$, media quality $\alpha = 0.76$) according to the 0.70 benchmark posited by Nunnally and Bernstein (1994). Some items (six of 15) were slightly modified so the respondents answered questions related to the communication between the rights holder and employee, as opposed to internal organizational communication. For example, the first item in the supervisory communication subscale, which originally read "My superiors know and understand the problems faced by subordinates", was modified to read "The rights holders know and understand the problems faced by the marketing staff". The other items were modified in a similar unobtrusive manner.

Organizational commitment. Since Meyer and Allen (1984, 1997) and Allen and Meyer (1990) published their commitment measures, referred to as affective, continuance, and normative commitment, they have been used extensively (e.g. Hackett *et al.*, 1991; Kent and Chelladurai, 2001; Meyer *et al.*, 2000; Somers, 1995), resulting in considerable evidence regarding their psychometric properties (Allen and Meyer, 1996). Internal consistency scores ranged from $\alpha = 0.73$ for continuance commitment to $\alpha = 0.76$ for both normative and affective subscales (see the Appendix). To avoid referent confounds (i.e. employees answering questions related to their commitment with either the rights holders or their university), the researchers instructed the respondents to answer regarding their commitment based on the outsourcing partnership. All respondents used in the analyses were employed by a

college or university and not an outsourcing agency (e.g. Nelligan Sports, Host Communications, or International Sports Properties).

Sample and procedures
The data were collected via an online survey distribution system using the National Association of Collegiate Marketing Administrators (NACMA) e-mail list-serv. A caveat in the distributed email stated that the researchers were only interested in colleges and universities who currently use rights holders and employees who work within that dynamic. Hence, marketing directors and associated staff (e.g. associate marketing directors and marketing assistants) who interact on a continual basis with rights holders were targeted and utilized in the analyses. The e-mail was sent to approximately 900 list-serve subscribers (National Association of Collegiate Marketing Administrators, 2008), from which 167 responded, providing an initial response rate of 19 percent. Follow up contact (i.e. post-notification) has been reported as being one of the most powerful techniques for increasing response rates for online surveys (cf. Dillman, 2000; Turner and Jordan, 2008). Therefore, two follow-up e-mails were sent to improve the responses. Following the post-notification, 30 additional questionnaires were received, providing a final response rate of 22 percent. After the removal of respondents whose college/university did not outsource, individuals who were employed by an outside agency, and lower level employees (e.g. student assistants, interns, etc.) who may only have limited contact with the outsourcing agency, 188 (131 male, 69 percent; 57 female, 31 percent) complete questionnaires were utilized in the analyses.

While the low response rate could affect the generalizability of the study (Kerlinger and Lee, 2000), the response rate for the current study is consistent with the majority of web survey distributions, according to Sax *et al.* (2003). To ensure that sample size would not affect the power of the regression analyses, an *a priori* power analysis was performed. According to Cohen (1988) the sample sufficiently powered the analysis (0.81), thereby reducing the probability of Type II errors and providing the ability to detect small effects in the regressions. In terms of ethnicity, 89 percent identified themselves as White/Caucasian, 5 percent as African-American, 3 percent as Hispanic, 1 percent as Asian, 1 percent as Hispanic, and <1 percent as "other". Respondent ages ranged from 21 to 61 (21-31 = 59 percent, 32-42 = 26 percent, 43-53 = 12 percent, 54-61 = 3 percent) and their work experience ranged from one to 35 years (1-10 = 93 percent, 11-20 = 4 percent, 21-35 = 3 percent).

Results
Descriptive statistics. The researchers first examined whether the communication and commitment constructs borrowed from the OB literature revealed sound levels of normality. Univariate normality of the data was examined with skewness and kurtosis values. All of the skewness and kurtosis values were in the range of −1 and +1, which indicated the data were normally distributed. Measuring the amount of autocorrelation in the error terms of a regression model, the Durbin-Watson statistics ranged from 1.983 to 2.027, informing the researchers that the assumption of independent errors was met (Glass and Hopkins, 1996). A general summary of means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients is provided in Table I. Inspection of the correlation matrix revealed the correlations between factors had

little variance; only five potential relationships were not significant. At the zero-order level, variables from two of the predictors correlate significantly with both communication and commitment constructs. The highest zero-order correlation with communication satisfaction is reported for media quality (0.64) and the highest zero-order correlation with organizational commitment is reported for affective commitment (0.53). Looking for signs of multicollinearity amongst the variables, the authors found all the correlations to be well below 0.80, suggesting no multicollinearity in the data (cf. Grewal *et al.*, 2004; Kaplan, 1994). Looking at the issue further, the R^2 values (at or above 0.80) also confirmed that multicollinearity was not problematic (Hutcheson and Sofroniou, 1999).

Regression analyses. Since the goal of the current study was to predict the relationship between communication satisfaction and organizational commitment, multivariate multiple regression was employed. First, the researchers tested the overall relationship between the composite communication satisfaction construct and the individual organizational commitment factors. Second, the predictive power and direction of the individual communication satisfaction factors on the same outcomes were analyzed. The composite communication satisfaction variable revealed significant main effects on the three outcomes for the multivariate regression model ($R^2 = 0.35$; $\Delta R^2 = 0.33$; $F = 11.384$; $p < 0.05$). The analysis revealed significant main effects for communication satisfaction on both normative and affective commitment measures, while continuance commitment was not significantly influenced (see Table II). It is notable that the effect sizes for the overall model were quite large ($R^2 = 0.18$, affective; $R^2 = 0.21$, normative) indicating that a communication satisfaction was an important predictor of a significant amount of variance for two types of organizational commitment.

The results of the second regression analysis (where the individual factors were regressed) are presented in Table III. These results showed that the three communication satisfaction factors were important positive predictors of two commitment outcomes in the multivariate model. Examination of the β coefficients revealed the statistically significant effects on the three outcome measures:

(1) supervisory communication ($\beta_{norm} = 0.34$, $p < 0.01$; $\beta_{aff} = 0.35$, $p < 0.01$);

(2) media quality ($\beta_{norm} = 0.29$, $p < 0.01$; $\beta_{aff} = 0.36$, $p < 0.01$); and

(3) personal feedback ($\beta_{norm} = 0.20$, $p < 0.05$; $\beta_{aff} = 0.30$, $p < 0.01$).

Construct[a]	Mean	Standard deviation	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Supervisory communication	3.92	0.83	1.00					
2. Personal feedback	3.53	0.63	0.47**	1.00				
3. Media quality	3.33	0.77	0.64**	0.49**	1.00			
4. Continuance commitment	2.78	0.67	0.01	−0.12	−0.06	1.00		
5. Normative commitment	3.09	0.69	0.37**	0.19**	0.19*	0.16	1.00	
6. Affective commitment	3.46	0.70	0.39**	0.27**	0.32**	0.12	0.53**	1.00

Notes: [a]1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree. *$p < 0.05$; **$p < 0.01$ (two-tailed). $n = 188$

Table I.
Means, standard deviations, and correlation coefficients

Examination of the R^2 values indicated that supervisory communication also accounted for a great deal of the variance for both normative ($R^2 = 0.18$) and affective commitment ($R^2 = 0.14$) outcome measures.

The signs associated with continuance commitment on media quality and personal feedback indicated a negative relationship with this aspect of communication satisfaction. Hence, the ratings of continuance commitment are uncorrelated with communication satisfaction (0.01) and are negatively correlated with media quality (-0.12) and personal feedback (-0.10). This finding indicates that respondents who experience ambiguity about their continued membership with the organization rate the downward dissemination of information and feedback negatively. This finding is not indicative of any multiple regression assumption violation. Inspection of the residuals revealed that they did not deviate from a normal distribution, were constant in variance, and are not correlated with the independent variables ($R^2 = 0.35$; $\Delta R^2 = 0.33$; SD = 0.62), thus indicating that the model was robust.

Discussion

Evidence in the extant literature is amassing that substandard organizational communication may be negatively related to unintended employee outcomes (cf. Gray

| | Dependent variables[a] | | |
| | Continuance commitment | Normative commitment | Affective commitment |
Independent variable[a]			
Communication satisfaction	0.063	0.339[*]	0.363[*]
R^2	0.273	0.410	0.432
Adjusted R^2	0.106	0.183	0.214
F statistic(degrees of freedom)	0.978(33,188)	1.809(33,188)	1.982(33,188)
p-value	0.053	0.015	0.006

Notes: Predictor → communication satisfaction; full model → $R^2 = 0.35$, $\Delta R^2 = 0.33$, $F = 11.384$; [a]1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree; [*]$p < 0.05$ (two-tailed); $n = 188$

Table II. Regression analysis for composite communication satisfaction

| | Dependent variables[a] | | |
| | Continuance commitment | Normative commitment | Affective commitment |
Predictor[a]			
Supervisory communication			
β	0.08	0.34[**]	0.35[**]
R^2	0.01	0.18	0.14
Media quality			
β	-0.12	0.29[**]	0.36[**]
R^2	0.02	0.08	0.12
Personal feedback			
β	-0.10	0.20[*]	0.30[**]
R^2	0.06	0.04	0.09

Notes: [a]1 = strongly agree and 5 = strongly disagree; [*]$p < 0.05$; [**]$p < 0.01$ (two-tailed); $n = 188$

Table III. The effects of the communication satisfaction factors on the dependent variables

and Laidlaw, 2002; Johlke and Duhan, 2000, 2001). Thus, new business strategies that could potentially affect employee commitment levels (such as outsourcing) should be entered into carefully, as the results of such engagement may be impactful for the organization. The current findings emphasized that the marketing employees' general perception of communication satisfaction towards an outsourcing agency was positively related to their emotional attachment to the organization and their obligation to remain a part of the organization. More interesting were the direct influences of supervisory communication, media quality, and personal feedback relative to the aforementioned commitment areas. In the first study the researchers found the employees' perception of communication (specifically, direction, frequency, and duration) was necessary for them to perceive a positive working environment. Interview excerpts reinforced this assertion in that the marketing directors generally valued communication and view it as necessary for a successful partnership. Study 2 addressed this idea empirically resulting in positive relationships between three communication variables which supported affective and normative attachments. Hence, the researchers concluded that positively perceived communication may underscore stronger feelings of affiliation and loyalty to the organization.

The results of this study provide general support for the hypotheses proposed, although with some exceptions. First, in the present study, outsourcing, which was designed to reduce costs and generally streamline the athletic department's operations, was shown to significantly influence the global communication-commitment relationship. Overall, communication satisfaction demonstrated significant predictive power for two types of organizational commitment. Second, all of the individual communication satisfaction measures positively influenced employee commitment levels. Specifically, the extent to which meetings are well organized, written directives are clear, and the amount of communication is right; both the upward and downward aspects of communication; and how the employees are judged and appraised, were positive predictors of affective and normative commitment. Hence, the quality of communication practices is likely to be associated with role clarity and performance outcomes in terms of providing high quality service. Moreover, communication mechanisms for establishing and sustaining organizational relationships affected levels of trust and affective commitment, as Mayfield and Mayfield (2002) suggested.

However, the non-significant relationship between communication and continuance commitment left the authors to speculate. Meyer *et al.* (1989) argued that the value of commitment to an organization necessarily depends on the nature of that commitment. The results from this study confirm the observation that positive communication is associated with affective and normative outcomes but not continuance ones. Continuance commitment is based on the costs employees associate with leaving the organization. Therefore, due to the competitive nature of the collegiate work environment the employees may be cognizant of a lack of alternatives. In addition, research discussing the level of satisfaction employees receive from sport industry positions adds further clarity to this argument (see Smucker and Kent, 2004). Specifically, research in this area has posited that individuals choose sport jobs not for pay or promotion (Parks and Parra, 1994) but rather for the emotional capital these jobs intrinsically generate. Therefore, managing the "right commitment" is essential as employees may experience commitment in varying ways, as illustrated here. The careful understanding of commitment then, requires some knowledge by management

of the effects different policies (such as outsourcing) can have on the various dimensions of commitment.

It appears (at least in this case) that outsourcing had a considerable impact on whether, and the extent to which, communication between the organization and rights holders could potentially affect employee commitment levels. It should be noted that the statistically significant relationships (i.e. variance explained) for the commitment measures were not all that modest, in fact they were quite substantial; a pattern not consistent with prior commitment research (cf. Mathieu and Zajac, 1990; Somers, 1995; Randall, 1990). Consequently, there seems to be evidence here that the relationship between communication satisfaction and organizational commitment is not a result of an overly restricted model of commitment.

These findings suggest that the three levels of communication satisfaction add substantial explained variance to both normative and affective outcomes. However, since this is (to the authors' knowledge) the only study to have examined such a relationship in this context, the conclusions should be tempered until further testing is carried out. Additionally, the specification of certain moderating variables in the aforementioned relationship could add to these initial findings. For example, an examination of the internal organizational culture, the impact of size of the university's marketing department, the budgetary constraints of the department, and the temporal nature of the outsourcing relationship could all have considerable impacts on the outcomes in the model. Given the initial variance explained, however, it is safe to say there is merit in exploring this relationship further, perhaps with a less homogenous sample and within different departments in intercollegiate athletics.

Implications

Taken together, the findings from Study 1 and 2 carry important implications for university athletic departments. Specifically, they call attention to the importance of the contextual factors that influence the relationship between organization and rights holder. Lee and Kim's (2005) integrated model of outsourcing partnerships identified three behavioral factors that influence the quality of the relationship between the service provider and receiver:

(1) shared knowledge;

(2) mutual dependency; and

(3) organizational linkage.

The current findings further buttress these contentions by identifying psychological factors as crucial in fostering trust, mutual benefits, and commitment. These "process" variables all possess characteristics necessary for user and overall business satisfaction (Lee and Kim, 2005). The dissatisfaction expressed by the marketing directors in Study 1 regarding communication, coupled with the positive relationship between communication satisfaction and organizational commitment, highlights the importance of addressing these factors within university athletic departments. As such, the authors now empirically believe (as opposed to intuitively supposing) that there is a need for fostering relationships rich in information sharing, joint efforts, cooperation, and mutual benefits between athletic departments and rights holders.

As mentioned previously, the decision to outsource is not without potential risks and some negative outcomes (see Belcourt, 2006; Burden and Li, 2005; Lacity and

Willcocks, 1996). In an effort to circumvent such consequences, it is essential to adequately identify and address any potential shortcomings when first entering into an outsourcing partnership. Burden *et al.* (2006) suggested the most successful outsourcing relationships are entered into when the university and athletic department integrate their goals, strategic directions, and philosophy into the decision-making process. Based on these results, the authors now believe that considering the behavioral and psychological factors identified by Lee and Kim (2005) in the decision-making process will further contribute to successful outsourcing relationships by attending to both macro and micro aspects of the service provider-athletic department relationship.

Conclusion

The results were consistent with the hypothesized expectation that communication satisfaction may explain employee commitment within the collegiate marketing environment. Three aspects of communication were significantly correlated with organizational commitment, and did display a unique relationship with two aspects of the commitment construct when entered into the model. In sum, the positive relationship between specific areas of communication satisfaction and commitment revealed that in the sport marketing arena, employees value the communicative efforts of their outside agencies. Thus, this finding indicates that organizations such as this need to explore ways to input communication channels into their often complex organizational structures. Doing so should lead to a higher degree of commitment amongst internal employees.

Note

1. The phrase "rights holder" is used to describe the entity that owns a set of rights on a given content area. In the current study, this relates to ownership of some or all marketing operations of the university athletic department.

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Appendix. Operational measures
Supervisory communication

- The rights holders know and understand the problems faced by the marketing staff.
- The rights holders listen and pay attention to me.
- The rights holders offer guidance for solving job-related problems.
- The rights holders trust me.
- The rights holder is open to ideas.

Media quality

- The rights holders publications are interesting and helpful.
- Our meetings with the rights holders are well-organized.
- The amount of direction given to me by the rights holders is about right.
- Written directives and reports from the rights holders are clear and concise.

Personal feedback

- I receive information from the rights holders about my progress in my job.
- I receive information from the rights holders about how I am being judged.
- I receive recognition from the rights holders of my efforts.
- The rights holders working alongside my organization have great ability as communicators.
- I receive on-time information from the rights holders needed to do my job.

Continuance commitment

- It would be hard for me to leave my organization right now, even if I wanted to.
- One of the few negative consequences of leaving this organization would be the scarcity of available alternatives.
- Right now, staying with my organization is a matter of necessity as much as desire.
- I feel I have too few options to consider leaving this or organization.
- If I had not already put so much of myself into this organization, I might consider working elsewhere.
- Too much of my life would be disrupted if I decided I wanted to leave my organization right now.

Affective commitment

- I would be very happy to spend the rest of my career with this organization.
- I really feel as if the organization's problems are my own.
- I do not feel a strong sense of "belonging" to my organization.
- I do not feel "emotionally attached" to this organization.
- I do not feel like "part of the family" at my organization.
- This organization has a great deal of personal meaning to me.

Normative commitment

- I do not feel any obligation to remain with my current employer.
- Even if it were to my advantage, I do not feel it would be right to leave my organization right now.
- I would feel guilty if I left this organization now.
- This organization deserves my loyalty.
- I would not leave my organization right now because I have a sense of obligation to the people in it.
- I owe a great deal to my organization.

About the authors

Matthew Walker is an Assistant Professor of Sport Management at the University of Florida. His research covers a variety of topics including corporate social responsibility, strategic management, cognition and behavior of corporate stakeholders, and topics related to the economics and finance of sport teams and leagues. Matthew Walker is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: walkerma@hhp.ufl.edu

Melanie Sartore is an Assistant Professor of Sport Management at East Carolina University. Her areas of research interest are diversity-related issues in sport, socio-cultural aspects of sport, individual and group attitudes and behaviors, organizational behavior, and human resource management.

Robin Taylor is the Director of Marketing at East Carolina University. She has worked in the athletic department for three years and served as Marketing Director for two of them. She recently completed her graduate degree in Sport Management and has aspirations to pursue her PhD.