

Unlocking value from customer relationships in 2015

By [Joseph Neusu](#)

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I recently presented a paper titled "*Thriving in the Digital Age: Elevated Experiences, Interactions and Analytics*" at a conference that focused on how businesses can manage relationships with their customers in the digital era.

One great thing that came out of my preparations is the opportunity I got to network with the real heavyweights in the industry from some of the top brands in the world. It was an eye-opening interaction that also exposed deficiencies in how local companies dispense customer service.

One thing is irrefutable: Customers are not only kings - they are the very kingdom. Competition for them has become ferocious and remorseless due to the proliferation of businesses that offer the same products or services all over. Again, the globalisation of trade means that supply is no longer a challenge.

Keeping customers happy

Indeed, times have changed radically. Product excellence has been overtaken by customer service management as the main differentiator. "Customer experience is the next competitive battleground," according to Jerry Gregoire, CIO Dell Computers.

However, the way in which most South African companies have handled this core function leaves a lot to be desired. It is obvious that many are still lagging behind the digital revolution that has brought in newer tools and ways of doing things.



Dusit Panyakhom via [123RF](#)

My observation is that customer services management is not being given the attention it deserves in the context of the changed times. The level of investment in customer service technology, training and processes is quite low. The companies also assign interns, junior staff and those who are deemed extra staff to the task of interfacing with customers.

Courteous treatment will turn a customer into a walking advertisement. Since business is all about getting and keeping customers, companies are best advised to recruit seasoned professionals who know the value of a handshake in fostering customer loyalty.

Additionally, these rainmakers should be equipped with the necessary business intelligence. Personalised service is the in-thing. No one wants to be dealt with in a dry and detached way when they walk into a bank. Imagine talking to an insurance customer service assistant who is well versed not only with your name but also the history of your claim and knows when the payment will be released.

The consumer is in control

The modern customer is savvy, opinionated and is in control of the journey as he progresses down the path to purchase. Like Lewis Hamilton, he is in total control and like the race tracks, the path to purchase has become circuitous too. It is at this point that businesses should consider investing in the necessary technology that converges multiple applications to create profitable customer experiences.

These sophisticated applications collect, store and display data in ways that make sense to a company in line with its business goals. The customers' demographics and psychographics are collected from various sources like CRM, websites, in store, social media and newsletters. The apps sit on the top layer of the existing companies' customer data software from where they pool, sort and process raw data to give valuable insights.

However, as a word of caution, data is not an end by itself. What matters most is the picture that it paints and how insights are translated into plans that are cascaded to the front line for execution.

As indicated before, the modern customer is super savvy. In fact, according to one industry expert, customers are light years ahead of companies in terms of knowledge and ownership of the latest digital technology. This digital divide can be the crack through which businesses can lose valuable customers and sales. Interestingly, the customers are not limited to one device only. They seamlessly switch from laptops to iPads to smartphones. They are always on, finicky and they love flexing their consumer power.

Switching brands

Not only are they switching suppliers and service providers at will, reports show that customers are now switching from one brand to another without flinching a muscle.

How can businesses respond? They can begin by restructuring their operations and pro-actively implement strategic customer support initiatives. Customer experience management is more about sociology and psychology than technology, but the latter is important as it enables transactions to occur.

A profitable business is one that orbits around the interests of customers and demonstrates that it exists to serve their needs. Modern marketing software integrates communication across multiple touch points, online and offline, and enables customers to continue interacting with a company seamlessly when they hop from one device to the other.

Currently, customers have to repeat themselves endlessly to an unending chain of customer support levels until they are given help. Customers don't like this and while previously a disgruntled customer only told his few friends, in the modern

social media driven era they are telling the whole world about their experiences.

I am reminded of an irate customer who put up a banner, at a huge cost, venting his ire against a certain manager of one of South Africa's mobile network operators. This story went viral and I am convinced the affected operator is still in the midst of damage control to sustain its self-imposed image of a modern brand.

Customer service management is an imperative that no forward-thinking company should ignore. It is the thin line that separates great companies from opportunist entrepreneurs who want to smash and grab the economy.

Customers are the lifeline and micro-managing interactions with them is the password to the vault.

ABOUT JOSEPH NEUSU

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