

The power of customer evangelism

 By [Mike Stopforth](#)

22 Nov 2006

I felt like a Reach for a Dream candidate. I kept looking over my shoulder to check whether or not I was being followed by a Candid Camera crew. What am I going on about? A few weeks back I wrote an article for *The Citizen* about things I wanted to do before I die. One of my goals was, and is, to drive an Aston Martin.



Justin Divaris, MD of Aston Martin SA, got in touch with me early the next week via email to thank me for my article (what?!) and offered me the opportunity to drive my dream car for a day. I quickly scanned the email again... "we will arrange for you to spend a day driving an Aston Martin!" Nope, wasn't seeing things.

Once I had finished dancing on the kitchen table, I replied and said I would be rather keen. Ha ha.

You see, here's the strange thing (and why, to be quite honest, I was pretty skeptical of Divaris' invite at first). Aston Martin is not just any auto brand. It is more than just an exotic brand. Each Aston is a handmade, thoroughbred supercar. Most famous for its marriage with the James Bond brand, Aston Martin (both the brand and the car) is the quintessential balance between raw power and sleek sophistication. The 'bottom of the range' V8 Vantage starts at R 1.4 million. Next in line (at least in the SA market) is the sleek DB9, quickly followed by the brutish Vanquish S (no pun intended). These are some of the finest and fastest cars on the planet. They are driven by the elite, forget the rich. Bottom line (and the question I kept asking myself) is: Why on earth would these guys let me drive their car?

I'm not unfamiliar with exotic cars. I worked at Extreme 16 in the North of Jozi for about six months, albeit as a retail assistant. We had some pretty impressive cars gliding in and out of there on a daily basis, and from time to time I was called on to assist with a delivery or two.

Someone would drop me off at another dealership to collect the car in question (anything from a 3 series BMW to a Range Rover to an SL55 AMG), and the experience at the dealership was always the same - I would stroll through the doors and some salesman or woman, a receptionist or a manager would look me up and down quickly, blink, and make a decision before they'd even spoken to me that I was unworthy of their attention or help, let alone their merchandise.

From the moment I received the email from Divaris, my entire experience at Aston Martin was quite the contrary. To quote Sukasha Singh of the *Mail & Guardian*:

The Aston Martin people are just about the friendliest folk you can come across. No airs [sic], no graces, no pretences [sic] - just down-to-earth professionalism. Sales manager Nic Naylor could see that I was a tad nervous about driving a R2.1 million car for the day, so after briefing me on certain features, such as where to find the hidden fuel release flap that almost drove Jeremy Clarkson to tears, he said: "Don't be afraid to drive this car. It loves to be driven, so go out there and have some fun."

Not once did I feel judged. Without exception, my experience of every other exotic show room in this country, Ferrari (especially), Lamborghini and even luxury dealers such as BMW and Mercedes, is a snooty, arrogant 'you're not worthy' attitude.

Now a good car salesperson will tell you that they can spot a buyer in seconds. It has a lot to do with the confidence of the person, their self-assurance - the way they 'carry' themselves. If the customer comes across nervous and uncertain, chances are they aren't worth your energy. Needless to say I'm often reduced to a blubbing mass of uselessness at just the sight of such a monstrous slice of engineering. Not exactly textbook buyer material.

But the weird thing is (and this is the philosophy of Aston Martin SA), EVERYONE IS A CUSTOMER. Whether I'm buying your car or not, I'm a customer. Not only am I a customer, but I'm a potential salesperson - a potential evangelist for the brand. Readers of this site know I'm an Audi evangelist - I love the cars and the people have always treated me like a human being. Aston Martin know that whether I can afford their car now or not is irrelevant - I MIGHT BE ABLE TO AFFORD IT ONE DAY! And when I can, they want me back in their showroom. Not Ferrari, not Bentley, not Lamborghini. Aston Martin. They bleed Aston Martin from every pore and it shows in the way they treated me.

The brand enjoyed rave reviews for their presence at the Auto Africa show this year - a show in which many marques took flack for disappointing stands and in some cases, not even showing up (apparently Nasrec is 'too South' for some exotic brands... nice).

Fans of the cars were afforded the opportunity to sit in the model of their dreams, rev the engine and dream just for a few seconds what it must be like to own one. Aston Martin sold seven cars. Not bad for a week's work.

Here's what Aston Martin get that very few other companies, let alone car companies, understand:

1. If you invest in customers, the vast majority will return your investment with interest. Maybe not right now, but sometime in the future. Customers are like elephants, they seldom forget. I will NEVER forget the negative experiences I've had at all Aston's competitors, and NEVER forget the positive experience at Aston.
2. You simply can't afford to judge a book by its cover. Divaris thought I was a freelance journalist. He knew when he sent that email there was NO WAY I could afford that car. Little did he know that I am a business owner. In two years' time, when I can afford it, you know where I'm going back to. You just never know who your next customer is (or who your next blogger is).
3. Customers become evangelists through relationship and experience. Justin, Alex and Nic gave me the experience of a lifetime and, even if they're pretending, did a great job of making me feel like I was a welcome friend. I am simply burning to return the favour. Brace yourself, Sheila.

So the other day at 3pm, I picked up a black 6.0 litre V12 Aston Martin DB9, and returned it at 10am the next morning. For 19 hours I felt like a king. For 19 hours, people applauded as I drove through traffic (I kid you not). For 19 hours, I got to share one of the most exhilarating experiences on earth with the people I love the most. I will never, ever forget it.

ABOUT MIKE STOPFORTH

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