

Prevent poor customer service from killing your brand

 By Wynand Smit

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South African businesses are faced with an exceedingly difficult task. They have to find ways to survive in the face of ongoing political uncertainty, fast eroding business and investor confidence, and declining consumer spend. From large retail banks to small consultancies, local businesses have to fight hard to win customers - and even more so to retain them.



Credit: Getty

Indeed, as competition intensifies amidst a slowing economy, brand loyalty is becoming a thing of the past. Today, consumers switch between brands at the slightest hint of better prices, more responsive service and higher quality outcomes. More than ever before, businesses have to stand out – they have to have a clear differentiator in order to survive (and thrive) in a tough environment.

But how do you stand out in an increasingly crowded marketplace? The answer is straightforward: provide outstanding customer service.

Instead of looking to change or adjust their service or product offering, South African businesses can attract and retain customers simply by providing seamless and efficient customer service. In an environment in which quality customer service is infamously absent, this can be an almost instantaneous (and relatively easy) way for businesses to gain a critical competitive advantage.

Get your customer service right, and you will instantly stand out from the crowd...

Beyond the buzzwords

There can be no doubt that modern businesses have lost touch with the consumer and end-user. While this can be attributed to many factors (urbanisation, the loss of the 'corner store', retail chains, hyper-connectivity, etc) the end result is the same: businesses no longer have a personal, 'human' relationship with customers. They have no knowledge of who they are dealing with, what that person's needs are, their historical relationship with the brand, etc. All intimacy and connection has been lost – the essential link has been broken.

Some companies have recognised this, and have taken steps to repair the broken link. In recent years, we have witnessed the emergence of myriad technology solutions and platforms to help businesses get it right. Arguably, however, many 'solutions' have been sold on the back of attractive buzzwords (cloud, virtualisation, AI, Big Data, chatbots, etc) that have seldom translated into positive and measurable outcomes for businesses.

Yet the problem doesn't lie within the technology itself: the problem lies with the simple fact that businesses still do not understand who their customers are.



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Get back to basics

To provide world-class customer service and thereby differentiate themselves, businesses have to get back to the very basics of engagement. Forget the technology for now, and place the emphasis on restoring the lost link with the consumer.

There are four key steps to take on this journey, and to provide a strong foundation for growth...

Consolidate all interactions

In an attempt to stay 'relevant' and trendy, businesses are adopting multiple channels and touchpoints without understanding how to integrate them properly. We are seeing the use of WhatsApp, chatbots, social media, etc, to engage with customers, yet with no ability to track, measure and follow through on queries.

To avoid providing lacklustre service on these channels, make sure that you consolidate and bring all the mechanisms into the same queue, i.e. into the measurement environment. If they cannot be consolidated, rather remove certain channels than allow them to dilute the brand.

Identify the customer

Once your channels have been consolidated, the next step is to learn to identify the customer across all the various mechanisms. To provide great service, every interaction must quickly and easily reveal who the customer is.

Harness the data

Once the identification piece has been solved, you can then begin to gather historical data and create a holistic view of the customer. This data can be used to predict behaviour and thus empower call centre agents with the ability to personalise their service and meet individual needs.



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Create accountability

The final and critical step is to create accountability. Make the customer a promise, and then put mechanisms in place to track and measure if that promise is being fulfilled. Without a culture of accountability, any attempt to enhance customer service will fail.

This also means reassessing and changing existing metrics. Today, efficiency and productivity is often measured according to the number of calls answered in a time period. Yet this means nothing in itself...were the issues resolved? Were there promises made, and were these promises upheld?

Basics drive profit

By getting back to the basics, understanding their customers, and creating a culture of accountability, businesses can quickly transform from within – without major investment or internal upheaval. There is no doubt that creating a winning customer service proposition is one of the fastest ways to drive bottom line profits today.

ABOUT WYNAND SMIT

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