

Competitive retail environment demands staff that care

The challenge of improving employees' customer service expertise, as well as performance ability, is an ongoing quest for the retail industry.



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"Whilst inspirational concepts have been followed from the days of Tom Peters' book, *'In Search of Excellence'*, to Steven Covey's self-help business book, *'7 Habits of Highly Effective People'*, as well other advice guides, the search for additional methods still continues," says Val Nichas, owner and principal consultant at VBN Consultants.

"How do we inspire team members to care sincerely about customers, whilst simultaneously yielding a meaningful and enjoyable service to them? We need to ensure that our customers' journeys are positive and memorable, as well as frequent."

Competitive trading environment

"Nowadays, we trade in a highly competitive environment which becomes increasingly spirited on an ongoing basis. Consumers live in a world of economic pressures and social challenges and continually search for their own personal purpose in life. So shopping in a space that enhances their lives should be of paramount importance to you...that is, if you want them to come back."

“If we look at the retail environment in South Africa, consumers have more options to choose from than ever before, including new international brands and online shopping options. Moreover, if the service experience is lousy, the brand runs the risk of dealing with social media where one complaint is amplified by the speed and reach of this media monster. This negative exposure, which goes viral in seconds, can be detrimental to any brand.

“Consumers are constantly engaging in many service experiences throughout their daily lives...from the petrol garage attendant to the supermarket cashier, receptionist, taxi driver, food vendor, call-centre operator, flight attendant, fitness advisor and many more. So what differentiates the team that cares, from the other that delivers a mediocre or poor experience? How do you get your teams to care - to behave, talk with care, take action with care?

“Some retailers in South Africa are leading the way with small touch points that enhance the customer experience. For example, Woolworths has team members that will walk you to where a required product is located in store, compared to other retail outlets where an unnamed supermarket packer will simply point out the number of the aisle, which is often incorrect. Woolies also impresses with a commitment to shoppers that says if you are standing in the queue for longer than five minutes, call a manager to assist.

“In addition, some retailers are going the extra mile to deliver an improved customer experience by offering exclusive gift wrapping and quality gift bags. There is also Takealot, which has provided ease and speed for online shopping.”



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“But then there are still many brands that simply don’t get it or don’t really care and fail to take the time to view the customer journey from the customer’s point of view. Far too often, processes that suit the business are applied, as opposed to what is good for the customer. For example, in footwear departments, there is often no place to sit and try on a pair of shoes. Many clothing stores have a limited number of mirrors, and changing rooms seldom have a seat or bench to rest a bag.

“Then, when it comes to services by team members in food outlets, they cannot be expected to sell anything with conviction if they have never eaten or even tasted the product before. How can I sell sweet chilli sauce and camembert cheese if I’ve never eaten it?”

George Bourdos, who focuses on consumer insights and customer journey mapping for VBN clients, adds that South Africa’s retailers need to make a significant investment if they are to deliver a superior service. “After a recent visit to the Nike Store in Soho New York, I can confidently say that Nike does it again. Following its reputation of the icon Nike Town store, it has now opened a better experience in Soho. Other than impressive store design elements, which include an in-store basketball court, soccer turf and treadmills to ‘test drive’ specific shoes, what impressed me the most was the human component in this new store.

“South African companies must start investing in recruiting quality sales people as well as providing the appropriate product knowledge training, if they are to compete with the best in the world. Team incentives need to be planned and created and the overall contact and communication sphere reviewed. Customer care goes beyond a friendly greeting and retailers have to ensure that staff have a genuine interest and passion for what they are selling. Team members have to know more information about the product than the customer who can access information online.

“Whilst new technology, as well as the rapid development and use of digital interventions, are largely responsible for business processes, systems becoming outdated, brands need to reimagine their customer experience journeys to succeed in satisfying the future wants and needs of customers,” says Bourdos.

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