



# Expect more fussy customers in 2014

Companies that do not take good care of clients will pay an ultimate higher price

By AKI KALLIATAKIS

**A**sk people about the state of customer service, and there is a good chance that they will tell you about at least five stories of terrible experiences – and not many positive ones. In a recent survey of more than 400 South African customers, 72 per cent said they had experienced rage with a business at least once in the last four months. Anyone who has tried to solve a problem with a bank, airline booking or mobile phone service provider recently will know what this sense of powerlessness feels like.

The horrendous state of customer care is not particularly new to most readers.



What is new is the fact that companies are going to pay a higher price for not taking care of customers, because rebellious customers become more able and willing to take action. The most important issue for our generation is not humility or frugality, but trust. We feel betrayed by governments and businesses, (as well as many other organisations,) and the trust is gone. What's made it worse for companies is that customers find ever-easier ways to deal with competitors, to identify and expose the "lies" and "fraud" committed against them by companies trying to separate them from their hard-earned money. There will doubtless be more Wikileaks and HelloPeter.com, (18 million hits every month, making it SA's most popular website,) that expose companies' worst practices, and we also have no doubt that customers will take action against any business that is vaguely unethical, greedy or abusive.

But the damage that customers do goes way beyond bad-mouthing a company and affecting its reputation, (in the social media and everywhere else.) Withdrawal of business, taking legal action, contacting consumer bodies and media, abuse of staff and property, and not paying accounts are some of the other negative consequences. And all this in an environment where comparisons are happening in real time, and customers demand better prices through decreased cost and waste.

What customer care trends do we think will happen in 2014? Even more importantly, how can a business avoid the pitfalls of poor customer management?

### **Better experiences**

For many years, companies have employed "brand police" in senior executive positions to ensure that the company's image is clearly defined and communicated. More companies will hire senior "customer police" who are obsessed with ensuring that customers are treated right. As author Chris Anderson put it, "A company's brand is not what the company says it is, but what the customer says it is on Google... The ants have megaphones now." Early on, amazon.com's Jeff Bezos brought an empty chair into meetings so that company executives and managers would be forced to think about the crucial participant who wasn't in the room- the customer. Now, that role is played by specially trained employees, and when they frown, executives tremble. As the power of traditional marketing and promotion activity fails even more, companies will need to focus on giving customers better experiences.

### **Great expectations**

Businesses will be forced to make customers' lives easier and more convenient. Companies need to look at four levels: What can they do to make it physically easier for customers? What can they do to make things less intellectually and conceptually challenging? What can they do to ensure that customers' emotional frustrations don't occur? How can they save customers' time? Businesses need to look in the

real world, as well as online. Customers will definitely become even more demanding about basic customer service issues in 2014: greater reliability, quality and keeping promises; more speed; greater 24/7 availability, (never be hard to reach); more personalisation and humanness in communication; more competence and consistency, (and less unpredictability); more friendliness, warmth and empathy; and a greater sense of security and safety. We also predict that lots of training and motivating people who deal with customers will become a bigger priority for larger companies.

### **Don't be petty**

Companies make mistakes often, (whether it's overcharging your credit card, or sending the wrong product,) and customers usually want to hear two simple little words: "We're sorry." Business, unfortunately, often have trouble expressing that sentiment, which only leads to more frustration and anger from consumers. Don't ignore customer unhappiness, and don't be petty or stingy when sorting it out.

Innovation and added value will separate average organisations from the unique, distinct and successful ones. To this, we can add customer expectations of memorable and amazing experiences that they will want to repeat over and over. It is not only about gifts and entertainment: the personal touch has and always will be very desirable for all customers, not just the select few.

### **Excuse-driven service**

While social media and the Internet will increase in usage, online retailers will not surpass bricks-and-mortar businesses until there is a vast improvement in their half-hearted, excuse-driven service and delivery. With one notable exception - Yuppiefest - SA online retailers leave a lot to be desired in service, reliability and delivery. It is not about fears of credit card fraud, poor internet speed, or an unreliable postal service. It is mostly because South Africans don't trust that their orders will arrive.

On the other hand, many companies will get cleverer about the way they manage their customers. They will be more adept at creating loyalty and retention, especially for the selected "good customers," cross-selling and upgrading customers, and using the power of referrals and recommendations. But if those customers don't feel actively positive about the business, these strategies will backfire, leaving an even darker void for salespeople. And decisions will also need to be made about the "long tail" of smaller customers that have the potential to grow.

Many executives may question what the return on investment (ROI) on customer management activity will be. Our answer is unequivocal. The ROI of taking care of customers is that you will still be around in the next five years to talk about it. ■

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