



CUSTOMER SERVICE

Since 2007, if you ask people about the state of customer service there is a good chance that they will be able to 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% said that they had experienced rage with a business at least once in the last 4 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. 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. 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? Here are our thoughts:

For many years companies have employed "brand police" in senior executive positions to ensure that the company image is clearly defined and communicated. More and 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 customer better experiences.

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*"The health of people is really the foundation upon which all their happiness and all their power as a state depend."
Benjamin Disraeli*



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