

Service is still the secret...

 By [Anton Ressel](#)

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In this age of mass consumption, fast food, FMCG, twitterati, fly-by-nights, whirlwind trends and a general throwaway culture, there is still one secret weapon that savvy and sustainable businesses use to stay ahead of the game - a focus on providing exceptional, personal and genuine customer service.

This is not a new strategy. In fact, before the advent of broad-scale advertising and more recently the multiple platforms of the digital age, the most powerful marketing weapon at a business owner's disposal was good old word-of-mouth. And since there was (and still is) no better way to encourage positive word-of-mouth endorsement than by going beyond expectation and delivering stellar customer service, this is what many companies did as a matter of course.

Sadly, these days this old-school dedication to customer service is increasingly sacrificed at the altar of positive PR opps or glossy, airbrushed advertising - painting a scenario that is usually so far removed from reality, it leaves one cold. I mean, does anyone really believe that any bank has their best financial interests at heart, or that their cellphone provider really does just want them to get connected to the world and live a great, happy life? If that was true, they would not cut you off with no warning (and charge a hefty reconnection fee) because you erroneously short-paid by R1,14 last month. If our banks were genuinely obsessed with our financial wellbeing, we would not have the highest bank charges in the world, or be expected to sign our life away (literally) when applying for a loan.

Genuine focus on the customer pays off

Fortunately, it is not all smoke and mirrors. There are some big (and many small) companies out there that do have a genuine focus on simply providing the very best product or service that they can, and it is no surprise that many of these companies are prospering in difficult economic times. One international example is UK-based retailer Sainsbury's, whose singular focus on excellent customer service has seen them garner ever-increasing market share in a flat economy, while their competitors struggle all around them. Closer to home, businesses like kulula, Kalahari.com and Woolworths have survived in very tough sectors by making the customer experience fun, consistent and a huge focus of operations.



The golden rule for every business - from the largest to the smallest... perhaps a stall in a craft market: Always put your customer first. (Image: [Quitolabicicleta](#), via Wikimedia Commons)

Fortunately, great service as a business growth strategy is not the preserve of big guys with big budgets. Let me illustrate my point with an example of one small local business that has seen first-hand the benefits of a singular focus on delighting their customers. Research Unit is a Cape Town-based manufacturer of high-end leather products, started in 2012 by husband-and-wife team Chad and Erin-Lee Petersen. Having started modestly, the company has enjoyed a rapid rise in a tough industry, culminating in them opening a brand new studio and showroom in March 2014 and being selected as one of only 18 participant businesses in SAB's Kickstart

Entrepreneurial Competition for 2013/2014. While this rapid growth is impressive, it pales in comparison when stacked against the outcome one particular instance of going the extra mile resulted in, not just for them, but for the customer concerned.

A little extra counts for a great deal

Explains Erin-Lee: "We met Kim Stern, curator and artist of note over a year ago at the Neighbourgoods market one Saturday afternoon. She loved our products and purchased a leather cardholder with our hand-stitched logo on the front. Since Kim works between Cape Town and New York, a few months later she popped in again and wanted to purchase more product. She also requested a replacement logo on the original cardholder. We swapped it out for a new folded cardholder, and we placed a brand new logo on the old one for her too.

After her product was repaired, we gave her a call to meet us to collect it. That day, she brought along her friend, Dr Liora Lazarus who lectures at the Faculty of Law at Oxford University and was visiting Cape Town at the time. Kim had told her that we also make cool scout packs from leather and canvas, and was keen to purchase one for her as a gift. After some contemplation over the colour, Liora ordered one but was leaving the next day, so we were unable to complete the bag in time. We promised to send it to her in Oxford, England, even though we do not usually send one-offs overseas. It was duly completed and sent, and that was the last we heard of it for a while.

Put your customers first. Always

'A few months passed, and then Kim paid us another visit at the market. She had a sparkle in her eye we had not seen before. "I'm off to England to spend time with my fiancé, and I must thank you guys," said Kim. She promptly ordered a scout pack, a Mac book cover, a few wallets, cardholders and a canvas shopper, and then excitedly told us that it was because of our efforts in making and sending that one special scout pack, a gift from her to someone who at that time was just a friend, that she and Dr Lazarus were engaged to be married! This was the best feedback we could ever hope to hear from someone who has now become a customer for life!"

While not every effort to go the extra mile will result in unexpected nuptials, it is clear that those businesses that are winning in these challenging times are the ones who put their customers first. Not in a glossy, slick, multi-million rand ad campaign way, but by a singular and sincere focus on delivering their products and services in a manner that makes their customer feel special, valued and more than just a number.

Trends, gimmicks, clever ad campaigns, and better mousetraps come and go all the time, along with the companies that see them as the way to get rich quick. Like the proverbial tortoise and the hare, steady and sincere usually wins the race.

ABOUT ANTON RESSEL

Anton Ressel is an experienced business development consultant, mentor and SME specialist. He is the Senior consultant at ED and CSI specialist agency Fetola (www.fetola.co.za), a winning mentor on the SAB Kickstart Entrepreneur Competition, and a published author across multiple publications. His passion is helping small businesses become big ones. Follow @antonres on Twitter.

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