

Customer experience: the key differentiator

South African consumers are expected to have spent R250bn in 2021 - a 20% increase from 2020, and it is customer experience that will differentiate one retailer from another, especially during peak shopping months such as December.



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With the rise of the e-commerce model, for the most part, pricing and product offerings are beginning to converge across the board and are no longer setting retailers apart from one another.

A positive experience

According to NTT's *2021 Global Customer Experience Benchmarking Report*, 57.9% of global consumers strongly agree that customer experience is a way for organisations to differentiate themselves from the competition.

While 90.9% of organisations agree that it is a primary differentiator, less than 50% of organisations are investing directly into customer experience. Zain Patel, managing director at Merchants, explains that for retailers this is no longer an option.

“Consumers are faced with more choice than ever, and the presence of online stores has meant a rise in the number of shoppers carrying out online research prior to purchasing products, so when they make the decision to leave the house, they do so with a very clear intention to purchase, rather than spending time browsing the store.

“What’s more, they are willing to switch retailers in an instant for better customer experience – both digital and in-store.

“Quite simply, the digital path to purchase and in-store experience need to be seamless to complete the sale. “What keeps consumers loyal is a positive experience with a retailer, before, during and after purchase,” he says.

“Consumers want to feel valued, and they demand a personalised experience from service providers throughout the path to purchase – be it enquiring about pricing, tracking an order using your WhatsApp chat bot, or communicating with your team about returning an item purchased online.”

Three way to up customer experience

Patel notes that there are three ways retailers can up their customer experience game, today.

- **Hire the right people**

The use of digital recruitment tools allows candidates to be matched with available roles based on cognitive ability and behavioural profiling, rather than age-old factors like experience and education.

“Not only does this mean that you are removing barriers to entry for South African job seekers, but you are going to have the right people for the role – enhancing their chance at being successful and delivering the very best customer experience,” notes Patel.

Examples of important skills for retail customer experience agents include problem solving, empathy, and a high EQ. “Making use of digital recruitment tools will allow employers to reach untapped talent pools who are currently being overlooked,” he says.

- **Cover all touchpoints**

As investment into digital customer experience channels grows, gone are the days of simply having a phone line for customer queries.

2020 consumer research from Merchants found that when asked what their preferred method of interacting with a business or brand was:

- 42% of consumers said contact centres
- 39% said they use whatsapp or chat as a preferred method
- 36% said social media
- 35% said live chat services like chatbots
- 68% said email

“Not only do retailers need to be available on all channels, but the service needs to be of the same standard throughout. If a consumer decides to switch from web application to email to contact centre, the experience needs to be seamless – all the moving parts need to work as one,” explains Patel.

- **Scale your teams at peak times**

Peak times like Black Friday or the festive season mean retail staff are working longer hours and serving more clients – often leading to burnout and fatigue, which can affect the experience for the end customer.

“If your customer experience partner is able to scale your teams at peak times and add capacity for dealing with queries through social media, email, and telephone channels, then your in-store staff will have more time to focus on providing the best experience in store and your customers will be happier,” notes Patel.

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