

Where is customer management going in 2017?

By  Aki Kalliatakis

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The most ridiculous phrase in the English language is 'the foreseeable future'. You can't foresee it. What you can do is monitor trends that, if sustained, will impact your business.

There are dozens of trends around safety, the environment, innovation and much more, all showcased by sites such as TrendWatching.com. The challenge is to identify the big underlying drivers.

Here, we should note the impact of disgruntled people who feel voiceless, but are far from powerless. Northerners in England, excluded from the prosperity cornered by the wealthy south, demonstrated the power of disgruntlement by voting for Brexit.

Presidential candidate Donald Trump has tapped into similar disaffection in the USA.

Disgruntlement is unlikely to go away. It won't simply impact politics, but business; possibly yours unless you do some listening and responding.



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In South Africa, the control of major metros changed because disenchanting voters refused to embrace previous prescriptions. In many cases, we saw no dramatic action by voters, but apathy. They did not care to vote, even though

indifference would hurt a political brand they had always favoured in the past.

Another meaningful trend, then, is the rise of the don't-care consumer.

Don't-care cadres are heartily sick of the antics of big business – VW with attempts to cheat emission tests, Yahoo which takes no responsibility for digital security breaches, BP and its inadequate response to the DeepWater Horizon disaster, Wells Fargo and its bogus accounts, banks involved in mis-selling and market rigging and countless brands that drag their feet before undertaking a product recall.

Little wonder PR firms no longer call themselves PR firms. Today, they are 'reputation management consultants' because reputational rescue is where the money is.

However, it takes years to recover a good name. Meanwhile, you lose business and incur extra costs. VW believes it may take 10 years to repair its own reputational damage, and that might be unduly optimistic. Samsung's estimated revenue loss from the Galaxy 7 debacle could approach \$17bn.

Don't-care customers punish breaches of trust for years. Typically, they withdraw current and future business, stop paying accounts on time, use word-of-mouth (and social media) to rubbish your business, abuse your staff, property and systems, become aggressive complainants, threaten legal action and sometimes take it.

Stores, banks, insurers, cellphone firms, airlines, food and beverage manufacturers, hospitals, pharmacare and other businesses should never forget they work in an emotion-charged environment.

Most purchases are influenced to some extent by emotional factors. Ignore the feelings of your customers and they will stop caring about you. Indifference can be harder to counteract than feelings of revenge. You may not realise its extent or how long it's been going on.

By the time you react, huge damage can be done.

Experience shows that prevention is better (and cheaper) than cure. So what can local brands and businesses do to avoid the risks posed by don't-care customers?

Here is a quick guide:

- Consumers are becoming more demanding, so pay more attention to the basic problems that plague them. Get the basics right. Ask staff and customers what issues frustrate them. Remove these annoyances (like greeting customers as newcomers when they've been loyal for years or misspelling their names in emails)
- Constantly look for ways to make a customer's life easier. Review standard practice. Scrap needless requirements
- Reduce a customer's physical effort. At airports look for ways to cut distances to check-ins. Introduce simple new packaging when current packaging is impossible to open. Make it easier to transact. Cut the amount of information you demand. Make forms design clearer and web pages easier to use.
- At every opportunity, indicate to customers that they matter. Systems that render them powerless don't work. Customers show their power in surprising ways – remember Brexit.
- Find out what wastes your customer's time. Cut queues and reduce delay.
- Once the basics are right, look for ways to add customer value. Give customers pleasant surprises.
- Try to make work fun for your people. They sometimes deal with customers from hell. Do what you can to make their

lives easier – reduce bureaucracy and pettiness from pushy, unhelpful supervisors, build team spirit, collapse silos, liven up boring, repetitive work, nurture good people and set reasonable rather than stressful goals (more understanding and less pressure might have stopped Wells Fargo's target-burdened staff from opening sham customer accounts).

- Explain and clarify. Dictats from on high annoy customers and demotivate staff. Expectation clarity in the workplace helps your people understand what is expected of them and the consequences of non-performance. It also helps you identify what tools are needed for exceptional service delivery.

Brilliant companies that are sustainable get the basics right first. They persistently and obstinately do things that are very obvious. Yet their rivals seem unable to imitate these sensible interventions.

Get it right and ultimately the don't-care customer starts to care – about your business, about your people and about the relationship with you.

Businesses that turn disenchantment into enchantment realise that in customer service the opposite of love is not hate, it's apathy and indifference. Reversing indifference and creating a different type of engaged customer is the challenge for 2017... and every year after that.

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