

## Consumer attitudes reflect society's feelings

Ask Afrika launched the Ask Afrika Orange Index to establish a rank that not only reflects service levels in a particular industry but also compares these across sectors. The latest report has just been released.

“Customers don't make industry specific differentiations,” said Sarina de Beer, MD of Ask Afrika. “They compare best-in-class regardless of industry. The utilitarian days of consumerism have gone. We no longer separate consumer and social expectations. Whether it is a brand or a public institution, we transfer our values and norms onto whatever is being graced by our attention.

“Much has been made of consumer centricity but many companies still do not appreciate the depth of this engagement. Deep down they maintain that it is simply a transaction with a smile. However, successive reports from the Ask Afrika Orange Index have revealed a clear trend.”



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The Index, first released in 2001, gathers views through 15,000 interviews across 33 industries and 228 companies, which are independently audited. The aim is to create a snapshot for South African companies, establish and maintain best of breed practices and ultimately boost the country as a service destination.

However, since consumers-cum-citizens do not differentiate much between service interactions - be it a brand, a public office or other layers of society - the index is quite revealing about the way South Africans think.

“South Africans are very open to change. It is a good thing because it plays a part of being the rainbow nation and having gone through significant changes over the past years. However, that change also implies - and you can see it with the latest elections - from a brand perspective, we are equally open to change. If I am not getting what I want from a brand, I am more than happy to look around for something better.”

The transference of our general expectations onto brands is having a profound effect. Brands are being held to much higher standards and there is a strong expectation of companies to help lift the country. This goes beyond corporate social responsibility. People place an onus on private companies to help address societal issues and invest in a better tomorrow.

“We see that values are incredibly important to people. That is what they look for: they want companies that share their values and they can relate to those values.”

## **Call centres reflect trend**

To illustrate this, De Beer cited fairness - one of the index's newer benchmarks. Fairness is not positively rewarded because it is anticipated. Yet once customers feel they have been unfairly treated, it can quickly become a culminating snowball of negativity.

Some would dismiss this as esoteric - a tad 'touchy feely'. However, the Index is not leveraging theory. These red-blooded trends must be taken seriously. To illustrate the point further, consider the sea change of call centres. Added as a benchmark several years ago, they are a good tell-tale of consumer evolution.

“A few years ago the call centre was a primary channel to migrate consumers away from face-to-face channels into a more remote and cost-effective channel. In the meantime, we produced more self-help channels such as mobile banking, so we have really empowered customers to service themselves.

“The result is that customers have become very proficient at self-help. Therefore, when they do decide to pick up a phone, it represents a huge escalation.

“My situation level is very different because I can resolve the majority of my queries independently. Therefore, the moment I get through to a call centre, my expectation of what that individual should be able to assist me with has increased quite dramatically.”

Since people paint consumer and social experiences with the same brush, companies that succeed in maintaining a strong relationship with their customers do so because they embrace this concept completely. Consumer centricity cannot just sit on the shoulders of frontline staff or a management level or even the executive sphere. It must be reflected across the entire business and its value chains. This is not just good practice. It is expected.

“The quest for loyalty and client commitment is becoming increasingly more complicated, so there are more dimensions that entrench service excellence, such as reputation, trust and corporate social responsibility. Consumers have opened this up - they are expecting far more from businesses, but under the umbrella of service.”

Ask Afrika generates brand reports and workshops to offer guidance around the specifics of the Ask Afrika Orange Index, categorized over ten different benchmarks. These reflect not just consumer trends, but social tides. Though it may seem odd to predict society's behaviour through a consumer prism, that turns out to be a very apt measuring stick.

“We expect an experience and we want memorable experiences,” De Beer concluded. “This is one reason why companies can't just focus on overall customer satisfaction. At every touchpoint, they need to be able to relate to customers on, to some extent, an emotional and values level.”

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