

Why SA's reluctance to use self-service tech is a positive for businesses

By Adam Manuel

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Self-service technology has gone a long way during the last decade. With the advent of social media and smartphones, coupled with the widespread availability of fast broadband, companies from all over the world have been taking advantage of low-cost digital alternatives to providing face-to-face support, particularly in customer care, banking and retail.

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While self-service technology is certainly something that should be embraced, it's important for corporate entities to retain a 'human' side. Digital solutions are convenient, however, they don't always lead to a satisfactory resolution to problems. Sometimes a simple conversation, or even a means for unhappy customers to vent their frustrations verbally, is necessary.

Explaining the lack of self service in South Africa

South Africans haven't taken to self-service in the same manner as Europeans and Americans, and often choose traditional face-to-face contact as the preferred method of communication. For example: self-service checkouts are yet to make an impact in retail, payment systems through third party internet applications aren't common, and automated ticketing is only available through a small selection of airlines. In fact, most organisations in South Africa are yet to even expand their social media into the customer support sector, believing it to be a significant waste of investment.

On some level, this could be considered a positive move as the cracks are starting to show in countries that have embraced self-service. For example, in the United Kingdom the government portal (HM Revenue & Customs) has recently announced a reshuffle that will see the their already strained customer services department focus on self-service solutions. The popular opinion has been largely negative. Tax is an extremely complex topic, and if trained customer services representatives already struggle to cope with demands, there's no chance the average Joe could sort out tax problems themselves.

The correlation between self-service acceptance and smartphone use

Smartphones and the widespread accessibility of broadband has had a major impact on the way business is conducted.

Approximately 89 percent of South Africans own either a smart or regular phone, which is comparable to the United States; however, only 19 percent use them for social networking, particularly those who can speak and read English, as opposed to 59 percent in the United States. Comparable trends can be seen in European and Asian countries. The correlation is undeniable. As social media use in South Africa is growing, perhaps in a few years self-service technology will eventually become more accepted. If statistics are anything to go by, this seems highly likely.

According to Contact Telephone Numbers, “UK companies like to insist that you are dealt with via email, online chat and FAQs. This is because dealing with queries by phone increases their expenditure on staffing and profit margins.” This general attitude has caused widespread disdain on the British Isles, and now businesses are starting to suffer. But that's not to say that South African businesses will experience a slow decline in their level of customer care with this advent of technology. In fact, they now have greater control of their future than before.

South African businesses have the rare opportunity to establish where the countries who have incorporated such technologies – such as the UK – are going wrong, and rectify any looming issues before they occur. Fundamentally, the pace with which the country is joining the self-service race, be it through lack of investment from the corporate sector or the reluctance of the general population, could be a major positive in the future!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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