

A lesson for Cell C - you could have turned a moan into a tribute

Suhana Gordhan:* Advertising wizard David Ogilvy said: "The consumer is not a moron. She's your wife." I love this quote because it humanises the consumer in a way that many brands don't. The consumer is not a biological virus to be studied in a fish bowl. Consumers are so human - flawed, unpredictable, forgiving and very powerful. The consumer is your wife, your girlfriend and your dad. Some days they will adore you and some days they won't.



It is ironic that Cell C's tag line is "The Power is in your Hands" because last week a disgruntled customer proved this to be entirely true. He was angered by Cell C's inability to rectify an issue and erected a billboard reading: "The most useless service provider in SA - Cell C Sandton City." What's more ironic is that the customer turned advertising on its head and advertised back to the brand, reclaiming his power and generating significant publicity.

This billboard confirms that the consumer is not just interested in being part of the conversation. He wants to create conversation. The billboard did its work and its simplistic tone can be admired for its ability to summon the masses in support. The billboard began a game of brand-and-consumer tennis and, right now, consumer is leading six-love.

A brand's response to negative publicity is crucial

Cell C failed in the first rule of great customer service. "Goliath" slapped "David" with legal action and put forward a weak Twitter response: "We can confirm that there is a dispute between Cell C and the customer responsible for the banner. We are attempting to resolve the matter."

Bravo! Thank you Cell C, for confirming what the public is already distinctly aware of. Cell C missed an opportunity to rectify the problem, to turn a negative into a positive and to serve an ace with a genuine response. But perhaps the biggest negligence was the failure to warm the consumer's heart again.

One of the most powerful forms of advertising is exceptional customer service.

In an age where everyone's dirty laundry flutters in the breeze and where everyman's opinion receives its 15 minutes on a soapbox, word of mouth becomes incredibly important.

Great customer service requires empowered employees, a shift in company philosophy and a conscious commitment to place the customer at the heart of the brand experience.

It requires more effort and energy than financial outlay but, most important, it means that everyone that represents the brand needs to give a hoot about the consumer.

When this happens, there will always be a good return on investment.

Gregory Ciotti, a marketer at Help Scout, says: "Customer service isn't about telling people how awesome you are, it's about creating stories that do the talking for you."

Say what you like about the loudmouthed US and prudish UK, but they have the best examples of extraordinary customer service. I'll share just two. Lily, a three-year-old, aptly pointed out that Sainsbury's tiger bread hardly resembled a tiger but looked more like a giraffe. With her dad's help, she wrote a letter to Sainsbury's, which not only responded but also changed the name of the bread. United Airlines announced a flight delay. One Mr Drake, on board that flight, was *en route* to see his mother in her final hours. The flight attendants, upon realising this, immediately alerted the captain, who radioed Drake's connecting flight. They responded by delaying takeoff to make sure he got on board. Drake made it in time to say his final goodbye.

The Cell C story is not just about a disgruntled rich customer. It tells a story of repeated carelessness on the brand's part. It reveals an inability to step off their marketing high horse and into human shoes. Whether the man who created that billboard was right or wrong is not the issue. The issue is that the consumer does not live on page 92 of Marketing 101. The consumer is you and the consumer is also your wife, who leans over your shoulder in bed to read the paper with you. Don't push her aside if she annoys you. Try buying her flowers every now and then.

Source: *Business Day*, via I-Net Bridge

**Suhana Gordhan is a creative director in advertising and wrote the above piece for Business Day.*

Meanwhile...

Cell C loses banner battle

The legal tug-of-war between Cell C and disgruntled customer George Prokas ended yesterday with the dismissal of the cellphone network's urgent court application against him...

A week ago, Prokas erected an embarrassing banner, reading "the most useless service provider in SA as experienced via Cell C Sandton City", on a wall at a northern Johannesburg shopping complex.

After the court victory yesterday he warned other service providers to "get their houses in order".

His attorney, Raymond Druker, said: "[Prokas] hopes this sends a signal to big corporates that they must tread warily, they can't bully people any more, they have to up their service levels and get their houses in order.

"He said this shows that the courts are here to protect everybody.

"He regrets that people who are in the same position as him but don't have the money to go to court to protect their rights like this have not been able to do so."

Druker said he was "pretty sure" the banner would stay put - only without the contact number of the franchise manager at the Sandton City branch.

Too slow to launch urgent application

Judge Sharise Weiner told Cell C yesterday it could have launched an urgent application immediately after Prokas threatened in e-mails to put up the banner. Its application was therefore no longer urgent. The damage had already been done, too, she said.

Prokas is said to have bought two phones from Cell C and when one stopped working, he took it back, only to wait several months before it was returned unrepaid and in worse shape. When he returned to Cell C he was told he had incurred a bill of R5,100 and had been listed with a credit bureau, his account sent to debt collectors.

The network's lawyers argued on Wednesday that the banner was "defamatory, and unapologetically so" and intended to "lower the reputation of Cell C".

They said it equalled "unauthorised use" of the Cell C trademark and might contravene municipal by-laws.

Many insulting messages had been left on the cellphone of the franchise manager identified on the banner, they said.

Yesterday, Webber Wentzel, lawyers for Cell C, referred queries to the network. There was no comment from Cell C spokesperson Karin Fourie.

Source: *The Times*, via I-Net Bridge

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