

8 great CX fundamentals to get your customers back to love doing business with you again

By [Liesel Jonkheid](#)

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When it comes to shaping your customer experience and service delivery, do not underestimate the emotional and psychological state of South Africans.



Source: © Julia Larson [pexels](#) When it comes to shaping your customer experience and service delivery, do not underestimate the emotional and psychological state of South Africans

South African consumers are in a fragile state – emotionally, psychologically, and financially. The state of our economy, soaring interest rates, crime, political instability, record load shedding, unemployment, the collapse of local service delivery and the build-up to the 2024 national elections are all taking a significant toll on people's state of mind, and confidence in the country.

Battered, emotional and downright fatigued

We also cannot underestimate the long-term impact that the changes brought about by the pandemic have had on consumer behaviour, triggered by the rapid and profound disruption of legacy business models across many industries.

More than two years of building 'pandemic resilience' are now amplified by many complicating local and global macro-factors that are leaving consumers feeling a little more than battered, emotional and downright fatigued.

The FNB/BER consumer confidence index (CCI) released on 23 March shows that consumer confidence plunged to -23 index points, the lowest point since the second quarter of 2022, when floods hit KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) and the world was coming to terms with the economic effects of the invasion of Ukraine.

This reading is the third lowest CCI reading on record since 1994 and illustrates consumer concern and stress about their household finances and SA's economic prospects. Some of the implications include pressure on spending power, which affects tourism, restaurants, and entertainment service, not to mention the avoidance of spending on luxury goods.



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The impact of all that uncertainty

What does any of this have to do with customer experience, and the ability of your business to keep your customers?

A lot more than you realise. It would be a terrible underestimation not to consider the impact that all the uncertainty – politically, economically, and socially – has on your customers' already emotional state, their loyalty and what this all means for customer service and experience.

Here's my take on the most pressing issues, with insights gleaned from personal experience as a customer experience specialist, observation, as well as from the CX market research that we conduct as the Consumer Psychology Lab.

4 of the most pressing issues

1. Customers are passive-aggressive

Consumers are fighting to be heard, and not always in expected ways. Three years since the pandemic, we see consumers behaving very differently, with high levels of emotion underpinning behaviour.

2. Dehumanised contact

Just consider your most recent engagement to resolve an issue with your bank, internet or cellular service provider, and how long it took you to deal with a human on the other end, after being pummelled through channels of bots, AI and self-service channels that left you in a heightened state of aggravation? Despite self-help options intended to scale support to many customers, the lack of human contact has dehumanised brands and customers.

3. Fear is driving a fight response

From the typical flight-fight-freeze response to fear, it seems 'fight' is the strongest contender. Excessive responses often relate to illogical rules or procedures that are not customer-centric and leave consumers feeling unheard.

4. Despondency

Do not underestimate the impact of global and local events and circumstances on people's psyches – record levels of load-shedding, a failing economy, looming elections and political uncertainty and upheaval, corruption, strikes, failing municipalities, non-existent service delivery, the war in Ukraine and huge increases in the cost of living are taking their toll.

Given this environment, it's little wonder that consumers are reacting more strongly, and often out-of-character. However, businesses also need to look critically at whether service delivery has kept pace with the changed dynamics of the last few years and the current market dynamics.

Business leaders need to ask whether the business and service delivery responses have evolved to meet customers where they are now?



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Where are your customers in 2023?

Rising customer expectations, intolerance of poor service and overtly angry consumer behaviour are just one side of the coin.

The flip side shows that companies have been slow to adjust to the new normal and that there was an expectation that things would somehow return to the way they were before.

This has not happened. Nor will it. If your service delivery and the processes supporting the changing landscape have not been reviewed, then it's likely that this is very well the match that leads to customer anger and ire as service complacency sets in. Customers and their expectations, on the other hand, are anything but complacent or static.

8 antidotes to the angry customer

There is an overwhelming need to regain the focus on the fundamentals of great CX in the current and future environment, as an antidote to the angry customer.

1. Know your customers

Who are your customers now, and how have they changed during the past three years? New insights are needed to direct the way forward and what to focus on. Refocus attention on customers and their needs, because customers are more vocal and less forgiving than before and will walk away to other providers who do listen. Ask customers more questions, listen and adjust the service delivery according to their needs.

2. Empathise

There has never been a stronger need for empathy as a business skill than right now. Empathy requires the ability to understand the context of others and respond appropriately. To build empathy for customers, business owners and their teams need to look at customers through different glasses and understand their needs within this context.

3. Review the current customer journey

Review the customer journey with fresh insights from customer feedback, enhanced with current trends in other industries. Re-assess each touchpoint and undertake channel reviews and tests from a customer's perspective to identify glaring gaps and inconsistencies. Review messaging throughout all touchpoints for relevance.

4. Experience expectations are now transferred across all industries

Digitalisation and more self-service channels have become a reality for consumers. Distribution channels have matured. Consumers now expect every online grocery purchase to be delivered the same day, or within the hour with easy, hassle-free service recovery. Does this apply to your business too? What else have customers transferred from other industries into new expectations from your business?



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5. Empower staff

Don't assume everyone knows what is required of them. Disempowered staff become disengaged and interact with customers without empathy and care, igniting over-reaction by customers who do not feel heard. Invest in training frontline staff with not only 'what to do' but 'how' to deliver the required service.

The generational shortcomings that technology brings in relation to intuitively knowing how to connect with customers on a human level also present a significant gap and requires the development of the right capabilities and communication skills.

For example, a Gen Z in customer support with no assets or business experience, managing a conversation about creditworthiness within their limited understanding of the process, may be unaware of their shaming, entitled tone with a customer.

6. Service design is not a once-off or static process

Review and redesign process, protocols and procedures in line with changes and challenges in the business and its customers, and ensure all staff understand the service designed around the critical touch points. Service blueprints are essential when implementing new processes and protocols across the entire value chain of service delivery.

7. Listen to customer feedback

There is no need to wait for a 'Voice of the Customer' programme to identify where customer pain points emerge (although it is one of the best sources for this purpose).

Ensure that staff have a channel to share their observations around what customers struggle with and take action on critical pathways. In addition, as new business practices are implemented, take time to "be a customer" by stepping into the shoes of who is buying your products – using all senses for the assessments – what does it feel like, what you are thinking, what the company says and responds and so on.

Be your customer for a day! Furthermore, empower staff with the skills to manage angry customers with a supportive framework and more management involvement in resolving volatile situations.

Do not remain in perpetual 'fix it' mode.

8. Measure and track

Measure the impact of any changes made to align with customer expectations, experience of service delivery and changes to service design. These include tracking business measures alongside customer experience measures.

Examples of metrics include lost and new customers (churn), volume and speed of returns/refunds, staff retention, number of and success metrics for innovations and improvements, first-time resolutions, CX training initiatives and so on.

Should the volume of 'angry customers' reveal the same trend as noted in this article, the number of investigations and material cost to the business should also be included in the metrics.



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The age-old saying of a problem always has two sides holds true. Take another look at the past three years, and how your business had to change, adjust and reposition.

Customers will always challenge your business. Traditional statistics and approaches can no longer be amplified to the present situation and customer psyche, as we are dealing with a completely new phenomenon, unprecedented in scope and nature.

The time to restructure with a more customer-centric, empathetic, forward-looking approach that is hyper-aware of your customers' changed realities is long overdue.

It is time to get your customers back to love doing business with you again.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Liezel Jonkheid is the director and founder of the Consumer Psychology Lab

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