

Customer service is not a science, says Cell C CEO



By [Jessica Tennant](#)

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A simple and common sense message that came across loud and clear at the [Ask Afrika Orange Index Conference](#) on Thursday, 9 February 2017 that seems to be the key to success in customer service was to create more real, meaningful human connections.

José dos Santos, CEO of Cell C, overall winner in the Call Centre category, spoke about three principles he applied to leading what is today the most successful call centre in South Africa, according to the Index.

For Dos Santos, "customer care is not a science, it's just pure common sense." He takes an inward-outward approach that's focused more on the call centre staff than the customers themselves, as he believes well-trained, self-motivated employees on the one end of the line will have a positive effect on the caller.



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To turn a call centre around as was the case for Cell C, besides quite unashamedly firing unmotivated employees, he suggests looking at your culture, leadership and the way you reward or recognise your staff.

Culture

"You've got to service your own colleagues first before you can service the customer."

Believe it or not, but [Cell C's 2013 Believe campaign](#) was more for the staff in the organisation. "We lived and ate the word 'believe'. There was no such thing as 'I can't do this'. If anyone had that mentality, they'd get put in the 'elimination box'.

Leadership

"It wasn't a question of management buy-in, it was a question of me leading from the front," Dos Santos explained. In practice, his email is publicly available to all members of staff, and 9 times out of 10 they receive a personal email from him. "The tone starts at the top," he said.

There are times when you should forfeit your value system to demonstrate what it takes to keep the customer happy. "How can you expect an employee at the call centre to do what you want them to do if you don't do it?"

He also finds engaging with the call centre staff very important. Every month he has breakfast with 25 young staff at low level and engages with them over a meal.

Rewards

"How do you keep people who sit there six hours a day listening to queries motivated?" You have to reward them, not necessarily monetarily, but through recognition. "Sometimes just giving them a check is not what they're looking for; they're looking for a different type of recognition," such as an annual awards ceremony, for instance.

Furthermore, he says you should embrace your partners by making them part of the family, and this might mean paying them on time, even early, as this will have a compounding impact on your partnership programme and the overall ecosystem.

That said, the call centre environment is changing. With the effects of the digital revolution and the next generation of consumers become more technologically advanced than the previous, you have to embrace new technology. "You have to use the science to develop the future."

Cell C are doing this by developing an application that responds to customer queries, whereby you'll be able to ask anything from 'What is the best package I should migrate to?' to 'I'm going roaming, what should I do?'.

"So this whole world of science is assisting us to better service consumers. If you don't embrace the science to adapt to how you're servicing your consumers, you'll have no customers in the next 10-50 years." The next generation of consumer is behind us, and they are so technically advanced, that it's frightening." So you have to start building self-service mechanisms and become accustomed to virtual reality.

In summary, "all you need for incredible customer care is empathy, common sense and to empower staff. When you have a strong service culture, good customer care naturally becomes a habit... A good reputation for service requires a consistent experience no matter what channel a customer encounters."

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