

An Afrocentric approach to store design

 By [Lauren Hartzberg](#)

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In the search to become 'more than a store', retailers in Africa need to put their customer at the heart of the operation, says Frans van der Colff, an independent retail consultant who previously occupied a role as director for Africa and international at Food Lover's Market Group.



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Speaking on the topic of store design at the [Seamless Africa](#) conference in Cape Town this week, he pointed out that retailers in Africa often neglect their customer. And South Africa, with its relatively sophisticated retail model, is no exception.

Focus on low-income communities

Consumers in lower income groups receive the most neglect, with their store environment marred by lengthy checkout processes and largely showing a lack of any experiential elements.

“In South Africa we tend to focus on the upper 10% and ignore 88% of our customers – and they’re where we’re going to get the biggest growth from.

“We get the checkout system so wrong in other African countries and especially in our rural and township areas. People buy in smaller quantities which translates to a larger number of customers, but we hardly have enough checkouts open and we don't ensure people get through them easily. For some reason, we believe that if you're poor you can stand in a queue for a long time.”



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He advised that retailers experiment with more ways for customers to taste, learn and discover by allocating areas for interactive experiences, like cooking demos, for example. It's not only an opportunity to entertain, but also to educate consumers on products like fresh produce, and thus healthy living.

Education is an important role for retailers and they should be providing a feast of information for Africa's burgeoning young population who are so hungry to learn.

Cultural cognisance

Van der Colff also called out the arrogance of South African retailers when expanding into other regions on the continent, who many times fail because they neglect to integrate the cultural nuances of the area into their operations and design.

“We think we've done a good job back home so we'll show everybody else how to do it. But many times, we simply take our model and we plonk it down elsewhere without taking into the account the cultural and customary differences.”

Who is the customer and what's important to them? The retailers that will see success in their African expansion plans will be those that can successfully marry the local culture and needs with their offering.



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Community-centred design

Store design can add real value to the shopping experience, and in Africa specifically, van der Colff feels that we should be designing around the concept of community.

“In Africa it's all about 'we'. Before colonialism, the African village was very much a community-driven concept, with a culture of sharing and assisting one another at its core. That sense of community is still very strong on our continent, and we need to design according to it.”

He emphasised the importance of social hubs within the store layout, drawing inspiration from the continent's age-old pastime of shopping in local markets.

“The market is not only the place you shop for fresh produce, it's also the place where people socialise. Our store designs so often neglect that. The entire shopping experience is rushed - we don't include meeting areas where our customers can engage and spend time with each other. We need to recreate that rich market experience.”

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