

Retailers - give me an (even basic) experience!

By [C De Meyer-Heydenrych](#)

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Many retailers are closing down their stores because of what they see as low consumer confidence and poor retail expenditure. This is not necessarily true: rather, South African consumers have become more discerning and savvy about how they spend their money, and are no longer willing simply to part with it because a retailer has something to sell.



I often walk around in stores and wonder what their retail buyers are thinking, and whether they really know who their target market is? Yes, product variety in a store is great; but just because you have products in-store, and you place them in bins or on display, does not mean that someone will buy them.

I often feel that retailers and producers alike are at fault here. In many cases, retailers will stock products because manufacturers offer a special price for bulk purchasing, or offer retailers money for a gondola end or for placing their products on-shelf. Yes, this brings in money for the retailer; but that means nothing if customers do not buy the stock.

The retailer just ends up spending more money on uplifting stock that has not sold. This is all about a push strategy. And, retailers, here is a secret: this does not work in our society anymore. In many cases consumers are looking for a bargain; but they always want a shopping experience – yes, even when they just buy groceries.



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The social experience advantage

Although many South Africans cannot afford to purchase online, those with the spending power are doing just that. They will rather search and compare offerings online, as the online experience can be convenient and time-saving; but it is missing one important element that South African consumers love – the social experience of shopping.

This is where physical retail stores have an advantage over online stores, and can target many more customers and drive sales back into stores. In order to do this, retailers need to excite and entice customers back into their stores.

I must admit that, having spoken to a number of retail store managers, I have been happy to hear that they are starting to get the message. Many store owners/managers refuse to allow displays in-store, or even clip strips on the sides of aisles. Some managers have told me that they no longer allow display bins in their stores because customers were complaining that the bins did not allow them to move around with their trolleys.

A number of stores have been busy with revamps (I think immediately of Checkers, Spar, and Dis-Chem). All of these revamps have one thing in common: make the store visually exciting to the customer, and create an in-store shopping experience without any barriers to movement around the store.

Managers have realised that having an “old”, “low quality” and “I don’t want to spend money on my store” attitude means that customers think that the retailer only wants to make money out of them without offering them anything in return – especially if the same product is available in other stores.



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Creating a positive in-store experience

So what recommendations can be made to retailers to create an in-store experience for customers? Here are some basic but viable solutions:

- 1) Spend some money on making your store look neat, tidy, and clean, and add visuals that attract and match your target market.
- 2) Make it easy for customers to identify the price of a product, and ensure that shelves have the right price label for the corresponding product. Nothing frustrates customers more than if you put a price on the product, but they still need to check the product’s barcode and price label. Also ensure that aisles are correctly labelled so that customers know exactly where to find what they want.
- 3) Think of how your customer would move through the store, and make that movement easy. Make sure that the aisles and shelves match throughout the store, and are equally spaced – that is, wide enough for two people with trolleys walking past each other to move through. Also ensure that trolleys are well-kept (e.g., easy to move, no broken wheels). Customers have walked out of a store for less than a trolley that doesn’t work!

Also, think about the types of products sold in-store: if you sell many small items, why expect your customers to put them

into a large steel trolley that has gaps that are big enough for products to fall through and break?

4) Have the advertised products in stock, and ensure that products that are on sale are correctly priced.

5) If products are out of stock, put a label on the shelf indicating when you expect new stock.

6) Ensure that tills and card machines actually work.

6) Create a social experience in the store. Have a coffee station, or a place where customers can sit and socialise with friends, or even just pop in for a coffee. The smell alone will attract many customers and bring feet into the store.

7) Ensure that the music played in-store matches the time of day (slower music for less busy times to keep customers in-store, and faster music to get customers moving through the store during busy times) – and your target customers. Do you really think that classical music will attract today's millennials?

8) Always think about what message your store aims to send your customers. Walk through your store as if you were a customer, and ensure that all of its messages match your overall message.

9) Consider creating pop-up stores to make consumers aware of your store.

10) Have your employees walk around the store, being visible to assist customers, asking customers whether they have found what they want, which other products they would like to see. etc. (Think about how a restaurant manager comes to ask whether your meal is ok, and whether you got what you ordered.)



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Remember: even though the above ideas are very basic, marketing today is not always about creating a huge vibe and spending a great deal of money. Rather, it is about sending the customer a message that says, "We have thought about you, the customer, and want to show you that you mean something to us".

This means that basics must be done first, such as ensuring that the products in-store are what your customers want and need, and that the in-store experience is one that minimises frustration by allowing easy movement and having less clutter and fewer displays, but offering more opportunities for social interaction and enjoyment.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

C De Meyer-Heyderych is an Associate Professor in the Department of Marketing Management at University of Johannesburg. She specialises in Customer Relationship Marketing and Services Marketing.

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