

# When customers don't care

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“The hardest job kids face today is learning good manners without seeing any”

Fred Astaire



We celebrate our association with Aki Kalliatakis. This is his 100th insightful article in Supermarket & Retailer.

Aki, we are amazed, delighted and so honoured to have you on-board with us for so long – such a blessing!

Have you ever noticed that many bad reviews on restaurants begin with the words, “We booked a dinner for my mother-in-law’s birthday ...” What do you know from such a humble beginning? First, he is already in a bad mood. Second, he doesn’t want to be there and would much rather be with his mates in a stadium. And third, this is going to cost him. But obviously, he can’t say anything or his life will be worth nothing!

Maybe once a year I will have such a shockingly poor experience as a customer, or feel so ripped off or frustrated that I write a complaint on social media or one of those websites dedicated to



“I’m embarrassed to admit that when I am running late, I overreact to the stress of being held up in traffic. I become like a 5-year old throwing a tantrum, and the thought never passes my mind that perhaps they are experiencing their own emergency.”

Image courtesy of Ono Kosuki. Pexels

customer reviews. A couple of weeks ago I got onto TripAdvisor and gave an awful review for a restaurant in my neighbourhood that I visited for the first – and last – time. (The owner didn’t

even bother to respond or acknowledge my comment, never mind apologise.)

Imagine this scenario: You are dropping off your kids at school and you are running late. The traffic





is chaotic and there are a bunch of people trying to merge into your lane or trying to cross over. Do you impatiently hoot, accelerate to close the gap, and give them a dirty look? Or are you quite courteous and remain poised?

You probably chose the second option, because even though you are not perfect and you do tend to sometimes give in to 'road rage', this is different. Why? First, tomorrow morning you will have to face all these people again (or even chat to them at your kid's birthday party or a sports day). And, besides, you always try to treat people with respect – the way you'd like to be treated.

Please don't get me wrong. I'm embarrassed to admit that when I am stressed or running late, and someone hazardously pulls in front of me on the highway, I feel spiteful and I overreact. I become like a 5-year old throwing a tantrum, and the thought never passes my mind that perhaps they are experiencing their own emergency. "You should have left home earlier if you're in such a rush, buddy!"

However, in the school parking lot, no matter what the pressure, we tend to be a lot more patient and polite. We wave people through. We stop to let that unhurried little kid with a heavy schoolbag and sports kit cross over safely. In fact, we probably go out of our way to be gracious.

The inherent lesson for customer care has probably got nothing or very little to do with being a better and more considerate person. Much as we like to see ourselves as good people, the difference between the traffic at school (or your church, or



in your neighbourhood, or at your golf club, or anywhere else where you behave decorously) is that you have to face those people again. There is a very clear future aftermath. On public roads, you may never see that taxi driver ever again, so you will be less generous.

And that is also true for your customers. If they view you as strangers never to be seen again, if they have a lot more choices where they can spend their money, if there will be no consequences to abusive acts, they are more likely to be rude. We happily complain aggressively to faceless

contact centre staff and it's even worse when we are once removed by having 'AI bots' or social media to communicate our frustrations with delays, mistakes, and breakdowns.

But if I know that I will be back to your store, I am gentle, kind, and generous. I'm Dr. Jekyll, not Mr. Hyde. So we all are determined to make the extra effort when we feel that there is some connection with others, some relationship that has been established – and will continue to exist in the near future.

The great news about this is that it doesn't take



much to make your customers feel wanted and special. Even simple words like, "Nice to see you again," can make a huge difference. (I can already hear you: "Yes, but how do I know that she has been here before?" The answer is simple: in 95% of cases they have been to your store before – and the other 5% will think you are confused but appreciate it that you tried.)

Some other possible examples:

- "Thanks for supporting us – I know you have a whole bunch of choices, but you chose us."
- "Oh, I really love your scarf/blouse/brooch/cap! It really suits you."
- "What does this new flavour of sauce taste like? I haven't tried it yet."
- "Thanks for being so patient. The queues really seemed slow today."
- "Did you see the special on this today? If you get one more you get a third one for free!"
- "I tried these chops on a braai last weekend with just a bit of salt and lemon. They were fantastic!"

Put differently, that little bit of extra attention – just a simple phrase – can make a huge difference in your relationships with your customers, and the way they treat you is a mirror of exactly how they see you respond to them. As the quote from Fred Astaire implies and as Mahatma Gandhi was supposed to have said, "Be the change you want to see in the world."

Oh, and by the way, as I get older, I find it much easier to fight the road rage against taxis and other selfish drivers. When I realise that I may never, ever have to see that jerk again why would I spend all my precious emotional energy on him? Best to preserve it for the people I love. **SR**



Aki Kalliatakis is the managing partner of The Leadership LaunchPad, a company dedicated to helping clients become more customer driven. He can be contacted at (011) 640 3958, or via the website at [www.leadershiplaunchpad.co.za](http://www.leadershiplaunchpad.co.za)



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# Ensuring fair play between suppliers & consumers



**Queen Munyai**

“Businesses should not fear the Consumer Protection Act. Instead, they should view us as partners who are there to promote healthy relationships between them and consumers.”

**Queen Munyai, CEO**  
Consumer Goods and Services Ombud

**M**s Munyai is the first CEO to be appointed to the Ombud, established six years ago in April 2015 and accredited in terms of section 82(6) of the Consumer Protection Act.

“This Act gives us our mandate,” explains Ms Munyai, “to provide for an Industry Code of Conduct, allowing the industry to manage its own disputes, instead of needing each complaint to be investigated by the National Consumer Commission (NCC). We do this primarily by providing an alternative dispute resolution service that helps companies to recover poor service situations and retain the goodwill of their customers in the process. In the era of social media, this is an increasingly important competitive edge that companies should be willing to embrace.

“We don’t take sides. We are completely impartial and look at every case on its merits. Our watchwords are fairness, transparency and good business practice.

“Since April 2015, we have fielded more than 61 000 calls – and the demand grows every year. Last year, we fielded over 22 000 calls, received 9 529 complaints, and closed 8 606 cases,” she says.

- The service is provided free of charge and is funded through a joining fee and annual levy based on turnover.
- The levies are based on eight categories of business, ranging from SMEs with a turnover R1 million or less who do not pay a levy, right through to the Super Group who generate turnovers in excess of R5 billion that translates into an annual levy of R180 000.
- Organisations join at group level, so one membership covers all outlets and branches.

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Participants can refer cases to the Ombud, instead of litigating, so cooperating business and consumers can reach common ground.

Failing a settlement, a complainant has the right to lodge a complaint with the National Consumer Commission (NCC). The NCC can then open a formal investigation and refer the case to the National Consumer Tribunal (NCT).

The NCT has the power to levy administrative penalties of up to 10 per cent of annual turnover



or make any other appropriate order for refunds as it sees fit.

Already, 1 000 customer-centric companies have registered with the Consumer Goods and Services Ombud. The scheme shows consumers that you value their business.

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