



Good news just doesn't sell – *or is that* a wrong assumption?

With the political changes that we have experienced in South Africa since just before Christmas last year, there are many people who are very positive, optimistic and relieved, albeit cautious, in South Africa right now. Even the media (in spite of consisting mostly of hard-nosed and justifiably cynical journalists) seem to reflect this sense of hopefulness and a new enthusiasm for re-building our glorious country.

I also have no doubt that the feel-good stories in the news won't last too long, because it seems to be an accepted assumption that "bad news sells". The reasoning, supposedly, goes like this: viewers, readers, and people on social media and the internet don't like upbeat or cheerful stories. They are boring. Thus, editors, producers and bloggers just don't publish them.

But I don't buy into this argument when it comes to customers. It is true that when a customer has had a terrible experience, others want to hear about it. It is interesting – sometimes scary – and serves as a warning to others about what businesses or brands to avoid. It is also very empowering for the teller who shares the story.

Therefore, a reader, listener or viewer who finds out what went wrong in one company can take action in response to the horror story. I mean, who wants to experience bad service and awful experiences when they spend their money? It is all very instinctual and is built into our primitive brains. Our reaction to perceived threats and dangers, inherent in our nature for thousands of years, explains why we are so likely to take action.

As I prepare this month's column, there is a news story doing the rounds of a pilot feeling forced to make an emergency landing in Vienna after a row caused by a passenger who refused to stop expelling gases from his posterior. The passenger apparently kept breaking wind on board a flight from Dubai to Amsterdam. Two

passengers sitting next to him didn't take very well to his flatulence, but the unashamed man was apparently not put off and refused to hold back. Members of the crew were apparently less than sympathetic and refused to do anything about it and a fight broke out between the men, causing the flight to be diverted to Vienna. Police boarded the plane with dogs and removed four passengers after the pilot made a report about "passengers on the rampage". What an interesting story! No wonder it went viral.

But what about good-news stories? Now this is where it gets more complicated. If the media share a positive news story, people are far less likely to respond than in the case of a bad-news story.

Sure, they probably feel good – and perhaps a little envious – about the person who experienced the good fortune, but good news is "uninteresting", unless the experience reported was so spectacularly amazing, delightful and "newsworthy".

In fact, Colin Shaw, CEO of Beyond Philosophy, has distinguished between emotional experiences that attract customers by the nature of the fact that they are so exhilarating, evoke such enthusiasm and/or make customers so stimulated or interested that they feel compelled to also have that experience. Think about some of the exciting things that you have done, places you have visited, shows you have seen, even amazing restaurants you have eaten at, and you will know what I am getting at. But, how many times can you see your favourite movie or live show? How much of a thrill is it to continue driving that new car for the next six years? The results are usually very short lived.

There is no guarantee that customers will go out of their way to be loyal to and support the company or brand that was responsible for one isolated good story. But over time, and with a collection of these feel-good legends, something changes.

Consider this story I picked up recently on the same day that the fight happened on the plane. There was an explosion in a small mall in the town of Mississauga in the Canadian province of Ontario. Fortunately, nobody was seriously injured in this blast, and the response of the emergency crews was, as usual, fantastic. But what touched me about this story was that there was an eight-year-old little girl, Viviana Cortez, who was making final preparations for her birthday party at her home, which happened to be right next door to the mall.

The whole area was evacuated, but when the emergency services found out about this, they sent an ambulance decorated with party goodies and balloons, as well as a whole bunch of cupcakes, to help little Viviana celebrate her birthday. It really touches your heart.

I have collected so many stories like these over the years, and one of the common themes is that when customers experience some misfortune, even if it has nothing to do with you or your business, you are presented with a magical opportunity to impress them. I have heard so many stories of retail managers who have opened stores after hours to help customers who decided to organise a party at the last minute, who have taken disabled (poor) customers home in their vehicles because it was raining, who have replaced a broken walking stick of a pensioner, who helped create a vegetable garden at an orphanage, (and bought the excess stock from them,) who delivered stationery to a school that had experienced a fire, and many, many more.

In previous columns I have shared many tips on how to create customer loyalty through service, but for this month maybe you can focus on heart-warming stories that restore people's faith in humanity. Maybe, as President Ramaphosa asked in his inaugural speech, (and in the words of Hugh Masekela):

I wanna be there when the people start to turn it around. When they triumph over poverty... I wanna lend a hand, I wanna be there for the alcoholic... for the drug addict... for the victims of violence and abuse. I wanna lend a hand. Send me.



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