

# The day when Santa visited us

Aki Kalliatakis

aki@leadershiplaunchpad.co.za

www.leadershiplaunchpad.co.za

In this series of Supermarket & Retailer's articles, we share stories of what some organisations and managers have done to motivate and inspire their teams. We give you practical ideas of what you can do to create the most amazing, customer-driven company in the world.

When my son was about 4-years' old he got a letter from Santa Claus. Well, not really from Santa Claus, but from a young lady who worked in a small toy store in Johannesburg. He had his mind set on a Thomas the Train set, but after exhausting all the big chains and trying online stores to buy this elusive toy without success, we were desperate. The last thing we wanted to do was disappoint him, but just didn't know what to do.

By a pure stroke of luck, we walked into a small independent toy shop, and explained our predicament to the young assistant. She explained that there was no stock in the whole country, but then conspiratorially she leaned forward and whispered: "I'll tell you what I'll do. While the two of you go and look for toys to put under the



tree, I'll write him a letter from Santa Claus, and I'll explain that the elves and helpers worked 24/7 to keep up with the demand, but just didn't make it – and then I'll tell him not to worry because Santa is coming back. Then next January when the stock comes in, I'll call you and you can give it to him then."

With a great sense of relief (and, wondering why we didn't think of that), we chose our gifts and returned to pay. By the time we got back her she had produced a beautiful letter.

It won't surprise you to hear that at that store, we not only did buy a few hundred rand of toys that same morning, but went back about four weeks later to spend another R600 for the train set. Ever since, because of that letter from Father Christmas, we have repeatedly returned to that shop to buy presents for birthday parties for other kids in the class. The return on investment of that little letter is probably a few thousand times.

Sometimes it's easy to forget what it means to be human, especially as we get caught up in the problems that we experience every day, but Christmas can bring back the lost spirit of warmth. Today consumers face a perfect storm of rising fuel prices, rampant food inflation, the 'New Covid Economy', power failures and ever-expanding bills, even while retrenchments and employment drop. But Christmas reminds us that there are people worse off than we are, and your business can be a beacon of hope, an oasis of comfort – even in your busiest time of the year.

You can bring joy and offer customers extraordinary experiences that they will appreciate and remember long after these dreadful times are over. All you have to do is look around you and observe

what their lives are like. Consumers will never again revere the companies and brands like they used to, but that doesn't mean that you give up trying.

Here are some examples of the things which can make a huge difference – and make people in your business feel good too.

Have you got specific ideas for how you can spread a little love? What is your plan to make sure that every single customer that comes into your business will walk out a little happier than when they came in? By all means, share some little gifts, some tasty little morsels of pleasure, or offer them gift vouchers or even discounts, if your budget can handle it, but also make sure that there is some warmth and a spirit of generosity. Have fun with lucky draws and similar.

Be charitable. You don't have to make donations to charity, and there are other ways to make sure good happens. Help customers save money, and don't forget poor people in your community. Asking your customers to help you with that can make them also feel good about themselves, and they will admire your business too. A good example is 'Barefoot No More' a company that makes and sells flip-flop beach sandals. For every pair that customers buy, they donate a pair of school shoes to a child that doesn't have any. And, if you really don't have any cash reserves, how about 'donating' each member of your staff for a day to assist at a children's home? Look for ways to help them when they are stressed, sick, or are in some other plight. When was the last time someone from your business stopped to help a customer or potential

customer broken down on the side of the road?

Get the basics right. This sounds obvious, but shopping is really a hassle in most people's lives. Without day-by-day pressures, customers have time to notice the little things, and these make a huge difference when relationships are being built. But when it is busy, all they want is to get the right products in the right quantities at the right time and at the right price. If this process is disrupted, and we create stress in their lives, we will pay

a very heavy price. Are you there when they need you? Is it easy to find things in your business? Can they get in and out quickly? Did they find what they needed? What else can you do to make it easy and effortless? Can you make recommendations based on what you know about them?

Be innovative. What problems and headaches do your customers have that you can help them with? For example, at the end of every month, hundreds of people move house. Instead of letting customers



go around begging for boxes, or even worse, having to buy them, you could put them in visible and convenient places – and even offer a surprise discount voucher for stressed customers inside the boxes.

Get clever with technology, social media and apps. As a self-confessed techno-moron, I shouldn't be giving you advice about what technology can do for you, but I do know that it can offer unprecedented convenience – or utter despair. Never mind giving your customers special discounts as soon as they walk into your store, based on what you already know about them. Many companies get to know you and can make recommendations based on that knowledge. But

when you already know that this is going to be the busiest time of the year, you'd better make sure that all the technology – including the payment tech from the banks – works.

Be ready for stressed-out employees. We just seem to be unable to get it right every year, but you already know that your people are going to be under pressure. Warn them now, and prepare them emotionally. Paint a picture of how wonderful it could all be if they were positive, and also how great it will be in January when it's time for a break. Give them little rewards and incentives, however small, to put in the extra effort. After all, what does it cost to buy them a cold-drink or a chocolate?

In this challenging economy, if you plan to get

loyal customers, business owners and retailers should be able to deliver a 'wow' experience. Despite everything, it is still possible to delight and surprise your customers. As SA economist Azar Jamine states, "Businesses need to wake up to the fact that just making money is an empty goal without contributing to the betterment of life of your fellow human beings."

I couldn't agree more. Don't be a Grinch. **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)



  
**GRAIN FIELD**  
**CHICKENS**

[Click here to visit our website and like us on Facebook.](#)

