

Yuppiechef creams customer service with common sense

 By [Sindy Peters](#)

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Many a retailer will sing to the tune of "The customer is always right", but not a lot actually live the phrase, much less invest any time or innovation in it. Luckily for you and I, this age of short-term vision is drawing to a close. Retailers can no longer put us in the consumer-only box - they have to take on a more human approach in reaching their sales targets.



Paul Galatis, director, Yuppiechef

The Internet has heralded an era in which half-baked products and shoddy customer service are unacceptable; it's taken word-of-mouth to where it was a century ago - back to the traditional marketplace where a story of a bad experience can spread like gossip in a high school teachers' lounge - as foretold in the [Cluetrain Manifesto](#), published pre-social media.

Yuppiechef is obsessed with customer service, there's no doubt about it - you can see it in both its online and offline communications. This strategy is [clearly working for them](#) as they've seen exponential growth since launching in 2006 - in 2011 they were seven people, in 2013 they have a staff complement of 70 and counting, you do the maths.

I recently received an invitation from the [Society of Consumer Affairs Professionals South Africa \(SOCAP\)](#) to attend its latest networking breakfast featuring Paul Galatis, a director of Yuppiechef, as its guest speaker. I gladly accepted, keen to hear more about the inner workings of this upstart that's showing the bigger retailers how it's done online.

Galatis and Yuppiechef subscribe to the call to action the Cluetrain Manifesto (a collection of 95 theses) puts forward: business needs to recognise the newly connected marketplace that is the Internet, and reassess their 21st-century approach to communications.

A powerful global conversation has begun. Through the Internet, people are discovering and inventing new ways to share relevant knowledge with blinding speed. As a direct result, markets are getting smarter—and getting smarter faster than most companies.

Excerpt from original Cluetrain.com site that went live in April 1999.

A lot of what Galatis spoke about in terms of the way Yuppiechef goes about its business seemed like common sense - you pay for something, the retailer delivers. Should something go awry due to the retailer's error, the onus is on that retailer to fix it - to fix it promptly, to be honest about it and, at the very least, be apologetic for the cock up - this all makes for a more pleasant experience for the consumer who might go on to relate that experience with friends, family and colleagues. The alternative is to have your company lambasted on whichever online social network your customer has at his fingertips, spreading the bad word about your business.

You see what I mean about common sense here? So then why are South Africans still plagued by sloppy customer service? Why aren't more businesses investing time and innovation into it?

"I don't know why other businesses aren't doing it. I think it has a lot to do with short-term vision; it has to do with people who are reporting in to an MD or a boss on *this* quarter's results, and if in this quarter's results I can't show enough profit or enough turnover, or have given away too much money in returns, then I'd rather just push that under the carpet because that reflects badly on me - I think that's probably the main thing - a lack of belief in the long-term benefit of that kind of

approach," said Galatis.

"It is common sense - almost every business that is adopting similar philosophies is seeing the benefits."

Yuppiechef takes a holistic approach with its customer service, citing culture, gratitude, remarkable, community and care as its cornerstones.

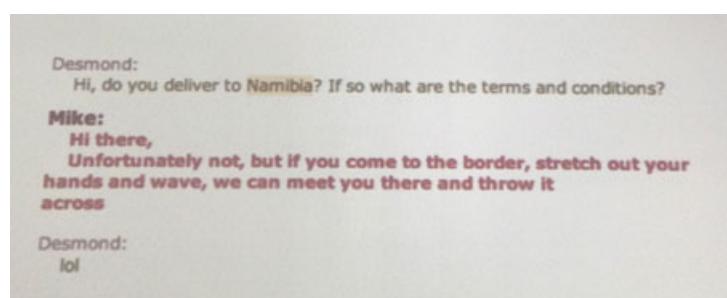
Culture

According to Galatis, Yuppiechef engrains customer service in its brand and culture, hiring people who believe in the brand and embody the culture, making excellent customer service a company-wide concern.

"It can't be: 'Okay, we're just going to get on with our business and let's just get the customer service people to deal with the people who are unhappy.'

"We need to evolve and the best businesses would evolve to a point where you build a business that has a culture which you are immensely proud of - you are proud of the way you serve people, you're proud of the way you obsess about the quality of your products, you're proud of every part of that customer experience. If something goes wrong, everyone in the company panics, not just the customer service team because that's their role."

Yuppiechef's approach is to hire the right people and, in representing the company, lets them be people. Don't expect to be fed a preapproved line from their front-of-house staff ...



Online chat prior to opening up delivery to Namibia

For a start-up I imagine building this customer-centric culture comes more easily, while for an established corporate that's been around for decades, this approach takes long-term vision from a board of strong-willed leaders. As an SME grows, however, some of the sincerity that was easier to maintain on the ground initially becomes more onerous to sustain.

Gratitude

For example, Yuppiechef takes great pride in making sure that every single package it puts together for delivery has a handwritten card expressing gratitude, but when you're faced with a reality of days when there are 1000 orders going out, surely that sincerity is lost, and surely that will come through in the communication. Yuppiechef currently employs two full-time card writers, but in December it will take on an extra seven just to manage the load.



Mash the pink monkey, on one of Yuppiechef's hand-written thank you cards.

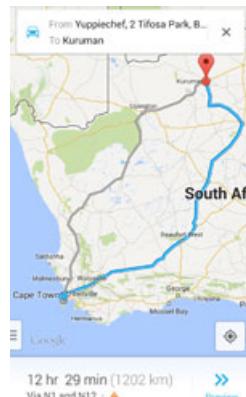
"A lot of people say to us: 'Why don't you preprint, pre-write 200 possible messages;' we could write computer programmes that see what you've bought, see what you've bought before and churn out the message we should write, and we've always just pushed against it saying the whole point of this is writing a note to express gratitude, that's why we don't have prewritten scripts.

"We had a group from the London Business School with us about two years ago, they were an MBA team, and they were doing a study on maintaining company culture through phases of fast growth, and how do we do it . We were in the middle of trying onboarding, telling people the

story of the business, the history, telling people why we do what we do - telling them what are the things that excite and inspire us in the hope that they excite and inspire them, and if they don't, within a few weeks we're going to go our separate ways. So it's a matter of trying to find people who have shared values."

Remarkability

Would your retail business deliver a R60 spatula to a customer more than 1000km away for free? Would it rather set R35 000 aside for a "customer delight budget" or take out a full-page in a print magazine? Would it go so far as to run a social media competition based on a print ad it plans on publishing and then include the [winner's name in lights](#)?



From Cape Town to Kuruman

Doing remarkable things rather than spending money on telling people how remarkable their company is, is how Yuppiechef prefers to go about its business, said Galatis.

"Very often we get approached on 'how did you market yourself', 'what clever marketing things can we do', 'how can we just get people talking about us'. We often ask them if there is anything they do worth talking about, is there anything that they do special, or what are the weaknesses of the operation. We go through it and this is a weakness, this weakness and this is a weakness, but they still go ahead and spend R35 000 on a full-page magazine ad because they'll just reach more people to plug them into this fairly average experience."

"I think we have great opportunities. We've come out of, what I think, have been the dark ages of customer service - we're coming out of that phase where people's expectations are so incredibly low that it is quite easy to be remarkable."

Community

When you're doing remarkable things, word gets around, in an online world, word gets around fast. With an online community, now sitting at 41 630 on Facebook and 12 318 on Twitter, Yuppiechef has to play its cards right - when you're communicating with a community this large, one small sneeze has the potential to turn into a full-on flu. Being honest, transparent and communicating with natural human nuances is the best way to go. While some companies tend to see social media as another avenue to promote themselves and sell more products, Yuppiechef takes a different approach: "We think that people engage in social media to engage socially with their friends - if they are kind enough to let us into that space, then we should be there to do these things - inspire, connect, entertain and engage - we are not there to sell people stuff," said Galatis.

They're bang on the money with that one - I recently stripped my Facebook newsfeed to friends, family and companies that add value to my online experience.

Care

How do you show people you care? You hire people who care.



"When we started building the business, we said that one of the things we really want to do, for our own selfish reasons, is work with people who we really enjoy being around. We also believe that by doing that it created a business that customers want to engage with. This idea of finding people who really care, people who are interested in the value of relationships, both internally and externally, is an integral part of choosing our team."

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Yuppiechef has quite an unconventional method of hiring new staff, but also in letting them go. Did you know the company offered staff three months' salary to leave if they wanted to? Only three took up the offer - unheard of, sure, but quite an effective way to assist those who found themselves no longer engaged by their jobs

or the company to move on. Remarkable? Most certainly.

Read more:

- Cluetrain Manifesto: www.cluetrain.com
- SOCAP: www.socapsa.org.za
- Paul Galatis [on LinkedIn](#)
- About Yuppiechef: www.yuppiechef.com

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