

'Hiking boot Christmas' on the cards

 By [Aki Kalliatakis](#)

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'Hiking boots' could feature high on the Christmas list of walkabout consumers this year as price hikes and sky-high petrol prices get them trudging round stores in a quest for bargains rather than little luxuries.

Hikes in food prices, hikes in transport costs, hikes in utility bills and hikes in the price of self-indulgence will have huge impact on consumers this Christmas. Prices won't be the only things to come under scrutiny; so will customer service.

The challenge for retailers and business generally will be how to lift the price burden and the customer's mood. Ironically, there has never been a better time for building repeat business because consumers remember the companies that help them in tough times.

I believe it's also time for senior management to "get their hiking boots on and walk the talk on service by putting themselves in the frontline".

Stay-at-home Christmas for many

For many families it could be a stay-at-home Christmas. A lot of South Africans are over-indebted while disposable income has been cut to meet fuel and electricity bills. As a consequence, the margins of many businesses are being squeezed as customers reduce purchase frequency or 'trade down'.

Even so, companies planning to become service leaders will seize the opportunity to delight customers. The good news is that it costs less than many assume.

Small giveaways and festive promotions have big impact on cash-strapped customers. Helpful, proactive staff make a major difference.

Senior managers can also make a big impression by walking the store and starting conversations with customers - knee to knee, jaw to jaw. Visible managers can be inspirational for staff under seasonal pressure.

Free word-of-mouth recommendations

What's more, delighted customers come back for more and freely give word-of-mouth recommendations to friends, driving higher foot traffic without driving up your advertising budget.

Uncluttered store or business environments with clear signage and good lighting also lift the mood.

In addition, it is important that consumers feel that the businesses they frequent are on their side and empathise with them.

Turn things around by showing you feel for your customers. OK, the weaker rand may drive up the price of imports. That's a great opportunity to launch promotions that say 'Buy South African and save'.

It's debatable how much extra money will be pumped into the economy via increasingly rare Christmas bonuses. But when economic factors stop working for your business you have to put emotional factors to work instead.

Often a little humour helps... like offering cut-price hiking boots to stamp out price hikes.

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