

# Customer experience has undergone a major shift in past 20 years

Issued by [Ask Afrika](#)

5 Oct 2021

**The social context to service expectations and customer experience has undergone a fundamental shift in the past two decades, says Ask Afrika founder and CEO, Andrea Rademeyer.**



Andrea Rademeyer

When the Ask Afrika Orange Index benchmark study launched in 2001, customer experience was the remit of call centres and branches. The index, which today is the broadest and most widely referenced customer experience measurement and benchmark in South Africa, in those early years focused primarily on banking and telecommunication companies given that they had the service budgets.

The index started out measuring seven industries and 26 companies in 2001. Two decades later it measures 31 industries and includes 200 companies.

“Twenty years ago, business was committed to taking a fresh view of consumers, one that interrogated the demographic nuances of age, gender, race, language and even urban versus rural,” explains Rademeyer.

Over the years the research has fed directly into the process design of the service experience. “It was incredibly exciting to design call centres to meet those needs,” reveals Rademeyer. “In fact, it was the service environment of business which truly lived our new status as a rainbow nation. The corporate enthusiasm for embracing difference and giving it space in corporate structures was immense.”

In many respects, service experts led where brand experts followed, she maintains, adding that it was a time of unparalleled collaboration between customer experience, IT and marketing – all with a singular focus on bringing all customers into the service net.

However, after the initial euphoria and the subsequent eruption of customer demand, businesses started focusing resources on high-value clients and basic models of customer experience.

“In an environment of escalating municipal service protests over the next two decades, business kept raising the flag for customer experience and engagement. At the same time, customer expectations also rose rapidly,” recalls Rademeyer.

Lockdowns during the past 18 months mean that we are once again living in a time where businesses have been at the forefront of designing ways to continue providing services to customers, while prioritising employee needs.

“It has been fascinating to observe just how creative businesses have become in order to bridge this gap, in many ways servicing a newly digitised customer seemingly overnight,” says Rademeyer. “The customer experience now includes being informed of staff and product hygiene which is something that would have been unthinkable even 24 months ago.”

While customer experience ratings, along with brand loyalty ratings, continue to decline, she says this is an indicator of a new customer who is easily irritated by external communication. “However, it could also be linked to customers feeling over-stimulated with information.”

What can we expect from customer experience in the future? According to Rademeyer, the demand for product information and customer experience will rise dramatically in the future – but for different reasons.

“Covid has changed societal awareness of information and communication in relation to human rights,” she explains. “Consumers have embraced debates around health behaviours on an unprecedented level.”

She believes this will evolve to other aspects around quality of life including even more debates around mental health, mobility patterns and family health, amongst others. In turn this will have profound effects on how consumers consume scientific information and behavioural suggestions from employers or government, as well as product information and contracting – the latter two which are both the remit of customer experience.

“Increasingly, customer experience experts will have to innovate around techniques of communicating live product data and contracting in a customer-friendly way,” says Rademeyer. “Customer experience will shift from platform mobility to content which means that customer experience will be the tipping point of trust between customers and business.”

Ultimately, she says, brand promises will be less important than service fulfilment. “The interesting opportunity is for collaboration between business and government, to ensure improved delivery to citizens.”

Another observation from the last two decades has been the shift in customer’s comfort with digitisation. “Twenty years ago, many customer segments were very uncomfortable with call centres. There has been a major shift and digital channels now get preference over human interaction.”

This, she says, is a clear indicator of artificial intelligence being invited to dance. “This might be the moment where our prediction that customer service will become a product becomes a reality. There are some customer segments that will be willing to pay for their preferred customer experience model. Retailers are leading the charge here. Consider, for example, that Checkers is piloting a completely hands-free branch while fast food has gone digital in the last 18 months.”

Today, the Ask Afrika Orange Index measures all channels. Banks and telco’s have been pushed aside by retailers who have become increasingly obsessed about “walking the aisle” and carefully evaluating their customer requirements.

The most consistent service performer over the last two decades, says Rademeyer, is Woolworths where a culture of excellence extends to all aspects of the business.

“After measuring customer experience for the last 20 years through the Ask Afrika Orange Index what has become very apparent is that customer experience continues to differentiate businesses from their competitors,” concludes Rademeyer.

A promotional banner for the Ask Afrika Orange Index. It features a dark blue background with a cluster of fresh oranges on the left. The text "INVITATION: FREE WEBINAR" is at the top. Below it is the Ask Afrika logo (an orange circle with a stylized 'A') and the text "askafrika | orange index" in white and orange. Underneath, it says "market research | analytics | decisions" and "since 2001". A line of text reads "– The Leading Customer Experience Benchmark & Measurement". The main text invites users to a virtual webinar where winners will be announced. It provides the date "Wednesday, 06 October 2021" and time "14h00 – 15h30". It lists the speakers: "With Andrea Rademeyer, Sarina de Beer & Dr Michael Mol". A red button says "CLICK TO REGISTER".

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