

# TRADING PLACES

The rules of engagement have changed forever. One new player in the services space is borrowing from retail strategies to address the new needs of customers. **Dominic Miller** eventually gets to the point.

I recently quit my job. Packed up, cleaned out, got the usual company gift (from which I'm enjoying possibly the best cup of coffee I've ever had), the sentimental goodbye speech from the big boss, perfunctory well wishes from the colleague I always hated and mild flirtation with some new girl I'll never see again. I'm about to start a new job at a company called Service Central. Great stuff, I hear you say as you lethargically lick your thumb and prepare to flick to the next article in this weighty bible of wisdom. Hold that thumb mid-lick for a second while I explain why you should stick with me.

I'm loath to preach, sell or promote in this space. I can't stand those marketing types who use forums such as this to wax lyrical over their company's sickeningly successful offering, all under the pretext of discussing a 'topical industry issue'. But these guys over at Service Central kind of have something pretty interesting for anyone in the retail sector. And rather than get hyped up like some bright-eyed PR princess on crack, I'm just going to give you the facts, straight and clean. Because even if you never have anything to do with this company (you see, I'm not going to use the opportunity to mention their name again), this really pertains to the retail industry as a whole.

I thought of a bumper sticker the other day along the lines of 'Retailers do it with ease'. Specifically I was walking through Chadstone

thinking about my girlfriend, so the concept kind of just popped into my head. I'm not sure where from.

Anyway, the point of the sticker was that I was thinking (after I'd left another shop with \$300 worth of stuff that I probably needed and definitely wanted) how easy it is to succumb to the retail shopping experience. I mean, the only actual effort on my part in the whole process was getting in the car and driving there, if you don't count the potential RSI brought on by multiple wallet opening. Beyond that, the retail marketing machine took over. And the experience was seamless.

Let me explain. Upon arrival at this shopping Mecca, I parked in my free car space, felt the rush of lovely warm air (it was freezing outside) as I walked through the doors that opened for me, and then meandered my way through a maze of wondrous products in a variety of stores who were all competing with each other for my shopping dollar.

Aside from the odd manic child (no, I'm not a parent), the experience was pretty much effortless, and I left with exactly what I wanted feeling somewhat satisfied with the whole thing. And that, dear reader, is exactly how it should be, for I am the most important aspect of the entire marketing process; I am customer, hear me roar. All roads should lead to me and if you want me to part with my hard earned dollar then you'd better bloody work for it and show me that you care.

In short, the retail experience in shopping centres is a well-oiled machine, which has conditioned consumers to expect things to be made easy for them. And what's wrong with that? It is why the services industry should be taking a leaf out of the retail book. Understand this: the core concept of retail is one that is built entirely on relationships. No ifs, buts, or 'my product is different' about it. If you are not making the complete retail experience – from the initial trigger, to the price comparison, to the actual purchase of the product or service – an idiotically simple process then you will not win this game. You will not even survive. It seems as obvious as the trite adage 'the customer is always right' but the industry is still not getting it. To that maxim, I would add 'the customer is always busy'.

You don't need a bucket-load of market research to know the key priority for every consumer today, particularly in the services industry: Convenience and price point. This holds true for your affluent corporate, your stay-at-home mum and your Gen Y uni student. Stop complicating your offering and making your job harder than it should be.

The services industry has for years relied pretty heavily on the directory. You know, those coloured pages? Now we all know that the old print directory is in its last death throes, but by applying the same-old print directory concept to online, products like Yellow Pages and even the heavy-advertising-

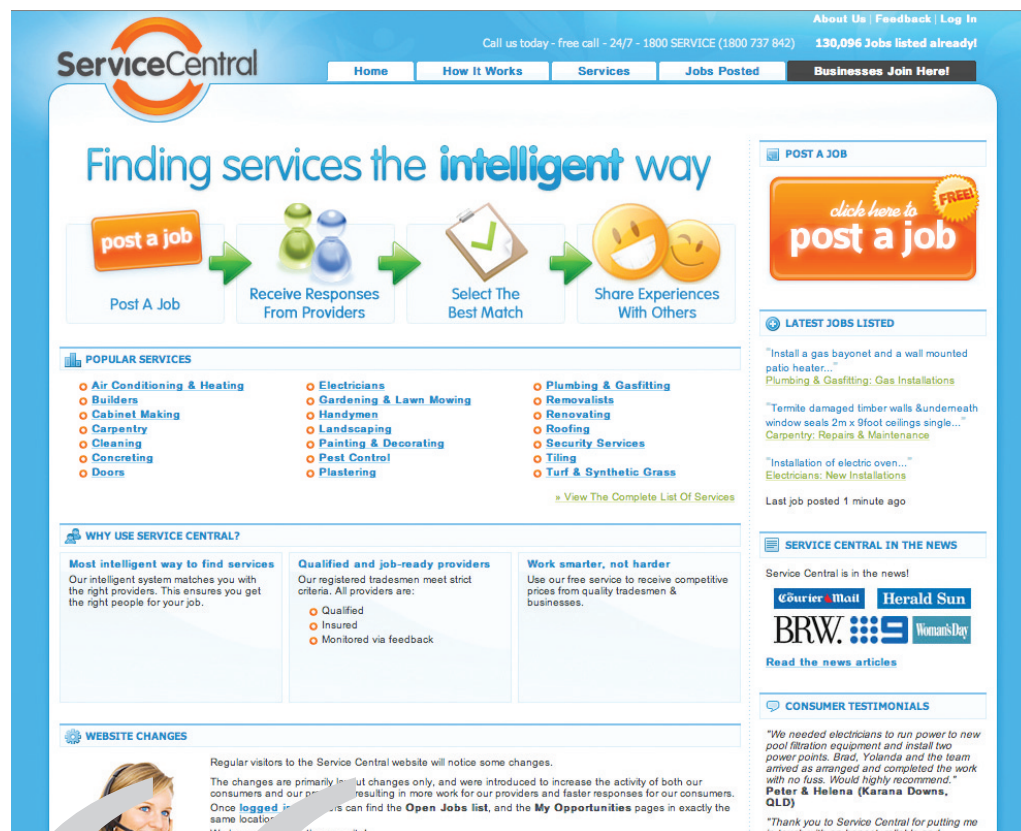
spend-of-late True Local seem to be missing the fundamental flaw in the whole customer experience: It's hard work.

As I said, it's almost pointless to harp on about how the print edition of the Yellow Pages is about as consumer-friendly as an 80s mobile telephone (and about as heavy) or how print directories are dying as the web consumes not only the minds but also the wallets of consumers. But I'd like to go further than that. Specifically, the whole traditional directory model is dead – print, online or in skywriting. I'm calling it at 21:43. And even if the whole thing is a bit *Sixth Sense* ("I see dead systems"), pretty soon the shocking truth will be revealed, even to them.

While I'm not entirely sure which Generation we're up to (Z? Yes, I think Z), and I'm pretty sure that Web 3.0 is still to come, there's definitely a 20th Century way of doing things and a 'better' way – for customers and providers. Simply putting your directory online but relying on the old 'customer-chase-service-provider' model is somehow missing the point. Why am I made to work so damn hard in this model? Where's the convenience?

For a start, the new model of consumer engagement for the services industry is the right-way round. That is, the new model places the emphasis on the service provider to chase the customer, not the other way round. For example, in the old days, if I wanted a plumber, I'd open the Yellow Pages (or go online to the same, or True Local) and start searching. Perhaps I'd find a service that was in (or serviced) my area pretty quickly, but then I'd have to begin calling those listed to see if they were (a) available, (b) did the sort of job I was looking for and (c) for the right price. On top of this I'd pretty much have to place my trust in the service provider and hope that they were going to do what they said they were going to do. That was unless I was lucky enough to have a referral from a friend that I trusted.

But with instant information at their fingertips a thousand times a day, customers now demand the ability to immediately evaluate a product or service, and one of the simplest and most effective ways of assessment is via the eBay model – peer review. In that model, if a group of buyers say that a seller is, well, rubbish, then that seller isn't going to be selling for very long. There's a social checks-and-balances system in place that weeds out the tyre kickers and the cowboys. Peer review also instils a level of trust in the process, allowing others buying the same service to let you know 'hot or not', rather than relying on the biased self-assessment



You don't need a bucket-load of market research to know the key priority for every consumer today, particularly in the services industry: Convenience and price point. This holds true for your affluent corporate, your stay-at-home mum and your Gen Y uni student.

of the provider or the service portal. Service Central has vetted the service providers before allowing them to pitch to the community of customers, and that in turn gives the customer the confidence to pick from the available service providers based on their peer-reviewed ratings.

If you're a plumber or an accountant reading this, you might well be thinking by now "Sure, that's great, but what about me?" Well, don't worry. It just so happens that the new frontier in service connectivity is not just about empowering consumers and making

their lives easier. The Service Central model is also about making sure that the service providers can build their business around the customers they come into contact with through the site. For the plumber, the leads they are receiving are pre-qualified, customers who have specified the sort of service they are looking for and have ruled out the competition. So while the customer can be sure that the service provider is the right person for the job, so too the service provider can know the job is right for them.

And once that job is over, it's up to the service provider and the customer to establish their own relationship. The customer gets the work done at the right price from a pre-qualified and trusted provider. While the provider, as well as getting regular work to their specifications, also gets the opportunity to forge an ongoing relationship with that customer; the chance to own that customer for life.

So let's be honest, it's about time that the customer and service provider came in for some retail relationship counselling. The new model of consumer engagement is geared towards making it easier for both parties to come together and communicate their deepest desires, to allow the customer and the service provider to forge a healthy relationship.

Retail marketing is falling in love all over again with the services industry, and this could be the start of something really beautiful. **M**