

Praising and Protecting our Retail workers

by

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In a previous article I echoed the support for our healthcare and all other emergency and essential workers during the lockdown. Today I want to shift the attention to our retail workers, in particular those in the essential retail sector, in other words, food and other essential item retailers. South Africa is blessed with a thriving retail sector. In fact, according to the Financial Mail, the country has the sixth most shopping centres in the world making it one of the top ten retail nations in the world. Or let me put it more directly, we are a nation of shoppers. The moment you think there is no more space for a shop, a new centre arises from nowhere, and guess what: The new shop is full of customers immediately despite difficult economic conditions, let alone the poor savings culture among South Africans.

While an abundance of shops, trollies, and tills are the visible expression of a thriving retail sector, especially over weekends, and month-end in particular, the unsung heroes during this period of 35 days of lockdown are the country's retail workers and managers. Retail workers were the first people in business exposed to Covid-19 because panic buyers overcrowded the shops one week before the lockdown. Throughout the lockdown, food retailers provided us with our essential items, and food in particular. Having said that, we have not yet forgiven some retailers for inflating prices of key products during this period. But we will forgive them for not selling certain products deemed non-essential by government, in that case they were compliant to the regulations, notwithstanding the fact that many of these rules did not make any sense to the public.

In general, our retailers are special people – the masterminds behind a good retail experience, every shopping bag and every cent spent during this lockdown and indeed throughout the year. Every shop is managed by a branch or shop manager, with several departmental supervisors making things happen on the shop floor. And of course, sales and support staff being available to assist customers in the shop. Let alone all the retail planners and other corporate retailers and staff who manage group planning and operations at head or regional offices.

Top retailers like Woolworths, Pick n Pay, Spar, Checkers and Shoprite have made a huge contribution to job creation in South Africa. For instance, Shoprite employs more than 130 000 employees, making it one of the largest private sector employers in South Africa and is also Africa's largest retailer. The retail sector is very competitive and growth has been phenomenal in recent years despite difficult economic times, and that will only get worse as a result of the lockdown and our demise into junk status. But given the good performance of South African retailers, we should not be surprised that they have expanded rapidly to other African countries with significant success. However, on the clothing retail side, it is sad to see that Edgars will not survive the economic turmoil, although their decline has not been a recent event.

I would like to thank our retail employees for their commitment to customer service throughout the year, but specifically during the period of lockdown. While the rest of us spent our time in other essential services or non-essential services safe at homes, our retailers are working very hard under difficult conditions during this lockdown period. Furthermore, they are highly at risk for being infected

by the coronavirus, including our pharmacy retailers and pharmacists who are even at a great risk than the food retailers. Not only do retailers ensure that our need for essential products is satisfied, retailers play a key role in maintaining one part of the South Africa economy in this difficult period of the rest of the economy being locked down. We realise that this sector is highly dependent on committed and good people to keep shops open and running in a professional and customer-friendly manner.

However, as in all other spheres of our communities such as petrol stations, police stations and other government departments, we are observing inconsistent hygiene and safety practices as members of the public visiting shops. Perhaps it is time for a clever IT person to develop an App similar to Trip Advisor or the Hello Peter platform for us to rate shops on their approach to good hygiene and safety practices for staff, customers and suppliers. Think about the last five shops you have visited. How would you rate them on a scale of 1 to 10 on their hygiene practices such as social distancing in queues, Covid-19 posters, the availability of sanitisers for staff and customers and masks for staff? I want to predict that the shop with the highest hygiene score will also be the most profitable. We can then roll this rating app out to all organisations in South Africa and rate organisations on their hygiene practices in real time.

Today, I want to kindly ask retail managers and all their staff to improve on their proactive hygiene practices in preventing the spread of the virus. It is very disappointing to hear about so many shops being closed after staff members have been infected. Look after your staff and ensure that they are safe and protected against the virus. Firm up on your safety plans by prioritising hygiene as the most important safety measure over the short and medium term. Let us protect our retail staff risking their lives, as well as those of their customers and families. Protecting retail staff against the Covid-19 virus is essential in ensuring that most shops can remain open. Imagine a situation if infections get out of control and most shops are forced to close down.

Retail managers should also pay special attention to the overall employee wellness of their retail staff, and that includes their physical, spiritual, financial, social and mental wellbeing. They live under increased levels of stress and experience even more anxiety, fear and panic than those working and staying at home. Retail employees work long hours and need to be treated with respect, dignity and fairness. Moreover, they need recognition and appreciation for their commitment to serve the public at a time when there is so much despair during the lockdown.

We all look forward to the post-lockdown period when all other shops will also open. The current situation of closed clothing shops, bookshops, and other so-called non-essential retailers cannot be perpetuated for too long. The economic impact is devastating and this has to change soon.

This morning I had to cut my wife's hair, and I never felt so incompetent in my life. But thanks to Lynel Farrell who coached me for this task on twitter, it saved my marriage, because I have to stay with my wife for another nine days when the lockdown will hopefully be terminated. Thus, I also look forward to the day when hairdressers will be open again, and indeed all other services.

As customers we are so dependent on our retail staff for servicing us. We also have a duty to ensure that we wash our hands and not expose them to our germs, flu and other viruses like Covid-19. Next time when you go to the shop, give our retail staff a special thank you and a big smile. But smile with your eyes, because they can't see your mouth behind your mask.

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