

What will customers expect from you in 2021?

Few could have predicted the global pandemic, nationwide lockdown and economic contraction while planning budgets at the start of 2020. Now that 2020 is behind us, we can draw on some insights to guide businesses on what we are likely to see in 2021.

 By [Robin Fisher](#) 6 Jan 2021



Robin Fisher, Area Vice President, Salesforce - Emerging Markets

From research Salesforce conducted globally and locally in 2020, I believe South African consumers are going to expect the following three things from companies in 2021:

1. Your company has invested in servicing customers digitally

“Be online or your business will die” has been the refrain since the late 1990s, but is an absolute necessity these days. And “being online” doesn’t just refer to a static website - it has to deliver value for your customers, and solve their problems.

Salesforce’s fourth [State of Service](#) research report, released in December 2020, found that 87% of South African service professionals have seen an increase in customers using digital channels, 86% of South African service decision-makers say they are accelerating digital initiatives, while 78% say they have invested in new technology.

Consumers and business buyers estimate that six out of 10 of their interactions with companies will occur online in 2021, up from 42% in 2019.

2. Your sales teams work differently, sales ops are now strategic, and field service remains active and available

The fourth edition of Salesforce's [State of Sales](#) report, released in October 2020, shows that South African sales professionals are adapting quickly and decisively, to serve as trusted advisors to customers in their time of need. Ninety-four percent of sales reps in South Africa say they've had to adopt new ways of selling while 66% expect their role to be permanently changed as a result of current economic trends.

The role of operations during this transition is vital, with 89% of sales reps in South Africa agreeing that sales ops are becoming increasingly strategic. Businesses require cutting edge operational efficiency and data-driven decision-making in order to accurately align with customers' needs while also endorsing brand reputation. Companies need to take advantage of existing skillsets within sales ops teams, while upskilling employees to not only support sales strategy but also help define it.

Consumer research conducted in June 2020 showed that 70% of consumers still preferred in-person appointments where on-site support was a must, such as appliance repairs or internet installs, with the remainder opting for digital alternatives. Accordingly, 80% of South African service decision-makers say field service remains a key part of their overall strategy.

3. Your company mines customer data, but also treats it with care

The Salesforce [State of the Connected Customer](#) report, released in October 2020, found that in South Africa, 84% of customers say that Covid-19 has elevated their expectation of digital capabilities. The use of artificial intelligence has skyrocketed, account-based marketing has rapidly become a cornerstone in B2B, and emerging technologies, like 5G, augmented reality and virtual reality, are expected to have a major impact in the next decade, the [State of Marketing](#) report, released in May 2020, found.

These trends were also reflected in the South African responses gathered by Salesforce. In South Africa, marketers are expecting to go from using four data sources in 2019 to six projected data sources in 2021 and 91% are already using AI to personalise customer experiences. Other use cases include driving next-best actions in real-time and improving customer segmentation.

Marketers are increasingly tracking metrics like customer satisfaction, digital engagement, and lifetime customer value to gain a holistic picture of what's working and what isn't across the customer journey, the report shows. B2B marketers have a particularly strong role in business growth through account-based marketing (ABM). In South Africa, 60% of marketers track customer lifetime value (LTV) to measure success.

Customers aren't ignorant about these moves. As digital engagement grows, customers expect companies to use their personal information, but they are also calling for enhanced transparency and stewardship. Companies need to automate the management of sensitive personal data - including addresses or birthdays - in compliance with data protection regulations.

With the right suite of data management and archive tools, any admin can now create rules that manage how their organisation retains, deletes, anonymises and transfers customer data – including policies that govern how long personal data is kept, or if it's to be compiled and transferred back to the customer at their request.

Companies that survived 2020 will stand a good chance of weathering 2021 if they keep these three key learnings in mind as they plan their customer approaches.

ABOUT ROBIN FISHER

Area Vice President, Salesforce - Emerging Markets

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