



## Creating a competitive advantage

Avis's 'brand ambassadors' add value in a commoditised sector, writes **Ruth Tate**

**C**REATING a competitive advantage in a commoditised industry is one of the main challenges in today's business environment. The car rental industry personifies this dilemma. What makes a consumer choose one car rental company over another where they all have pretty much the same offering at similar prices?

Customers are fickle creatures, but the experiences that promote word-of-mouth advertising tend to be based on the soft issues: service, friendly and helpful staff, a manager who listens and acts on a complaint. The question is: how does a manager instil these qualities in staff and create a competitive differentiation through these attributes?

Avis CEO Grenville Wilson has come up with a series of staff programmes aimed to do exactly that. Dubbed Brand Ambassador, the initiative was introduced in mid-2001 to help employees understand that personal behaviour plays a crucial role in how the Avis brand and company are perceived.

"Personal behaviour is the one element of our lives over which we have complete control, and it also happens to be the make-or-break factor in a service business."

When Wilson originally realised that something was lacking in the service delivery of the company he started sending every person (except himself) on a two-day motivational course. The results were disappointing, with staff tending to base their potential results on external factors: "If it does this, then I can do that."

He realised that in order to facilitate real change, he would have to be as involved as every employee in the business and drive the initiative from the top down.

Taking Avis's vision, promise, values and culture to the drawing board, Wilson designed a fun, two-day brand workshop for his staff.

One of his key principles is to have a healthy balance in life, making time for career, friends and family and time for personal well-being. He has subsequently been involved in every one of the courses and made

it his mission to take the workshops beyond the boundaries of station, culture, religion or race.

One amusing example which illustrates his willingness to be as exposed as his colleagues is a time he decided to take singing lessons publicly, admitting that his shrewer voice could do with some help.

The workshops were developed by Wilson and Mark Rittenberg, who holds a doctorate in international and multicultural education. It is his belief that important personal, social and business problems can be effectively addressed using the "active communication" methodology he has developed. This draws upon an actor's discipline of engaging and effective communication that has so influenced the Brand Ambassador programmes.

Rittenberg co-facilitates workshops with Wilson, with the backing of a team of local facilitators, many of them involved in acting and theatre, such as Motshabi Tyelele and Janice Honeyman.

"Actors are heightened communicators," says Rittenberg, "and it is the skills utilised by actors that I've been using in the Brand Ambassador programme to crack the communications nut — something that corporations have been battling with for years." Using famous actors, many of them black, helps to increase the confidence of black employees, who often suffer in the corporate environment from low self-esteem due to previous disadvantage. "Seeing other black people who have made it gives them tremendous confidence, while it also helps break down the barriers of gender, race and religion."

Actors are taught to be good listeners as well as good communicators. Voice training, breathing exercises, concentration, eye contact and energy-level sustainability are some of the skills taught.

Enmeshed in the acting training, Rittenberg has taken an anthropological view: "What makes one family stay together, while the neighbouring family falls apart?"

"It has nothing to do with wealth or poverty, but rather with a number of other aspects. Ritual is one: ensure



Avis staff practise an actor's technique, shoulder relaxation, at a Brand Ambassador workshop

that you have dinner one night a week as a family, but choose to be present. Pay attention to what has heart and meaning; tell the truth without blame or judgment; be open to outcomes, not attached to them. These principles are relevant in the workplace as in the home," he says.

Taking responsibility for one's behaviour may sound like a simple and obvious matter, "but," says Rittenberg, "in the business schools that I've visited in the US it is a novel idea. Thinking in this way in business terms is a huge shift in thinking as the autocratic behaviour that we're used to is questioned."

Wilson says: "We believe in placing emotional quotient (EQ) before IQ. The soft issues are best for service provision, but are more difficult to fulfil. The hard issues are easy to handle: ensuring that the right car in the right condition is in the right place at the right time."

"Avis employees have more than 10 000 customer encounters every day. Each of these is an opportunity to satisfy or disappoint. Our vision — for which Brand Ambassador is the main driving force — is to exceed our customers' expectations at every interface," he says.

There is little point to a programme if it has no measurable results. Avis uses research company Markinor for its regular employee survey, which remarks on "the consistency of the positive trends over a number of disparate areas affecting the working environment and experience of Avis employees, and the consequent positive effects

of attitude and behaviour."

Externally, the programme is credited with a marked rise in the company's customer satisfaction index. Measured by the MRM research organisation through monthly interviews with more than 500 customers, the index has mounted steadily from an already high 83% in 2002 to higher than 87%.

Markinor's Sylvia Jones, who led the employee research project, says that the measures for communication have improved to the extent that in the 2004 survey Avis is communicating with its employees in such a way that they no longer perceive it as an area needing attention.

"This is an extremely unusual finding. For most companies, communication scores are low and have a significant effect on loyalty. It appears the Brand Ambassador programme has had an effect in an area where most companies struggle."

Other research findings show that staff turnover is down to 15% from 20%; productivity has increased from 641 rental transactions an employee a year to 744; and the number of employees at risk of leaving has dropped from 31% to 20%.

"In the programme each person graduates as an ambassador," says Wilson. "Improving service to our customers has to start internally and employees are asked to make a promise about one small behaviour change. Only about 20% of people have sufficient communication skills; the other 80% need some help. The programme focuses on those skills, but the first principle is to

show up and be present."

Because the workshops are not purely work-related, but rather centre more on life skills, many personal issues come out. This is encouraged, but by the same token, "it's an important part of the culture that people do not laugh at the hole in your side of the boat, but offer help to fix it, as we're all in the same boat."

Sustainability is something Rittenberg is obsessed with. In line with this, he and Wilson have come up with the Leader as Champion programme, which is designed for management to become "guardians" of the process. "Each one must teach," said Nelson Mandela, and we've therefore set up a group of educators to continuously work the process," says Rittenberg.

Wilson says developing the programmes have been a challenge, based on trial and error, with a high level of investment. "It's been a journey — it's not a silver bullet — and I would not do anything differently if I were to start over, except perhaps roll it out faster." Investing about R12m has been Avis' biggest investment in its people to date, but Wilson says it is the best investment the company has ever made.

The idea is to keep advancing the programme to new levels, while reinforcing the existing workshops. Wilson stresses that the workshops are not a "booze up". The sessions start at 6am, "but there are no complaints and attendees take them seriously and buy into the concept."

■ Ruth Tate is a freelance journalist.