

# FOREWORD

The challenges facing businesses are not becoming easier but rather more complex in nature. All over the world businesses are struggling with an economy that is not showing signs of recovery and with customers still unwilling to spend their hard earned cash. Larger companies are battling to generate more jobs and small business are finding it harder and harder to compete and many are barely surviving. This phenomenon is however not unique to a select few countries but rather to a wide range of businesses on all continents.

The problems faced by these businesses are directly linked to the world wide crisis's of countries. Greece for one has been in the news with their inability to repay their loans to the EU. They are in serious threat of default that may lead to their expulsion from the EU- which in turn will have major implications for the whole Euro Zone and the Greek economy. Their deadline is now end of June and economists world wide expect them to default. The UK is also in the process of re-evaluating their position towards the Euro Zone and the Prime Minister David Cameron has promised a referendum on the issue before end of 2017. This will also have implications for the region and for businesses.

On the upside the USA has shown some promise with the number of jobs created in the past months increasing steadily. This has given to speculation that the Fed will increase interest rates in order to stem inflation and to boost growth. The head of the IMF has however cautioned the USA against the raising of interest rates and suggested that it would be more appropriate to do so only in 2016. Economists have however predicted that the Fed will raise interest rates this year.

The economic pressures felt all over the world also have an impact on third world countries and South Africa is not excluded from this. The South African economy has been under severe pressure for some years now and the unemployment rate is over 25%. Government efforts have not succeeded in creating the required number of jobs and with load shedding on the order of the day businesses are finding it hard to cope. The fact that the energy supply in the country was not properly managed over the past 20 years has now reached epic proportions and the adjunct president Cyril Ramaposa expects this problems to only be solved in 2years. Crime, wide spread corruption in government and a wide range of other issues are all contributing to an unstable business environment and the economic growth for 2015 is placed at only 2,1%.

Business confidence is at a low level and in this overall climate businesses are under pressure. It is the responsibility of all to contribute to an environment that is conducive to good business and to ensure the survival of businesses during this time. Research focused on new technologies, on the improvement of service, on job creation and any other means to improve the business climate is now needed – not only in South Africa but also other countries.

Retailers and other organisations need to focus on the basics and to make sure that they meet customer expectations and needs in such a way that they will be able to ensure their long term survival and sustainability. Academics and industry champions have a major role to play and they need to take the lead in these trying times.

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Professor Michael Cant is the Head of Marketing and Retail Department at the University of South Africa (Unisa). In this position, his responsibility includes: the development of staff; course design; the development of new modules/courses and degrees; and liaison with the business community to ensure that all qualifications are in line with the specific needs of the business world.

He acts as promoter for both Master's and Doctoral students. He is the chairperson of the Departmental Marketing Committee of Unisa, as well as a member of the Marketing Committee of the College of Economic and Management Sciences.

In 1999 a major retailer in Africa, *MassDiscounters*, sponsored a substantial amount of funds for the development of a BCom degree in Retail Management. This sponsorship has been utilised for research in the field of retailing, course development, and to fund the Chair in Retail Management for which Prof. Cant is the incumbent. He secured these funds largely due to the fact that he and his staff members had been able to assist MassDiscounters, through the academic programmes offered by the Centre for Business Management, to train their employees and develop their own in-house programmes.

Unisa presented a merit award for research to Prof. Cant in 1998, and again in 2002. His research outputs include contract research and contributions to prescribed textbooks, either as editor or as an author. His research projects which deal with student perceptions of certain academic matters, their attitudes towards specific components for the curricula, their needs, and so on have been completed. He has also published a number of research articles in both local and international academic journals. Prof. Cant also services on the boards of the Journal of Retail and Consumer Services.