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Does empathy
belong in
branding?

Put yourself in their shoes.

Think about how they feel. How would you feel if that happened to you instead? As young children, this language was often used to help us learn the importance of empathy. If we could at least attempt to see situations through the eyes of others we might better understand why they feel the way they do, and why they behave in certain ways. At the time, the intention was to help us build friendships and hold ourselves accountable for how we make others feel.

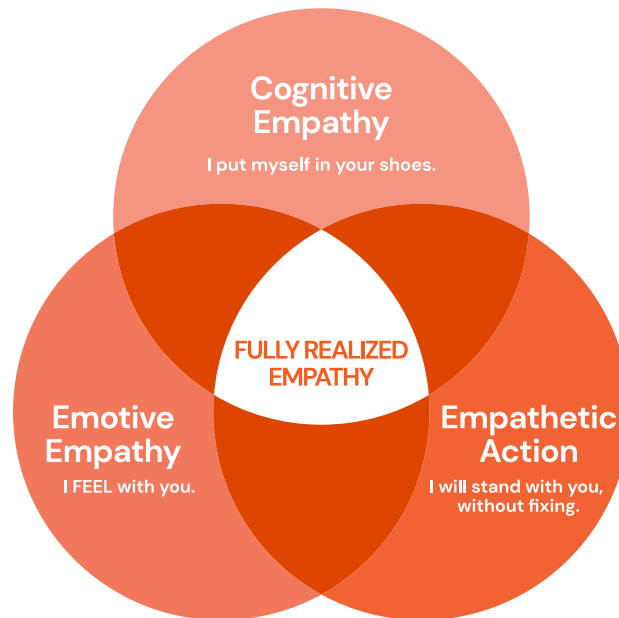
While empathy comes more naturally to some than others, the Covid-19 pandemic has brought a certain urgency to weave it into daily life, including how companies interact with their customers. The following pages explore the concept of empathy in brand strategy and whether it should be given as much real estate in your work as the world seems to demand.

Empathy goes well beyond putting yourself in your customer's shoes.

The idea of empathy is a relatively new concept, and in fact, the way we define it is much different than its original meaning. In 1908 the word “empathy” appeared as a translation for the German word “Einführung,” the literal translation being “in-feeling”. Its true European meaning wasn't to put ourselves in others' shoes; rather, it was to project our feelings on the other person—ultimately persuading them to feel what we are. By the second world war, social psychologists began exploring empathy to help clinicians better understand their patients. Over time, the concept of empathy became much more complex.

As an example, pretend you're leading an urgent care facility in a suburban area. By studying the neighborhood and its people, you know a majority of your audience works full time, has school-age children and likely feels spread too thin. Because of this, you offer extended hours. Need met and problem solved, right? Not so fast.

While the urgent care example is surface level, all too often this is about as far as some organizations go to connect with their customers. In truth, there are three types of empathy—understanding others' thoughts, feeling what they're feeling and acting in a way that demonstrates true connection.



Cognitive Empathy

You could argue that most organizations stop here as they develop their communication strategies. By simply stating they understand how you live, they believe a lasting connection can be made. The language and imagery they use is geared toward proving they “see” their audience and their challenges or needs.

Emotive Empathy

This type of empathy takes the concept further into the human experience by transitioning from mental awareness to physical experience. It’s actually feeling what someone else is experiencing.

Empathetic Action

This is likely the most difficult type of empathy to harness. Empathetic Action is shared knowing and feeling—and then acting in a way that shows you’re in lockstep with another person’s experience. It’s challenging because this is the point where humans (and brands) need to be quiet enough to authentically connect with others. This is the heart and soul of real connection.

In some ways the thinking behind the three types of empathy resembles a glidepath. It makes sense that first we work to understand what someone is experiencing. Then, we dig deeper to actually feel what they feel in those moments, and lastly, we act in a way that shows we’re right there with them, sharing the same experience. At this point, it likely feels obvious that we believe empathy is the key to building meaningful brands. The answer isn’t quite that simple.

Before you go all-in with empathy.

Whether you consider the different types of empathy as a glidepath to deeper connections with your audience or as a tool for understanding what your consumer needs, it's important to begin with knowing the difference between branding and marketing.

Branding is a complex process that helps organizations articulate who they are so that each of their stakeholders, from business partners to employees to customers, can understand and connect in a meaningful way. Establishing that connection occurs through relatable stories and shared feelings. On the other hand, marketing is how brands communicate. It's typically driven by statistics and data, which inform the brand but do not lead it.

According to Harvard Professor Gerald Zaltman, it's our subconscious—not our rational mind—that leads our purchasing decisions. He goes on to express that as much as 95% of purchasing decisions are fueled by emotion. As rebranding experts we often say that in the battle between your heart and mind, your heart will win a majority of the time. It's the experience and emotional connection brands create that outweigh any number and even logic.



**Brand =
Stories and Feelings**



**Marketing =
Statistics and Data**

Why is everyone talking about empathetic marketing?

Search “empathy in branding” and you’re more likely to find countless articles and blogs arguing for empathy in marketing. As brand experts, this is both perplexing and frustrating. While marketing has its place in your overall strategy, tying the concept of empathy at the marketing level is risky business.

Consider this: marketing is how businesses promote, or dare we say sell, their services or products to an audience. Agencies have spent countless hours conducting surveys and focus groups, sampling clients’ products and much more to better understand consumer behavior, their needs and their wants. While the intention is to connect the dots between product to buyer, there’s a gray area in how it’s done. Are businesses using real empathy—driven by the consumer—to establish a connection or are they using the guise of empathy to persuade consumers to feel what they want them to feel?

At its core, marketing is focused on conversions. It’s short-term campaigns that are driven by statistics and data in order to prove the activities in the plan are effective. You might argue that empathy lives in the creative concept or messaging delivered through the ad or other tactic. But, it really stems from the brand.

Why aren't more people talking about empathy in branding?

In approaching the topic of empathy and whether or not it belongs in branding, we'll be honest, the answer was no. A business seeing the world through their customers' eyes and creating its brand to reflect the experience goes against everything we teach. Branding and empathy can only be aligned when an organization builds its strategy from the inside out.

Branding is a marathon. It's committing to a belief, embracing the experience and working like hell to share the journey with like-minded people. The process for establishing your brand begins by taking a close look at who you really are as an organization. Brands express themselves more honestly when they clearly identify their purpose, values, culture and position. These foundational elements to your brand strategy cannot come from the wants and feelings of the audience; they have to come from leadership and the core reasons why the business exists in the first place.

Branding uses personality, messaging and visual cues to engage and inspire others to share in the experience. When an organization commits to living their story, it attracts employees and customers who share similar values and want similar outcomes. The only way to bring empathy into branding is to create human experiences that bridge the gap between the business and its audience. This isn't accomplished in a postcard or email; it's through more intimate touch points where people can interact with and exist within the brand. It's in moments where both brand and audience are experiencing their shared values and beliefs in a collaborative way.

It's possible the only way empathy and branding can really coexist is through intentional use of the Brand Commitment Matrix.

	CUSTOMERS		COMPANY	
who they are	IDENTITY	↔	PURPOSE	why we exist
what they want	AIMS	↔	ONLYNESS	what we offer
how they belong	MORES	↔	VALUES	how we behave

BRAND COMMITMENT MATRIX

So, does empathy belong in branding?

Only if the brand is built on its own truth, and the experience it creates is based on a shared journey with its customers. By humanizing the brand and inviting the audience to play an active role, only then can deeper connections be formed.



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