

Empathy: How To Demonstrate It And How To Use It To Fuel Business Growth

Elements Of Empathy

There is a short story, often misattributed to Hemingway, that generates strong reactions in some readers with just six words:

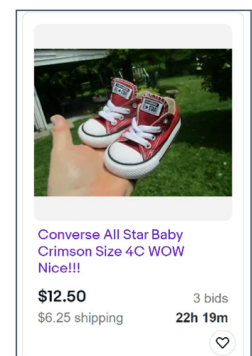
**For Sale: Baby shoes.
Never worn.**

A famous science fiction writer and Hemingway acquaintance later said that he could not think of this story without crying – even after many years!

The way in which a person goes from those six simple words to tears involves active participation with the story. A reader uses what they know about life and human behavior to imagine why the shoes were never worn. In the early- and mid-20th century when infant mortality was higher in almost every country, it was easy to hypothesize that the child had died, making this a tragic story of loss.

This example illustrates two key elements of empathy – active listening and participation in making meaning of what you see or hear. Being empathetic involves the “imaginative transposing” of yourself into how the others think, feel and act.

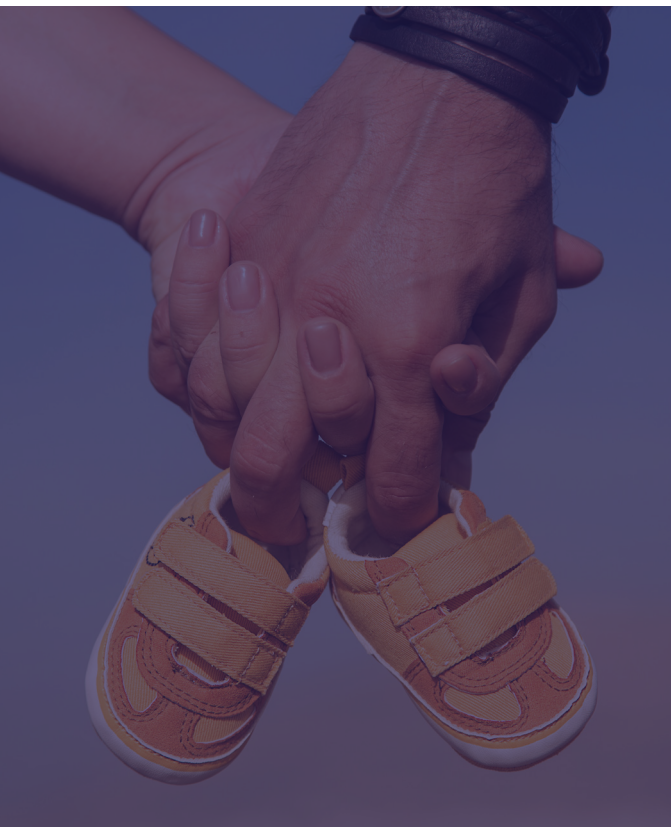
Now fast forward to today, where one day this month there were 5,774 pairs of size 4 pre-owned baby shoes for sale on ebay (US), including these:



Maybe it's the exclamation points or maybe it's what we know about the economy and side hustles or about fast fashion or sneakerheads, but today, there are new meanings that can be imagined when reading *"For Sale: Baby Shoes. Never Worn."*

This brings us to another element of empathy – accuracy. To be empathetic, we need to accurately transpose ourselves into how another person thinks, feels and acts. Our capacity for empathy depends not only on our ability to suspend judgment and listen actively, but also on the variety of experiences and human behavior to which we have been exposed. It's hard to imagine multiple meanings of another person's story if we aren't aware of range of human behavior and life circumstances.

For example, would it surprise you to know that there are an estimated 300 million people worldwide who cannot afford shoes? Or that this includes 20 million children in sub-Saharan Africa who have no shoes to protect their feet from extremely hot soil temperatures?



Mona Purdy, who founded Share Your Soles in 1999, said she participated in a road race in Guatemala and was surprised to see children putting tar on their feet so they could run on the rocky ground alongside the runners. “It blew my mind. I didn’t know kids didn’t have shoes anywhere,” she once said.

Blake Mycoskoe, who in 2006 founded Shoes for a Better Tomorrow later shortened to TOMS, had a similar reaction when he spent a few days working alongside someone who was distributing shoes to children in Argentina. “It dramatically heightened my awareness. Yes, I knew somewhere in the back of my mind that poor children around the world often went barefoot, but now, for the first time, I saw the real effects of being shoeless: the blisters, the sores, the infections. I wanted to do something. But what?”

Both Purdy and Mycoskoe let themselves feel distressed by what others were experiencing. They went beyond perspective-taking to feel a degree of heartache about what others were experiencing.

Allowing yourself to feel distress because someone else is in pain or allowing yourself to feel joy because someone else is happy is the key to true empathy. Why? Because it's only when we combine cognitive and emotional empathy that we become capable of an empathic response – a meaningful, compassionate, empathic response that creates or strengthens the relationship between you and the other person.

Providing an empathic response to a person in distress doesn't mean you have to agree with their opinions. Nor does it mean that you have to feel exactly what they are feeling or let their feelings overwhelm yours. Minimally, it means that you strive to respond in a way that does not dismiss or subtract from the other person's experience. Optimally, it means that you respond in ways that help the other person get beyond and below the surface of what they are expressing so that both of you come out with a deeper understanding of the experience.

Empathy at its best is like a compassionate "root cause" hearts and minds dialogue – one that leads to an appropriate humane response and to meaningful human connection.

TL-DR How To Lead With Empathy

In the Moment:

- Be an active listener and engage with what the other person is saying
- Suspend judgment and imagine how the other person thinks, feels or acts in their situation
- Let yourself feel emotions like distress or joy with what you are hearing or seeing
- Provide a compassionate response

Ongoing:

- Expose yourself to multiple viewpoints
- Check your assumptions by asking others how they think and feel about certain situations
- Let the compassion you develop lead you to additional empathetic responses



How Empathy Can Fuel Innovation and Business Growth

We hear a lot about empathy in business today. From Microsoft in technology to PepsiCo in consumer packaged goods, many executives have been pointing out the importance of empathy and ways in which empathy and business growth are complementary.

Empathy supercharges creativity and innovation. Being able to accurately imagine what someone else is thinking and feeling allows you to more fully understand the need(s) and anticipate and understand the need(s) in ways that person may not be able to express. And allowing yourself to feel distressed by their pain ensures that their need(s) will remain in memory as you create and develop solutions.

The connection between innovation and empathy is backed by data. Herd and Mehta (2018) show that if you ask one group of people to imagine how a product

On Empathy & Innovation

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Empathy makes you a better innovator. I look at the most successful products we [at Microsoft] have created, it comes with the ability to meet the unmet, unarticulated needs of customers.

Satya Nadella, Microsoft CEO

On Empathy & Brand

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I'm a firm believer that empathy has become the new brand mandate, especially in light of this pandemic.

Greg Lyons, CMO for PepsiCo Beverages North America

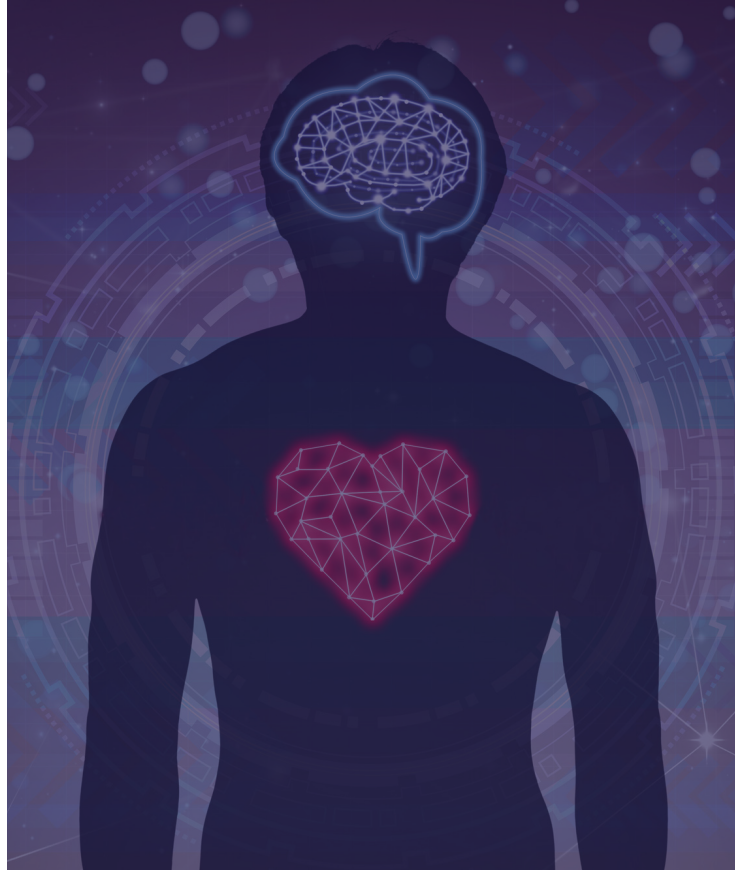
user will interact with and think about a product, but you ask another group to imagine how a product user will feel while using the product, both groups will come up with more useful ideas than a group that does not consider the user. But the group that imagines feelings will come up with ideas that are more original.

As these authors demonstrate, imagining how the user will feel creates empathetic concern that in turn creates cognitive flexibility. The higher the empathetic concern the higher the cognitive flexibility and greater the ability to imagine solutions and outcomes that differ from the norm.

As Greg Lyons, PepsiCo Beverages NA CMO, pointed out last year, empathy also helps marketers avoid over-indexing on performance metrics and data to the detriment of making people's lives better.

Today, insights professionals use different types of research to investigate how the people who buy and consume their products and services think and feel. Some of these approaches, such as ethnography, focus groups, 1:1 interviews or certain biometrics, can provide substantial depth in understanding people's pain points, needs and motivations, but can be costly and time consuming or are heavily dependent on the skills of the observer or moderator.

Other approaches such as AI or ML algorithms applied to big data can provide more breadth and scale but can lose the human plot line when results are aggregated for reporting purposes. And surveys, an industry workhorse, may not always reveal a full picture of subconscious motivations.



What we need to fuel our empathy for the people whom we build products and services are additional new or mixed methodologies that turn the tradeoff between holistic depth or broad generalizability into an “and” from an “either/ or” decision.

At GutCheck we've been rolling out solutions that turn “either/or” into “both/and” for a couple of years now. One of our first research solutions in this empathetic vein was Audience Illuminator, a profiling and audience-understanding solution, that yields marketing insights, recommendations, and guidance that slots directly into a creative brief. By combining survey data, connected big data, and AI algorithms applied to open-ended responses to automatically detect personality traits and identity needs, we provide a deeper, more holistic view of people as people – at lower cost and in substantially less time than the most commonly used alternatives.

Our recently released Innovation Illuminator product also falls into this “and” category. It’s a “qual at scale” approach that uses Hybrid NLP applied to a range of data sources such as product reviews, social media posts, forum or community discussions, focus group or IDI transcripts, marketing materials, and more to go beneath the surface of basic sentiment (beliefs or judgments) to detect a range of specific emotions about people’s experiences using a product, service, or brand or about their journeys along the way. By digging into emotions like love, delight, frustration, anger, desire at the product attribute level, we help clients

identify innovation opportunities so they can build breakthrough products that help people make progress and improve their lives.

At GutCheck, we think of ourselves as Empathic Explorers – progressive, open-minded individuals who actively engage with people and put forward bold ideas to drive innovation and growth. Whether it’s a better experience for our clients, new approaches that bring depth and breadth of insights and actionability, or new technology or applications of technology to increase the speed to action, we believe empathy for others is good for brands, good for innovation, and good for business.





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