



The Case For Empathy

Understanding how emotions impact customer experiences.

by **JANET LEBLANC**, Janet LeBlanc + Associates Inc.

ABOUT JANET LEBLANC + ASSOCIATES INC.

A leading North American consulting firm specializing in customer experience management. Recognized as one of the foremost experts on customer-centric leadership, Janet LeBlanc guides senior leaders on how to use customer strategies to drive business growth. We partner with public sector institutions and Fortune 100 companies to overcome silo-based obstacles and collaborate on how to earn customer-driven growth.

Our team of dedicated professionals deliver services across four practice areas including leadership, customer insights, customer experience design and innovation, and performance improvement.

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Customer experience professionals recognize the powerful impact emotions have on determining whether a customer has a positive or negative interaction with an organization. The prolific growth of social media and mobile technology has, in fact, empowered modern-day customers with a much “louder” voice in which to broadcast their emotional experiences and reactions—reaching hundreds in their immediate networks and potentially millions if their likes or dislikes go viral.

According to Dan Hill, Ph.D, president of Sensory Logic and author of Emotionomics, “Medical science has proven that 95% of our mental activity is subconscious. Our actions are intuitive and we think more often in images, not words. We feel before we think, and we buy emotionally. In fact, feelings happen five times more quickly than our sensory or rational thinking brain. Our emotional brain sends 10 times as much information to our rational brain for processing.”

Given that emotions drive needs, wants and desires and are the primary triggers for most customer interactions, forward-thinking companies are embracing the value of integrating genuine empathy—the capacity to recognize and resonate with emotions that are being experienced by another person—in their customer experience strategies. Those who have the ability to step into someone else’s position to understand their experiences, feelings and point of view are inviting the opportunity to earn a customer’s trust and, subsequently, their loyalty.

By understanding (or learning how to understand and even map out) the emotions of customers throughout the customer journey, companies can build a better problem-resolution and complaint-handling process—while inspiring the collaboration of their leadership teams and entire workforce to proactively improve the customer experience. This culture transformation, in turn, can produce measurable improvements that successfully strengthen the company’s reputation, brand and overall organizational success.

Understanding the Emotions of Customers: What is Empathy?

Empathy is a natural impulse and the innate ability for humans to understand the emotional states of others. Newborn babies, only a few days old, will cry when they hear other newborns cry. Even toddlers who haven't yet learned to speak will try to help adults in accomplishing tasks.

People who are born with no empathy and are completely self-oriented are generally referred to as psychopaths. They are considered aberrations in society because they are completely immune to the feelings of others and will rarely do anything to undermine their own interests.

Empathy is one of the five categories identified in Daniel Goleman's international bestseller Emotional Intelligence. The ability to perceive emotions—by detecting and deciphering emotions in faces, pictures, voices and cultural artifacts—also includes identifying one's own emotions. Perceiving emotions represents a basic aspect of emotional intelligence, as it makes all other processing of emotional information possible.

Can Empathy Be Learned?

There is a "more or less" quality related to empathy. The human capacity to recognize the feelings of others is related to the ability to see oneself in another. People tend to be more empathic to those most similar to themselves in culture and living conditions.

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Dr. Guy Winch, in his popular blog, "The Squeaky Wheel," provides a method to experience empathy. He recommends putting ourselves completely in another person's shoes to help examine their point of view. For instance, Winch imagines what it is like to be a call center agent, sitting in a small cubicle all day facing a computer that dictates almost everything he needs to do and say. He visualizes frequently dealing with frustrated and angry customers, being called horrible names and not being able to respond in kind for fear of losing his job.

Winch believes that doing this type of empathy exercise also helps employees realize that being kind and respectful when presenting a problem might elicit feelings of relief and gratitude in the customer toward the company representative.

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Managing Complaints with Empathy

Even the most successful companies experience failures. How an organization deals with problems and operational failures can be the difference between “good” and “great.”

When developing problem-resolution strategies, companies that train employees to apologize without addressing the importance of incorporating genuine empathy in its delivery may find themselves disappointed in the outcome of their complaint resolution and customer loyalty scores.

Scientific research in conflict resolution shows that, even if an apology such as, “I’m sorry,” is offered, without recognizing the emotions at play or a statement of acknowledging the gravity of the situation, the apology will not have a positive impact.

Dealing with problems and handling customer complaints effectively is fundamental to the success of every organization—and, in fact, resolving problems to the delight and satisfaction of customers strengthens brand loyalty.

Mapping the Customer Experience Journey

According to psychologists, what people remember about a customer experience is determined by the intensity of emotions created in specific moments—not the overall customer experience. Behavioral economist, psychologist and 2002 Nobel Prize winner Dr. Daniel Kahneman suggests that people judge experiences largely based on the intensity of experiences at their peak and at the end of their journey.

Customer experience journey mapping is one of the best tools used today for understanding how customers interact with a company, clearly pinpointing when and where they experience emotional pain or frustration and what motivates them to move from one stage of the journey to the next. Mapping is a visual representation of a customer’s thoughts, feelings and actions, identifying “moments of truth” when opinions are formed or changed about a company or brand.

Customer experience journey mapping helps organizations understand the path taken by customers and the impact of their emotional experiences across all touchpoints of the customer journey. Employees who respect and understand the “moments of truth” on this journey will be better prepared to empathize with and effectively respond to each customer’s emotionally based reactions.

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Building Collaboration across Leadership Teams and the Entire Workforce

Modern-day organizations are interconnected and managed through a complex set of interdependent relationships. Collaboration from the entire leadership team—across departments, lines of business and global entities—is required to implement successful, large-scale customer experience management programs.

Jay Conger, an internationally recognized expert on leadership development, says, “Today’s leading organizations have shifted the emphasis from the individual leader to collective leadership capabilities.”

In her book, *The Empathy Factor*, Marie Miyashiro reinforces the fundamental importance of human “empathetic” connections in workplace systems and the significant role they play in the success, productivity and transformation of organizations today. Winning the support and engagement of the entire leadership team requires an understanding that every executive comes with his or her own set of background experiences, priorities and overall perceptions. Having the ability to empathize and recognize perceptions across a diverse leadership team provides great insight into how to strengthen relationships and build collaboration.

How Empathy Impacts Organizational Success

Empathy is gaining interest and acceptance as an important contributor to organizational success. In *The Empathy Factor*, Miyashiro provides insight into the fundamental importance of human empathetic connections in the workplace. Further, the Temkin Group declared 2014 the Year of Empathy, recognizing the rise of empathy as an area for businesses to gain a greater understanding of the customer experience.

“Recognizing emotions in others is a critical area for anyone delivering a customer experience,” writes Colin Shaw in *Building Great Customer Experiences*: “Being able to understand and empathize with the emotions your customers are feeling is key.”

From identifying key value drivers of the customer experience to discovering which factors specific to a company have the most influence on driving customer loyalty, there is no question that systematic improvements can drive performance results to new heights. A well-designed customer experience strategy not only listens to the voice of the customer, it empathizes with the emotional reasons why they might engage with an organization, strengthen their relationship and recommend it to others.

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A Winning Formula

Celebrated civil rights activist Dr. Maya Angelou once said, “People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

The Information Age has given rise to technologically empowered customers whose voices, and particularly their emotional reactions and responses, can be shared more quickly and expansively than ever before in the history of humankind. The most effective customer experience management strategies require the awareness, sensitivity and collaboration of leadership teams and workforces to make transformational changes based on the voice of the customer.

Listening to this voice is not enough: Whether customer feedback is positive or negative, frontline employees who demonstrate genuine empathy during their interactions with customers will earn not only their trust and loyalty, but also their word-of-mouth referrals. To integrate a well-planned customer experience strategy into modern-day business practices is to embrace a global phenomenon that is a winning formula for organizational success. ■

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