

CREATING EMPATHY AGENTS

1 EMPLOYING EMPATHY TO DRIVE EXCEPTIONAL CUSTOMER EXPERIENCE

Someone once said that the highest form of knowledge is empathy. This invites the question: If empathy is a form of knowledge, can it be taught? Many experts agree that learning how to be empathetic is not only possible, it's also good for one's well-being ... and in the world of customer service, it's the best way to show your customers that you truly care.

Taken a step further, as we reported in last quarter's [CX Insights](#), empathy is among the most important attributes to consumers when communicating with a live agent, second only to expertise.¹ Many view this as a change in consumer expectations, but we see it as a heightened awareness of the human connection that drives a more impactful customer experience than previously understood. "CSRs must become 'empathy agents' as voice becomes the empathy channel of choice for customers."²

But what happens to empathy if customers don't hear a live human voice as part of their service experience? Advancements in technology have ushered in a digital-first era of interactive FAQs, chat bots and all things AI. What often gets lost in the cacophony of ubiquitous self-help digitization is the fact that customers are human, and as such, are emotional beings. So when the chat bot gets it wrong, or the system doesn't recognize you, or the only thing that appears on screen is the dreaded "404 error," you need a human who can understand what you're going through. Add to this the stress of pandemic quarantines, serious weather events, wildfires or political unrest, and agents encounter many consumers with an amplified emotional response.

Now more than ever, customer service agents and the systems that support them must be empathy experts. Using the COVID-19 pandemic as an example, Forrester reports that, "Contact centers saw unprecedented spikes in call volume from devastated consumers. Sixty-eight percent of respondents agree that the phone has become the new empathy channel for consumers, and most agree that CSRs are now dealing with more complex customer requests (67%) and emotionally charged customers (70%) than ever before. And because of the pandemic, many CSRs are doing so in isolation."

68% PHONE IS NEW EMPATHY CHANNEL FOR CONSUMERS

67% COMPLEX CUSTOMER REQUESTS

70% EMOTIONALLY CHARGED CUSTOMERS



Insight #1: Forced reliance on technology coupled with pandemic isolation have elevated consumer expectations when they reach out to a contact center. An empathetic response is imperative.



2

LEARNING TO BE EMPATHETIC

In order to learn to apply empathy – or to train others to be empathetic – we first have to understand what it is and how it works. Empathy in a CX environment is best described as the ability to discern and connect with a customer's feelings. This can occur in two broad categories:

1. **Affective empathy** is sharing the customer's emotion or feeling the same way. Theresa Wiseman (famed nursing scholar that first published her four-step process for empathy in 1996) describes this as feeling with people in an act of **perspective taking**, i.e., taking on the customer's point of view.³
2. **Cognitive empathy** is the ability to understand the customer's emotions without actually sharing their experience. This is very similar to the way a psychiatrist might understand a patient. This also corresponds nicely to Wiseman's advice to **make no judgments**. Empathy is not about agreeing or disagreeing, but rather acknowledging the legitimate feelings of the customer.

Wiseman also advocates for **recognizing emotions in others** through active listening (allowing the customer to tell you how he or she feels about a situation) and regulating your own emotions. In some cases, sharing the feelings or even understanding the feelings of the customer can trigger an emotional response in the listener (the CSR). When you can differentiate others' emotions from your own emotions, you can control your own reaction while at the same time **communicating recognition**. To do this, restate the feeling the customer has expressed plus why he or she has those feelings.

If our objective is to enable empathy in a non-scripted, organic conversation, then agents must be able to put themselves in their customers' shoes, refrain from judgment, simultaneously assess the customers' and their own emotions, and validate the customers' feelings. This sequence can be trained. At Morley, for example, we do this through our E3 initiative (Empathize, Empower & Escalate), where we educate agents and leaders on the unique language of empathy and how it differs from sympathy.

For instance, imagine that your washing machine broke. Which customer service agent would you rather engage with?

The sympathetic agent (who often uses "at least ..." phrases): Sorry that your washing machine broke. At least you had a washing machine. I have to go to the laundromat.

The empathetic agent (who acknowledges your legitimate feelings): Thank you for reaching out to me. I can certainly understand how that would be so frustrating. If it's all right with you, I'd like to collect some additional information and see if I can identify an acceptable solution for you.

You can see in these examples how showing empathy fuels connection while demonstrating sympathy drives disconnection.

By training agents to use empathetic language and avoid sympathetic language, we are attempting to use empathy both internally with our colleagues (to ensure an outstanding culture) and externally with our customers (to ensure outstanding service). We are encouraged by the success of other programs such as those identified in a study by Massachusetts General Hospital and Northeastern University that found mindfulness training could produce significant changes in the areas of the brain connected to empathy.⁴

Insight #2: Empathy can be trained as a skill and become part of an organization's culture.

3 IT PAYS TO BE EMPATHETIC

In 2016, the *Harvard Business Review* published the article "The Most Empathetic Companies" by Belinda Parmar.⁵ It describes The Empathy Index, an attempt to calculate the degree to which individual companies practice empathy as part of their culture. Parmar explains: "The Empathy Index seeks to answer the question: Which companies are successfully creating empathetic cultures? These are the companies that retain the best people, create environments where diverse teams thrive, and ultimately reap the greatest financial rewards."

Study results showed that the top 10 companies in the index increased in value more than twice as much as the bottom 10. In addition, they generated approximately 50% more in earnings (measured by market capitalization).

Yet despite these results, empathy training has not yet become widely enacted. In fact, though 82% of CEOs believe that empathy training drives better business results, according to *The Wall Street Journal*,⁶ only 20% of companies actually conduct ongoing empathy training.⁷ We think that this gap represents an opportunity for companies committed to empathy training to deliver extraordinary customer experiences.



82% CEOs BELIEVE EMPATHY TRAINING DRIVES BETTER BUSINESS RESULTS

20% COMPANIES ACTUALLY CONDUCT ONGOING EMPATHY TRAINING

Insight #3: Ongoing empathy training at all levels of an organization represents an opportunity to earn a positive return on investment and to establish competitive advantage.

MOVING FORWARD

Among Morley's value statements is the desire to "Be Your Best Self." It is a concept that relies on setting high standards and then working in an environment of continuous process improvement to challenge and raise those standards. Continuous organizational empathy training is a great example of how that concept is practiced.

For example, we believe that servant leadership is critical to our culture. What better way to serve your team than being able to actively listen to them, understanding their point of view and then actively working to help them achieve their goals? We live our values and work toward our vision of becoming unrivaled at amazing those we serve by teaching our people how to be empathetic toward both customers and colleagues. All of this leads us to believe that continuous organizational empathy training is key to unlocking competitive advantage for companies who specialize in managing a customer experience environment.

Sources:

- ¹ [The most important customer service qualities in the next normal: Expertise, empathy, and speed](#) – ZDNet, June 29, 2020
- ² [The New Contact Center Empowers Its People With Customer Intelligence](#) – Forrester, March 2021
- ³ [A Concept Analysis of Empathy](#) – Leading Global Nursing Research, June 1996
- ⁴ [Meditation Makes Us Act With Compassion](#) – Greater Good Magazine, April 11, 2013
- ⁵ [The Most Empathetic Companies, 2016](#) – Harvard Business Review, December 1, 2016
- ⁶ [2021 State of Workplace Empathy](#) – Businessolver, 2021
- ⁷ [Companies Try a New Strategy: Empathy Training](#) – The Wall Street Journal, June 21, 2016

Sam S. Jundi | Executive Vice President, National Sales Manager

One Morley Plaza, Saginaw, MI 48603 | 989.791.0140 | sam.jundi@morleynet.com | www.morleycompanies.com/bpo
