IS EMPATHY DEAD IN AMERICA?

A METHOD RESEARCH REPORT

Identify your targets. Deploy your strategy. Launch your campaign.

It's a reality that military jargon has permeated the modern American workplace. Onboarding is often referred to as boot camp. The org chart is a chain of command. Sure, capitalism is inherently competitive, but is there a world where growth and goodness can coexist? Can a company be cutting edge without being cutthroat?

We think so. In fact, most Americans do, too. Turns out, there is a place for empathy in business. ***The trick is not to use it as a weapon.***

Through the unprecedented civil unrest we all experienced last year, many companies took a stand on the important issues. Some scored high marks by showing genuine empathy in times of crisis. Others failed and saw their efforts backfire. We wanted to find out who did it right, who did it wrong and why.

Method recently conducted a survey to gauge the average American's thoughts on empathy in society and business culture. Our main takeaway: Empathy has a light side and a dark side. As we combed through the data from our survey, a few patterns emerged. What we came away with was ***a blueprint for companies to understand what empathy means and how to use it.*** This framework settled into three buckets: Company, Customers and Culture.

Let's define what empathy really means.

To avoid any potential confusion, respondents were shown the following definition throughout the survey.

em-pa-thy (ˈem-pə-thē) noun: **1.** The ability to understand and feel what someone else is feeling, or see a situation from their point of view.

Empathy can be tricky.

For some, the term has evolved in recent years to include various displays of sympathy or pity. We even found, surprisingly, that some Americans had a negative view of empathy, seeing it as a sign of weakness.

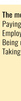
Despite the fact that nearly a quarter of Americans say empathy "doesn't matter," an overwhelming majority of us (73%) agree that it would be better for society if people were more empathetic.

But how does it show up?

General Empathy in Society

The top groups blamed for society's lack of empathy are politicians, social media platforms and the news media, followed closely by the average American.

But when it comes to whose responsibility it is to promote greater empathy in society, most Americans say the average American, followed by politicians and "myself."



Americans who say empathy has decreased over the past year.

Those who find the decline concerning.

Why We Think Companies Show Empathy

Over half (54%) of Americans say it's a demonstration of empathy when a company takes a stance on a social or political issue. But there are better ways to do it.

The most effective ways to show empathy, according to consumers:

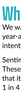
Paying higher wages	43%
Employing a more diverse workforce	40%
Being more accommodating with customers	37%
Taking a public stance on a social or political issue	29%

Only 29% say taking a public stance on a social or political issue is an effective way of practicing empathy.

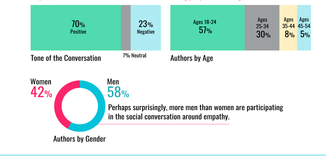
Whose Job Is It Anyway?

Americans who want to see brands practice empathy.

Americans expressing skepticism or outright disbelief when brands take an empathetic stance.



Americans who want technology companies to take the lead in promoting empathy because they act as thought leaders in today's culture.



What Social Media Says

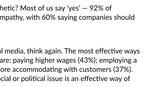
We wanted to track sentiment around empathy on social media because over the last year-and-a-half, it's where many companies have shown where they stand — whether intentionally or not. Below are the top insights gleaned from our social listening analytics.

Sentiment is primarily positive in conversations about empathy, but not universally so. These proportions almost exactly match our data showing that most Americans agree that it would be better for society if people were more empathetic (73%) but still, nearly 1 in 4 say it doesn't matter.

Empathy Sentiment Summary

Tone of the Conversation

Young people are leading the conversation



Authors by Age

Perhaps surprisingly, more men than women are participating in the social conversation around empathy.

Authors by Gender

Is Empathy Political?

Of Twitter's top accounts that talk about empathy with the most likes and engagements, several are politicians – and they're all Democrats.

Adam Schiff @RepAdamSchiff

Barack Obama @BarackObama

Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez @AOC

President Biden @POTUS

Vice President Kamala Harris @VP

COMPANY: Begin Within

Is it really an organization's job to be empathetic? Most of us say 'yes' — 92% of Americans believe brands should practice empathy, with 60% saying companies should show it to employees first.

Practice What You Preach

How to do it? If your first thought was social media, think again. The most effective ways to show empathy, according to consumers, are: paying higher wages (43%); employing a more diverse workforce (40%); and being more accommodating with customers (37%). Only 29% say taking a public stance on a social or political issue is an effective way of practicing empathy.

Why We Think Companies Show Empathy

As mentioned before, over half (54%) of Americans believe companies demonstrate empathy when they take a stance on a social or political issue. Yet the main reasons we think they're doing it is because:

It increases their customer base	41%
Gets them media attention	41%
Think empathy is just a marketing ploy	34%
Because it's the popular thing to do these days	32%
Companies genuinely want to do good in the world	25%

But some said they're against companies taking a stand on sociopolitical issues, because:
32% think it could hurt corporate DE&I efforts.
34% say it could alienate employees who do not agree with the stance.

Get Up, Stand Up

54% of Americans say they are more likely to shop with a brand when it takes a stance on a cause they agree with. But there's good reason to take it further: 50% of Americans say the best thing brands can do to make their statements more believable is to back those statements up with action.

What should you stand for? The topics consumers think brands should take a stance on are:

Minimum Wage	67%
COVID-19 Policies	64%
Women's Rights	62%
Political Campaigns/Candidates	37%

Does Empathy Pay?

Our data shows that the most effective way for a company to practice empathy is to pay its employees more. And while it's also been shown that happy employees make happy customers, there are other things brands can do to rate favorably in the eyes of the public.

More than half of consumers (55%) say they are more likely to purchase from a brand that shows empathy and is "human." But 47% don't trust brands that say they're showing empathy because they think it's just a money-making strategy.

Actions Still Speak Louder Than Words

While your company culture may have an indirect effect on your customers, social media is blurring the lines between internal ethos and external perception. More and more, what your company thinks, feels, says and especially does is echoed in the public sphere.

We can all remember examples of brands who have virtue-signaled in the name of social equality only to have their efforts backfire. If an organization chooses to align itself with a cause, it should try its hardest to be aligned internally with the values that cause is championing. The takeaway: practicing empathy is good for business, but make sure your own house is in order.

CUSTOMERS: Turn Followers Into Fanatics

Studies have shown that happy employees really do make for happier customers. "Employee happiness correlates with employee efficiency, creativity and productivity." And this is true whether your employees are customer-facing or not. But taking good care of your own people isn't the only way brands can or should show empathy.

Remember that 60% of Americans believe a company should show empathy to its employees, but 60% also feel companies should practice empathy for their customers. Once your organization has mastered empathy on the inside, it's time to move to level two: empathy on the outside.

Being Selfish and Selfless?

The main reason over 40% of Americans think that companies express empathy is because it increases their customer base. Regardless of a company's motivation, 55% of consumers say they are more likely to purchase from a brand that shows empathy and is "human," with 54% even saying they are more likely to shop with that brand when they take a stance on a cause they agree with.

Customers Are The Key

The benefits of empathy as seen by consumers are many, including fewer social issues, greater happiness in general, reduced polarization and divisions in society and even solving major issues like climate change and immigration. But what many brands still haven't nailed is the right way to display their empathetic efforts.

Just how do you tell the world your organization values empathy? According to 37% of consumers, being more accommodating with customers is the best way to do it. But it also depends on who you ask. Young people demand empathy from companies the most.

Do you think companies should practice empathy?

Brand Activism

Americans are divided when it comes to brand activism, with 37% saying brands should take a stance on public issues, while 20% think they shouldn't. And 26% say a brand should only practice social activism if it directly relates to the brand or customers.

One-third (32%) of consumers against companies taking a stand on sociopolitical issues think it could hurt corporate DE&I efforts or alienate employees who do not agree with the stance (34%).

CULTURE: Penetrate the Zeitgeist

Every once in a while, preparation meets timing and a brand gets lucky. Dove, for example, was at the forefront of a movement that sought to change beauty standards and promote self-empathy with their ***Real Beauty Sketches*** campaign. Patagonia's ***Don't Buy This Jacket*** campaign became famous when the company announced they would donate 100% of global Black Friday sales directly to grassroots nonprofits. And remember the ***Ice Bucket Challenge***? Empathy helped break records for ALS awareness and research.

While we're not claiming that empathy is the key to viral success, there is a way to make an emotional connection with consumers who aren't yet your customers. Making your brand famous can be both a goal and a side effect of having empathy beyond your immediate influence.

Is Your Brand Woke?

We said earlier that 92% of Americans want to see brands practice empathy. But the current perception toward brand empathy is one of skepticism, with 66% of Americans expressing some skepticism or outright not believing it when brands take an empathetic stance on a topic.

Americans want brands to take a stand on public issues. A quarter of people actually blame large corporations for a lack of empathy in society and say it's because they have too much power and influence. And almost half of us (46%) say brands should take more responsibility for their role in society at large.

But we're divided on how they should do it. When it comes to brand activism, 37% of respondents said brands should take a stance on public issues, 20% think they shouldn't, and 26% say they only should if it directly relates to the brand or customers. Still, 55% of people think it's a demonstration of empathy when a company takes a stance on a social or political issues. 39% say corporate empathy should especially extend towards minority groups in society.

With Great Tech Comes Great Responsibility

How do tech companies fit into all of this? Half of Americans (51%) think tech brands have a greater responsibility in society than other industries because they have so much money and influence. In fact, nearly a third (30%) of Americans want technology companies to take the lead in promoting empathy because they act as thought leaders in today's culture.

Even though we want tech companies to do some good with the influence they have, skepticism remains high because a third of Americans think the tech industry is empathetic, another third think it isn't and a third aren't sure.

47% of Americans believe that tech brands are only in it for themselves and have no empathy toward the average consumer.

49% of Americans believe that tech brands' stances on social movements in 2020 were only made as PR moves.

40% of Americans believe that tech brands will revert back to not taking stances on social movements once the pandemic winds down.

43% of consumers blame social media platforms for declining empathy in society.

What can tech do to promote empathy?

"Be a voice for consumers of all races, creeds, religions and orientations."
"Donate to charitable causes that promote equality and empathize with many different types of individuals and groups."
"Put their money where their mouth is."
"Become active in helping the economy and environment."
"Take care of their employees and customers."

Where Empathy Meets Economy

Can you do good for others and benefit from it at the same time? We see it every day: companies will promote their socially conscious acts and the things they care about in order to align with the things consumers care about, thus increasing loyalty and revenue.

For example, Yoplait sponsored the Susan G. Komen Foundation with their "Save Lids to Save Lives" program and then produced content announcing the initiative on YouTube. Honda donated minivans and generators to help power vaccination sites during COVID. Whether we like it or not, doing the right thing for even questionable reasons has become a legitimate and socially acceptable motivator.

What's Next?

If brands want to make their way through the three levels of corporate empathy, simply being on social media isn't enough. Tweeting about social injustices or posting stories in support of the disenfranchised isn't enough. Read on for our final thoughts and recommendations on how to show empathy, starting with your company, moving on to your customers and finally expanding to culture beyond your immediate influence.

Be About It

Consumers want to see action from brands. Especially tech companies, who people feel should lead the charge. Nearly a third (30%) of Americans want technology companies to take the lead in promoting empathy in America. It's great to leverage a cultural moment to start a conversation, but in the eyes of your customers — present and future — you have to back up your sentiment with tangible effort. Ensure that the cause or issue you're aligned with is relevant to your company. And it's okay to tell tale of your good deeds, as long as it's not just talk.

Try Not to Weaponize Empathy

Empathy exists on a bell curve where both ends are not desired. Too little empathy can make it seem like your company doesn't care about an issue (or is even opposed to it), but too much can come off as disingenuous. Each brand's sweet spot will be different, but to help you find it, try to participate in moments and causes that are aligned with your company's products or philosophy.

Something is Better Than Nothing

Following the data it seems that, for the most part, attempting to show empathy is preferred by consumers over staying silent. And how you say it can be just as impactful as what you say. Fifty-five percent of consumers are more likely to purchase from a brand that shows empathy and is "human," and 54% are more likely to shop with that brand when they take a stance on a cause they agree with. Bottom line: choose your battles, speak authentically and have a bias toward execution.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on original research conducted by Method, using an online survey distributed by Dynata among n=2,013 Americans ages 16 to 76. Respondents were evenly split between men and women with equally sized generational age groups. Survey data was collected from July 1 to July 8, 2021. Method used Sprout Social to conduct social listening on topics of empathy spanning from July 2019 to August 2021.

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