



Putting empathy at the heart of customer care: the *why* and the *how*





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Introduction

It may be the digital age, but thanks to Covid, it's also the age of empathy.

The pandemic has changed the relationships we have with each other – our peers, colleagues and customers – and it's made human connection more valuable than ever. At its height, the words 'stay safe' rang out; we heard it in thousands of calls and live chat conversations we handled for UK businesses, as the human touch took on extra importance for customers. Connecting people to vital services, helping them find reassurance and giving them control in an uncertain time, made communication king.

The business-winners of the last two years were quick to realise this and made accessibility and understanding their biggest commodities. Now, as the pandemic enters the rear view mirror, we must learn from those lessons and equip our businesses accordingly. Empathy is a core business competency, and it sits right at the heart of the customer experience.

This guide looks at why empathy is so crucial to business and offers practical tips and advice to furnish customer-facing teams with the emotional intelligence they need to excel. Our CEO, Joanna Swash, also shares why she believes empathy is the mark of modern leadership and how it must come 'from the top'. Plus, to give you lasting food for thought, we ask 'how empathetic are you?' in our short quiz.



What is empathy and why does it matter?

If you take the dictionary definition of empathy, it refers to the ability to understand and share the feelings of another, but it should not be confused with sympathy. Nor mistaken for false concern or platitudes.

Empathy is genuine and it is demonstrable. It underpins the shared human experience and helps us to understand the emotional impact of the things that happen to us, the way we feel and how we act.

Now, after prolonged periods of separation, uncertainty and increased anxiety for many, we all have first-hand experience of the need for empathy – for our feelings and emotions to be acknowledged. Quite simply, it has highlighted the need to focus on listening and understanding in order to do good business.

Throughout the pandemic there were some brilliant examples of businesses that embodied empathy – creating new products, refining their brand positioning and making themselves relevant – because they recognised people's needs had shifted. They prioritised accessibility for and listening to customers, and responded accordingly. Others, however, didn't try to understand, and missed the opportunity to connect, merely pushing themselves further away from their own people and customers.

The business benefits of empathy are numerous. The more empathy you have with your people, the better your workplace culture, which impacts productivity, recruitment, retention and sales. The more empathy you have with customers, the better the rapport, understanding and loyalty, which in turn drives revenue and sparks innovation.



The three levels of empathy and the need to listen - an emotional intelligence expert's view

By Sandra Thompson,
Founder of The Ei Evolution



Neuroscience tells us it's impossible to know exactly how someone else is feeling.

Despite this, how many of us use phrases like 'I know just how you feel' or 'I've experienced exactly the same thing' when talking with colleagues and friends?

According to acclaimed neuroscientist, psychologist and author, Dr Lisa Feldman Barrett, this is because our own emotional responses are shaped by the way we were brought up, the experiences we've had and the context of the moments we find ourselves in.

While the pandemic has been a shared experience, it's also been very different for different people. The saying 'we're all in the same storm, but not the same boat', sums up the reality very well.

Against that backdrop, it's not helpful to presume to know how people feel. Living within the confines of restriction highlighted many social injustices. It heightened our anxieties, affected our tolerance and seemed to give us the permission to speak more openly and be our authentic selves – whether that was in relation to the Black Lives Matter movement, food poverty, financial difficulties or mental health.

Covid has been a lesson in unfiltered expression for us, as we all felt the need to be heard. So, it's hardly surprising that for businesses, Covid has been a lesson in active listening.

For businesses to be empathetic, they must understand the three different levels of empathy:

Cognitive empathy

I think I know how you're feeling, and I can categorise your emotion.

Emotional empathy

I perceive I feel what you're feeling, and I believe that the sensations I have are similar.

Compassionate empathy

I think I know what's going on with you, and I'm driven to act.

Compassionate empathy is crucial to customer experience as it is geared around the imperative to act – to help the customer. But to do this, you have to listen.

One of the best empathy-led behaviours a business can have is to ask brilliant questions of those they're trying to help. Asking the customer to articulate how they feel – instead of imagining or assuming – can expedite the best outcome. By listening, we provide space for people to express themselves, which can offer hugely valuable insights. It also creates time for customer service representatives to really consider what's been said and think about how they can help before they respond.

Who would you rather talk to: a customer agent that finishes your sentences and talks over you, or one who asks questions, listens deeply and responds thoughtfully? The answer is easy.

But for customer care to be rich in empathy, the business behind it must be too.

Lessons in empathetic leadership - start at the top

By Joanna Swash,
Group CEO at Moneypenny



Empathy has been described as the new language of leadership and I'd certainly agree.

Successful leaders need empathy to inspire understanding and knowledge in team members. It opens doors and removes confusion. When people are open, you can be more creative in solving problems in ways that drive productivity and long-term success. As a CEO, it is hugely important to surround yourself with brilliant people who are full of ideas and can enhance your skills and knowledge so you can lead even more effectively.

At Moneypenny, empathy underpins our style of management and the culture we have created. We know our team brings empathy to their work because they feel it from their Moneypenny colleagues every day. It's become one of our USPs because it is imbued in how we operate.

For example, we make sure everyone knows why others are on a team and the value they add. This promotes respect. We also ensure that people know how to communicate with those of a different mindset in a positive way – it is crucial not to let conflict fester. Establishing strong relationships with colleagues and supporting them to become the best they can comes from actively listening, asking for opinions and avoiding judgement. These are all small but simple ways that empathy can be embodied in the workplace.

From creating the perfect environment and involving your people in the planning – as we did in the building of our HQ – and from replacing annual reviews with eight-weekly chats and regular 1-2-1 coffees and catch-ups, there is power in listening to and hearing your people. This is how to create a more connected culture and sustainable business.

To foster a sense of community, we also make it clear that the leadership is part of the team. Our leaders regularly roll up their sleeves to serve lunch, man the bar at social events and clean up afterwards.

Empathy is crucial externally too. The only way to know your customers is to communicate with them. True business partnerships are a two-way street, so engaging with customers, listening and learning is the key. Ask them how you can help, what do they need from you and then facilitate the solution. This may spark new innovations or remind them of a complementary service you offer. Either way, their business is your business.

I believe in transparent, compassionate leadership in business and these principles easily translate to society. Showing empathy, cultivating trust, empowering people, and being open and honest are all important skills that we as human beings should prioritise – especially in business.

Empathy in practice

55% of our communication is non-verbal^[1]

“People will forget what you said. They will forget what you did. But they will never forget how you made them feel.”

Maya Angelou

Listening + Empathy = *Insights and Healthy Relationships*

Empathy underpins how we connect with others and how we make them feel – which means it's all about the things we say, the non-verbal signals we offer and the way we act.

When helping businesses to put empathy into their customer care practices, it can often seem that the focus is on handling unhappy customers. However, when empathy is integral to your business and service delivery, it will add value to and strengthen every interaction – including your most positive ones.

At Moneypenny, we know first-hand that empathy shapes customer experience. Here, we share our years of experience delivering Telephone Answering, Live Chat, Outsourced Switchboard and customer contact solutions for more than 21,000 businesses across the UK and US.

The things we say

The things we say over the phone, face-to-face or via online channels such as live chat or social media can make the difference between a customer feeling validated or under-valued.

Because empathetic people listen and have good emotional intelligence, they are typically able to handle customer requests and issues with care, understanding and a desire to help. Of course, some people have more empathy than others, but there are certain personality traits that will not help in the delivery of empathetic customer care.

Beware of conversational narcissists

If you've not heard the phrase before, a conversational narcissist is someone who consistently turns the conversation back to themselves. The phrase was first coined by sociologist Charles Derbe, and it highlights people who hog conversation and dominate.

We mention this idea here because conversational narcissists aren't great listeners, and they stand to do damage when it comes to customer care. They are the people who are most likely to overshadow customers by relaying their 'similar' experiences, assume they understand in order to move conversation on, interrupt a lot as they have their own agenda or who simply do not engage with others well.

If you spot people with these traits, moving them out of customer-facing roles would be a very wise decision.

[1] Statistic from Mehrabian as supplied by Sandra Thompson

Practical ways to build empathy into customer care

There are 9 easy ways to show you're listening and that, importantly, listening has turned into understanding:

- 1 Give customers space** - We all need to be heard and have space to express ourselves. Customer care representatives aren't actively listening when they're talking. Don't rush or interrupt customers because you need to capture certain information – empathy involves patience. Make sure your customer care team can confidently manage and contribute to conversation as it unfolds.
- 2 Repeat** - Use the same words your customers do to show you've understood and make them feel acknowledged. It's proven that in employer-employee disputes, when both sides repeat what the other has said, resolution is reached 50%^[2] faster. In customer care terms, this is a serious win.
- 3 React** - Reacting to what you've heard as you've heard it shows you're listening, and you don't always have to include words either - non-verbal cues can help. Failure to react to a customer's conversation can come across as being disinterested or distracted.
- 4 Be genuine** - Be your authentic self and respond accordingly. While you must always be professional, make sure you're also human and that your responses are sincere.
- 5 Legitimise their feelings** - Make sure your customer knows their feelings are valid. Showing you understand, take their feelings seriously and will act accordingly can be achieved through your tone, choice of words and the steps put in place for follow-up
- 6 Don't make it about you** - People sometimes think empathy is sharing an experience you feel is comparable. Don't add in your comparison or judgements - it will break the feeling of connection.
- 7 Don't assume** - Don't put words into the mouth of your customer or think there's no need to ask questions because you 'know how they feel'. Listen actively and establish how this individual customer feels - it will help you to ascertain the next move.
- 8 Match your tone to the customer** - If they're expressing their disappointment about a situation, make sure your tone reflects that. The only exception is with anger. If someone is angry, respond with a tone that shows you take the situation seriously, but remain calm and professional.
- 9 Thank the customer** - Taking the time to say thank you - particularly if they've just explained a very difficult circumstance or emotion - is a great way to show empathy. It recognises their circumstances and makes them feel appreciated.

^[2] Example from psychologist Marshall Rosenberg as quoted here: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/magazine-33287727>

The *language* of empathy

Empathy is the language of emotion.

Everyone working in customer care positions must be able to actively listen and use emotion to connect with customers. It's not just about problem-solving either, empathy can also help to unearth areas for innovation and new revenue.

So letting a happy customer talk about how a certain part of the house buying process has made them feel, listening to someone as they share the challenges of choosing a care home for a relative, or a customer sharing the difficulties in finding answers to a tricky financial question, all reveal opportunities.

By listening and showing empathy, you become closer to customers – and the better it is for business.

To make empathy part of the language of your business, here are some linguistic dos and don'ts:

Positive phrases to show you're listening to customers

"Thank you for bringing this to our attention."

"I'm truly sorry to hear about your experience."

"Great question, let me find out for you. I really appreciate your patience."

"Here's what I'm going to do for you.... Thanks for your understanding."

"I hear you and I'm sorry you are experiencing this."

Avoid the non-apology

Many celebrity statements following high profile indiscretions provide a masterclass in how not to show empathy. They rarely take ownership for what's happened, nor do they seem sorry or sincere.

In business, you must ensure that customer care teams avoid the non-apology at all costs, as it can be the quickest way to ruin a relationship and lose business. The following phrases are detached, aloof and without compassion, and should never be used in conversation or written interactions:

"I am sorry if you are offended."

"I'm sorry they did that."

"Mistakes were made."

"It is unfortunate that things turned out this way."

"That's your version of it."

"Maybe that's what you heard but it's not what I said."

Choose positive language and focus on the action you will take

All customers want either action or resolution, whether it's an upbeat call to enquire about a service or to make a complaint.

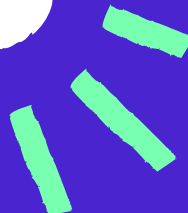
Choose positive language that shows your goal is to resolve or progress the issue for the customer and that you want them to understand what will happen next - this is compassionate empathy in practice. So rather than "all I can do is...", use phrases such as "what I am going to do is..." instead.

Other useful phrases include:

"I am really sorry about this. I will find the best person for you to discuss this with now."

"I'm very sorry this has happened. I will ensure an urgent message is passed along and picked up as a priority."

"I can hear you are frustrated. I am sorry you feel this way. I will do my very best to help you. "



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How Moneypenny supports businesses like yours

As the call and live chat experts, over 21,000 businesses – from sole traders right up to multinational corporations – trust us with their customer conversations. Founded by a brother and sister team in 2000, we currently employ over 1000 staff across our family of brands in the UK and US.

We give you the very best people, superpowered by leading-edge technology, to manage calls, chats and more on your behalf, ensuring every enquiry is captured and outstanding service is consistently delivered.

We're proud of our customer-focused approach and work hard on our internal culture, demonstrated by our 7x Best Companies to Work For status, including a top 5 listing in 2015 and 2017.



Paula Moneypenny Trainer

Quiz: How empathetic are you?

Empathy is a crucial skill in modern business. This is why we've created a short quiz with Sandra Thompson, Founder of The Ei Evolution, to help assess whether you are already empathetic in your day-to-day habits, or if you and your team still have work to do.

Let's get started!

What type of listener are you?

- A. I pay full attention to what the other person is saying, and I notice their body language too.
- B. I listen closely when I'm not distracted by my phone.
- C. I get the general gist of what the person is saying and can often finish their sentences.
- D. Sorry, what was the question?



Explanation: When you focus completely on the other person, they feel more valued and are more likely to trust you. You may notice changes in the tone of their voice and emphasis on particular words which can indicate how the person is feeling. When you are distracted in conversation, the other person will feel it and become less likely to engage.



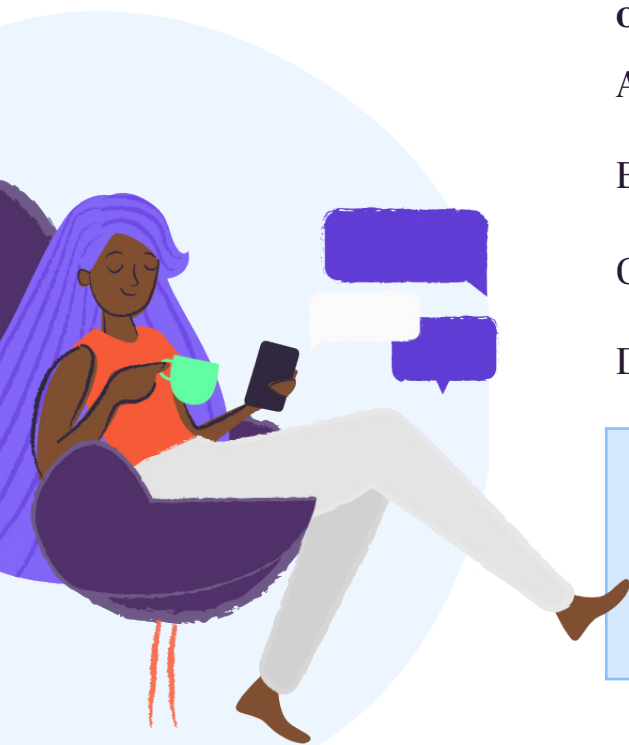
Focus

How focused are you when talking to a colleague or friend?

- A. I ask questions to help the person describe their experience and feelings.
- B. I like to provide suggestions on how they might solve their problem.
- C. I've always got a story about a similar situation I know they would like to hear.
- D. Funny thing is, we always end up talking about me.



Explanation: Every single human being has a different perspective on the world. The meaning they attach to things will be different to you. The experience you describe in your examples, your stories or the story of a 'friend of yours' is unlikely to be the same as the person you are speaking to. If you take this approach, you will lose your connection.



Understanding

Which of these statements best sums up your approach to understanding others?

- A. I never know exactly how the other person is feeling - that's not important, it's being there for someone and being supportive.
- B. It's easy for me to work out exactly what the other person is feeling and why.
- C. I just know precisely how someone feels, as I know I am feeling the same.
- D. There's only six emotions out there, I pick one of the six to describe how the other person is feeling. Simple.



Explanation: Our emotions are shaped by how we have been brought up and the people who have influenced our beliefs and values. They have also been shaped by our experiences and the meaning we have attached to those experiences, along with the context of that moment. This means that it is rare, if not impossible, for you to feel the same as others.



Learning

What do you do to build your empathy 'muscle'?

- A. I'm always trying to become more self-aware, it's an ongoing process. The greater my self-awareness, the better I am at empathising.
- B. I think I'm empathetic, but I often ask people if that is the case.
- C. Empathy and sympathy are the same thing aren't they? I'm great at sympathy.
- D. You're either empathetic or you're not. I'm not going to bother trying.



Explanation: Empathy and sympathy are not the same. You can learn how to be more empathetic by focusing on understanding how you feel first (self-awareness). Everyone can be empathetic. Science is proving that neurodiverse folk in our society also have the capacity for empathy - science yet again busting some of the myths out there!



Scoring

If you answered...

Mostly A:

Congratulations! It seems from your answers that you know exactly what it means to practice the most effective form of empathy. You're truly focused on the other person; something they will appreciate fully. People will trust you more readily as you're brilliant at getting to the heart of any issue. Keep going - you're doing a fantastic job.

Mostly B:

Well done. It seems that many of the things you are doing are hugely empathetic, but not all. Take a look at all of the A answers and consider how you might tweak your approach to become an empathy acer!

Mostly C:

The good news is that you recognise your behaviours, and you feel a connection to others. This is a great start, but it would be useful to look at A and B answers to consider what you might do differently to become more genuinely empathetic. Remember, according to science, it's impossible to know how someone feels. It's better for you to ask great questions than assume you know how the other person is feeling.

Mostly D:

There's plenty of room for improvement here. On the upside, empathy can be practiced and improved over time. A great place to start is to actively listen to others.



Talk to us *today*

If you'd like to know more about the ways Moneypenny can support your business, please get in touch. Together, we'll guarantee an empathetic and seamless customer experience.

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