

**But how does that  
make you *feel*?**





Research shows that empathy helps designers create more unique and innovative products, and there's reason to believe it can help marketers move away from fixation and better relate to consumers

**By Sarah Steimer**



**T**here's a wall in the Oxo offices in New York City covered in lost gloves: fingerless biker gloves, work gloves, winter mittens, rubber-tipped, fur-trimmed, leather, suede, knit. It reminds employees walking by that they're designing products for all the different hands that would occupy these gloves.



Oxo is the 29-year-old brand that's ubiquitous on wedding registries and in Bed, Bath & Beyond. The company is the poster child for universal design, the concept of creating products that are accessible to anyone, regardless of age, size or ability. Oxo's origin story is steeped in empathy—the founder noticed his wife's arthritic hands struggling to use a metal vegetable peeler—and the wall of gloves hearkens back to this founding principle. It urges you to have some perspective; put yourself in someone else's ... gloves.

Empathy has given the Oxo brand its edge, and there's reason to believe that many marketers could benefit from stopping to ask, "How would this make the consumer feel?" Research shows that this simple action breeds increased creativity, which is a welcome addition to the relatively cold data collected on consumers.

"A large part of putting the customer at the center is remembering that they are a human being, and not just an end user of your products or services," says Mary Beech, principal at MRB Brand Consulting and former CMO of Kate Spade. "What you are creating,

marketing and ultimately selling is but one piece of your customer's life as a human on Earth. One very small piece. And if we aren't keeping in mind their full journey, including their emotional, mental, social and physical needs—as well as the challenges and joys they are facing—we cannot do our jobs well."

But to truly benefit from empathetic thinking, marketers need to get out of their own way. It's all too easy to think of yourself as the end user, which breeds bias. The best empathetic practices aren't all that different from choosing the perfect birthday gift for a loved one: Think less about what you would want and more about how it would make the recipient feel.

### **Mental Agility**

"There just wasn't a great understanding of how to think about consumers," says Kelly Herd, a professor of marketing at

the University of Connecticut. Of course, the end user should be kept in mind when designing a product, but Herd wanted to determine whether thinking empathetically would produce unique results.

She and Ravi Mehta, a professor of business administration at the University of Illinois, ran five studies to test the effects of empathy on design, resulting in an article published in the *Journal of Consumer Research* in June 2018. The co-authors found that when study subjects were prompted to imagine a user's feelings, they produced more creative and



original—but still practical—ideas, compared with when subjects were simply asked to design something for a particular audience. Three of the studies included college undergraduates—Herd says that these participants were mostly business students—and two of the studies used Amazon Mechanical Turk (MTurk), a crowdsourcing marketplace.

In one of the tests, participants were told that Frito-Lay was running a crowdsourcing campaign for new potato chip flavors for pregnant women. Half of the group was given the basic assignment in an objective way, but the other half was given an empathetic prompt to take a few minutes to imagine how the customer would feel while eating the chips. The latter group's flavor ideas—sushi, margarita and pickles and ice cream—were deemed more creative than the former's by a panel of mothers-to-be.

The other studies yielded similar results, suggesting that adopting a feelings-imagination approach, versus an objective-imagination approach, enhances cognitive flexibility in the participants and boosts originality. Herd and Mehta also controlled for whether the effect holds for positive or negative feelings. It does.

While they found that empathy breeds mental agility—sparking creativity and originality—the researchers also discovered that the effects can last.

“It would hold that if you prime people to think about how a child would feel when using a toy you create, and then you are asked to think of some other creative thing, it would transfer,” Herd says. “The reason it works is because thinking about others' feelings makes you more cognitively flexible, it makes you more mentally agile, and so that mental agility transfers into other things that might happen.”

The studies were similar to work done by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's AgeLab, where researchers designed the AGNES suit, which stands for Age Gain Now Empathy System. The suit is worn by product developers, designers, marketers and others to better understand the physical challenges related to aging. The wearer feels the estimated motor, visual clarity, flexibility, dexterity and strength of a person in their mid-70s. The intention is for the wearer to empathize with the struggles of an aging population, and thus design with the goal of easing the stressors.

Although she and Mehta's study tested the effects of empathy on design, Herd maintains that marketers would see the same benefits. “My co-author and I have



talked a lot about whether we wanted to test this with marketing professionals and see how it holds,” she says. “We’ve been very clear in the paper that we think this would hold for marketing professionals. It’s possible it could even help more for people who are experts and tend to be very fixated in their own thinking.”

There’s just one small thing that can get in the way of empathy: marketer bias.

An April 2015 paper published in the *Journal of Marketing Research*, “Managerial Empathy Facilitates Egocentric Predictions of Consumer Preferences,” found that when marketing managers were prompted to think empathetically, they were more likely to say that customers’ preferences were the same as their own—even ignoring the provided market research on the customers.

But it’s not all bad news: The researchers were able to negate the egocentric effect when study participants were simply made aware of their bias.

“The job of a marketer isn’t to say, ‘Hey, what would I want if I were the customer?’ It’s knowing you have a bias,” says Brian Carroll, founder and CEO of Markempa, a consulting and training company for empathy-based marketing.

In the story of his own path to empathic marketing, Carroll likes to reference a story he saw on CBS from 2013 about collections agency CFS2. Owner Bill Bartmann (now deceased) told CBS he made about 200% more than his competitors by being empathetic: Instead of hiring debt collectors, he hired people with customer care experience. Employees were rewarded for how many free services they provided—even helping to fill out job applications and schedule interviews—with the goal of getting the debtors back on their feet.

In his own work, Carroll has tried to help marketers recognize

their bias, employing systems such as empathy-mapping and customer story interviews. “I’m not just interviewing about what appeals to someone, I want to hear the story of their journey,” he says. “When you listen to someone share a story, they don’t [just] share the facts, they’re sharing emotional content and context.”

Marketers do try to capture consumers’ emotions, and sometimes it can work brilliantly—other times, it can backfire. It’s not dissimilar to the way an ad taking an insincere social stance can feel hollow. Belinda Parmar, CEO of The Empathy Business and the founder of The Truth About Tech, calls this phenomenon “empathy-washing.” Parmar argues that empathy needs to start from the inside of an organization before consumers will feel it.

“The marketing cannot just change—the leadership style has to change, the way of working, the language of the business has to become more human,” she says. “Millennials are demanding empathy, as they will sacrifice meaning for money. To keep great talent, a business has to nurture empathy in the way they speak to each other, give each other feedback in an empathic way and have some of those honest conversations.”

## A Good Grip on Empathy

It’s easy to forget about Oxo. Its products become part of the household, easy to use and unflashy. They don’t release major ad campaigns and mostly let the products speak for themselves. But the brand hasn’t forgotten about you. In fact, it’s all they think about: How does using this gadget make you feel?

Consider the measuring cup. The classic glass or plastic version requires users to pour in the ingredient, bend down to check the

level, add more or remove, bend down, repeat. It’s not a terribly onerous exercise for many people, but designers at Oxo watched this stoop-and-repeat and saw a better way. Enter the Oxo angled measuring cup, which allows users to check their measurement levels from above.

“You watch someone do something and you’re like, ‘Why did they keep doing that? Why do they have to tilt their arm that way? That looks uncomfortable,’” says Karen Schnelwar, VP of global brand strategy and marketing at Oxo. “Humans have an amazing ability to compensate for difficult situations subconsciously. ... When that measuring cup comes into play and you get to retain your posture and your dignity and your composure, everything changes in a way that you never thought you were compensating for before.”

There’s empathy to the product design, and Schnelwar says the marketing team’s job is to communicate this empathy. Often, this simply means writing functional explanations of what the product does.

The company did release a brand video a year ago. The almost two-minute spot features users of varying ages and abilities, and the voiceover says, “Love inspires everything that we do—how we work and what we create.” It covers Oxo’s origin story and design process, but it focuses mostly on its products in use. In fact, most of the company’s videos on YouTube are short, simple clips that highlight how an individual product works. No narration, just a little text and light-hearted music as video shows the product in use.

Schnelwar says that the Oxo marketing team does its job well when it’s able to communicate the craft and empathy of the products, of which there are approximately 2,500. They try to connect the dots across the brand portfolio to show

how Oxo provides a consistent experience and what role the products play in users' everyday lives.

"When you ask about how we get empathy into our communications, part of it is because we're always communicating about our tools that have empathy baked into the inspiration and the design for the brand in general," she says. "With all of the user testing and how the product teams observe people doing tasks—sometimes that becomes the inspiration for what we're going to create next."

Part of the brand's empathetic communications strategy is being straightforward. In its product videos and on its packaging, Oxo gets to the point: You don't have time to read a small novel about a whisk, do you? And in any case, you can physically feel the benefit in your hands. "We try to demonstrate that thoughtfulness without having to say we're thoughtful," Schnelwar says. "You want to demonstrate it so that people can internalize it and see how it would affect their everyday positively, rather than have to take up a layer of messaging by talking about how thoughtful we are, about how much better everyone's life would be. We'd rather demonstrate it one campaign at a time, one piece of communication at a time. Let people discover it and fall in love with us on their own terms."

But the reliance on letting the products tell the empathetic brand story presents a bit of a challenge for Oxo: You can't touch its products on the web. Rather than be yet another thumbnail lost in a forest of products on Amazon, the brand took a step back and used its guiding brand principles to reach customers. It chose to name its products in a clear and concise manner, sometimes with a little wink. For example, Oxo's Good Gravy Fat Separator: The name

spells out exactly what it is, and that it's better—with the added splash of wordplay.

Companies can't maintain their brand front on Amazon's search results pages, but Oxo saw an opportunity to provide some short, descriptive text on the thumbnails within product pages. "If you scroll down on Amazon—they call them A-plus pages where you can communicate with photography and with messages—we try to make those kind of an oasis of calm in a sea of e-commerce chaos," Schnelwar says. If the products are intended to make every day better, why not have empathy for the shopping experience as well?

## How to Become an Empathetic Marketer

There's never a bad time to use empathy in the creative process, but Herd recommends using it as a problem-solving tool. For example, thinking empathetically can be an add-on to using AI, introducing a human component to what can otherwise feel like a very mechanic system. In addition to moving the brainstorming team out of fixation, it can also move ideation out of the funnel and into journey-mapping. As a professor, Herd tells her students to think about how a person may feel when they're going through a particular experience: What would be some of the positives or negatives?

In Herd and Mehta's study, the participants were asked to imagine how someone may feel when using the products, or to visualize a person interacting with the items. "It's as simple as saying, 'Think about how this person would use the product and then think about how this person would feel when using the product,'" Herd says. To take from the Journal of Marketing Research, an additional prompt may be to

remind the brainstorming team of their biases.

Mary Beech, who spoke about empathetic marketing in a Think with Google session, says that once this shift in mindset happens, it's hard to look back. She says some of the most empathetic brands don't simply consider the consumer when they engage with the brand, but the user is seen as a whole person.

"I am a long-distance runner, marathons specifically, and I routinely feel seen and treated with empathy by the brands I associate with in that aspect of my life," Beech says. "Not all, but most. As a marathon runner, my needs and experiences are specific and shared by other marathon runners. But the best brands and companies acknowledge that most people who run marathons do not do this full time. It is an aspect of their life, not *the* aspect of their life. I feel the most empathy from brands who treat me as a full human who happens to run marathons."

Marketing technology can make a consumer seem more like a dataset than an actual human, and Beech recommends that marketers remember that a consumer's experience with your brand doesn't happen in a vacuum. "My demographic and socioeconomic data combined with my search and purchase history on the web tells a story," Beech says. "But it is not my full story. It is not the most compelling story of me, but it gives a direction. Data can and should be a tool in the toolbox of the storyteller, and it should be part of creating a great story. But it still needs the magic of the human touch."

And to Parmar's point, a company also can't separate internal and external empathy. So in addition to practicing empathy in the ideation process, marketers need to practice empathy with their colleagues.

"Often, unempathic behaviors





toward customers or unempathic language in marketing is as a result of poor internal culture and low engagement internally,” she says. When Parmar works as an “empathy-in-residence” at companies, she works to be part of the organization’s culture to nudge it to a more empathic state. “The best and fastest way to change the levels of empathy in a company is to change the meetings and make them more empathic to make everyone feel like they belong,” she says.

But like any feel-good practice (and plenty of marketers have cautioned that empathy can be more of a buzzword than a real strategy), measuring for whether it’s working can be tricky. Parmar says that the answer isn’t in traditional metrics, but suggests looking at the “empathy quotient,” or what Alibaba co-founder Jack Ma calls “the love quotient.”

“We need to measure campaigns by how much they motivate and move people emotionally,” Parmar says. “How much a campaign helps people feel that they belong, and how much it helps people build identities.”

If that still feels a bit wishy-washy, Carroll has his own proud figures from taking a more empathetic approach. He trained his team at a previous job to understand people’s deeper motivations when they chose to download a report, rather than using that communication to convince the consumer to talk with a sales representative. After six months of focusing on answering

questions, Carroll says that the team had 303% more sales opportunities.

The brands and marketers that engage empathetically with consumers are the unique and creative problem-solvers. Perhaps you never gave much thought to standing with a hot kettle, making your morning cup of coffee—at least until Oxo came up with its auto-drip, pour-over coffee maker. Now you’re grateful for getting those three minutes back in your morning. An empathetic strategy isn’t always necessary—sometimes a customer simply wants to know when they can expect a package—but it can be wielded to overcome tricky brand and communication challenges.

“Empathy isn’t the only answer,” Carroll says. “I view it as a superpower to take what you do in marketing and make it way better because you’re actually orienting to what matters to your customer. ... Empathy builds connection, connection can build trust and then trust ultimately is the precursor for what needs to exist for someone to say ‘yes’ or to ultimately buy.” **m**