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Introduction

The expectation for companies and organisations to show empathy across channels of engagement is growing rapidly. People might accept the titles ‘employee’, ‘customer’ or ‘partner’, but they want more. They want to engage authentically with brands like they do with friends and family. They want to be seen, heard and valued as human beings.

People also expect companies and organisations to take a stand on issues that matter to them. Movements, such as the Global Climate Strike, Black Lives Matter and #MeToo have exposed a gap between what people expect and what brands do, and the COVID-19 pandemic has only served to highlight it. When companies and organisations fail to live up to their values — or stay silent on important issues — people use social media to speak out. This type of activism can rob companies from future sales or prevent an organisation from contributing to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Empathy is the ability to understand others, share their feelings and offer help. When companies and organisations practice empathy, they commit to understanding people and connecting with them emotionally. Companies and organisations that practice empathy also aspire to accelerate organisational performance and drive real-world outcomes, but most are missing the mark. They fail to listen and keep up with people’s changing expectations. They struggle to explain their purpose through the lens of stakeholder needs and values. And they’re unable to share content and experiences that resonate as authentic.

Our hyperconnected world only adds a layer of complexity for companies and organisations seeking to build long-term, trusting relationships with their stakeholders.

Showing empathy in an increasingly digital world is a challenge, but it doesn’t need to be — at least not with a roadmap. Digital empathy is a communications approach that uses digital technology to understand and respond to people’s values and priorities through shared content and experiences. This approach can be described in four steps:

1. **Step 1: Listen**
2. **Step 2: Integrate**
3. **Step 3: Share**
4. **Step 4: Evaluate**

Digital empathy can help companies and organisations build trust and drive emotional connection. It can also accelerate performance and drive real-world outcomes. Companies and organisations that ignore digital empathy are more likely to operate on false assumptions and alienate their stakeholders. Those that practice digital empathy are more likely to create emotional connections with the people they serve. Issues, such as climate change, systemic racism, sexual harassment and LGBTQI rights provide new opportunities for authentic engagement. Now is the time for companies and organisations to embrace digital empathy. The reward will be brand affinity and organisational agility.
Highlights

- **The return of social media activism** explores the risks companies and organisations face when they fail to align themselves with the needs and values of the people they serve.

- **Humans first in a digital world** looks at how companies and organisations can build a strong foundation for emotional connection through storytelling, employee advocacy and digital learning.

- **Moving towards emotional connection** discusses the importance of digital listening, community building and co-creation in engaging people’s emotions authentically.

- **A new compass for change** highlights the merits of integrated communications evaluation, predictive analytics and creating a learning culture.

- **The path towards digital empathy** defines digital empathy and provides recommendations for strategy and tactics.
The return of social media activism

Social media has given people a window into the world around them. People read the news, connect with friends and follow brands they admire. What’s less often discussed is how platforms designed to transfer bits and bytes also transfer ideas and expectations. When people see companies and organisations innovate to provide a superior service or advance the SDGs, an expectation transfer takes place. Seeing something better raises expectations for all brands to do better.

Such a phenomenon is remarkable, especially when we consider how people interact with companies and organisations. Ninety per cent of people globally say authenticity is key when deciding which brands to like and support.2 And more than seventy-seven per cent of people expect businesses and non-profits to be transparent on social media.3 Companies and organisations should recognise that authenticity and transparency are mainstream. Any gap between what they deliver and what people expect is already visible. And it’s only a matter of time until someone says something that will influence the way others perceive the brand.

“Companies and organisations should recognise that authenticity and transparency are mainstream.”
People have always had opinions, but social media has given them a voice. Sixty-three per cent of people believe their actions — from participating in boycotts to speaking out on social media — can influence what a brand says and does. Such boldness should put companies and organisations on alert. A customer who receives a bad experience can drive thousands of people away with a negative review. An employee who sees inappropriate behaviour in the workplace can spread the news globally with one Tweet. What adds to the complexity is that many people who engage with brands do so to make a statement about who they are and what they stand for.

When companies and organisations share hollow words or stay silent on important issues, people turn to social media to speak out. Social media activism can have a damaging impact on reputation that robs a company from future sales or prevents an organisation from delivering on mission. Today, brands should expect people to hold them accountable for their internal practices and culture. Brands should also expect people to demand action on wider issues, such as climate change, systemic racism, sexual harassment and LGBTQI rights. Any personal breach in trust can become public — and it won’t be easily silenced or forgotten.

### Empathy in Action

Sports brand Nike took a stand with American football player Colin Kaepernick at a time of controversy. Kaepernick had been kneeling during the national anthem in protest of police violence against African Americans. And the country was divided. The weekend of 21-22 September 2017 saw more than four million social media posts discussing the controversy. The President also joined the online conversation, calling for NFL players to stand during the national anthem or be fired. Kaepernick was eventually let go of the NFL and treated as an outcast. Nike largely stayed silent about the debate until September 2018 when they named Kaepernick as the new face of their ‘Just Do It’ campaign. The day after the first ad went live, company shares fell three per cent and videos of people burning Nike shoes went viral. Yet Nike didn’t back down. The company continued to support Kaepernick’s social activism, mirroring the values and priorities of many of their customers. Since the campaign, Nike’s stock price has increased fifty per cent and negative attitudes towards the brand have decreased by fifty per cent. By partnering with Kaepernick, Nike breathed new life into their ‘Just Do It’ message and connected emotionally with millennials and Generation Z. Nike also positioned itself as an ally of a movement that gained significant visibility during the pandemic: Black Lives Matter.
Humans first in a digital world

People want to engage with brands in the same way they’d engage with friends and family. They don’t want to be reduced to a cluster of data points. They want to be seen, heard and valued as human beings. And they expect brands to showcase their humanity through empathy. Eighty-three per cent of millennials want to buy from companies that reflect their beliefs and values.\(^9\) And seventy-four per cent of people expect brands to take a stand on the issues that matter to them.\(^10\) The problem is that many companies and organisations have divorced their purpose from stakeholder needs and values. When companies and organisations understand where the two overlap, they have an opportunity to build long-term, trusting relationships with their stakeholders.

A humans-first approach to communications aims to close the stakeholder expectation gap. This approach requires that companies and organisations explain their purpose through the lens of stakeholder needs and values. It then calls for companies and organisations to build on their North Star to develop a narrative based on stories and facts. At a micro-level, a narrative enables storytelling that connects with people emotionally and inspires them to action. At a macro-level, a narrative equips companies and organisations to shape the global discourse about a topic. Companies and organisations that are clear about the value they offer and how they benefit the world take important steps towards humanising their brands. But no brand can be authentically human without the faces and voices of leaders and employees.

A Sprout Social study found that CEOs with a social media presence are viewed as more approachable and more human than those without one.\(^11\) Whether they share thought leadership or next steps after a crisis, they are likely to contribute to a positive brand perception.\(^12\) Brands should also make it easy for employees to share content. Research shows that brand messages are shared twenty-four times more frequently and earn 561 times more reach when employees post them.\(^13\) Make it easy for employees to share perspectives and stories. Make it fun for employees to share content using leaderboards and rewards. Brands that invest in employee advocacy stand out in their ability to amplify messages in an authentic way.

The most forward-thinking companies and organisations are also investing in digital learning to emerge stronger from the pandemic. Seventy-four per cent of employees want their managers to demonstrate empathy in leadership.\(^14\) And sixty-nine per cent of employees want more digital upskilling post-pandemic.\(^15\) The demand for human brands — and the lack of skills needed to make them a reality — present companies and organisations with new opportunities. Provide empathy training to expand perspectives and improve decision-making. Use digital learning to engage employees and help them master new skills. Now is the time for companies and organisations to position themselves for success in a post-pandemic world.

The demand for human brands — and the lack of skills needed to make them a reality — require companies and organisations to build stronger foundations. They need to explain their purpose through the lens of stakeholder needs and values. Then they need to create a strong narrative based on stories and facts. Only then can companies and organisations reap the full benefits of executive profiling on social media, employee advocacy and digital learning.
Moving towards emotional connection

Seventy per cent of people globally expect a two-way relationship with brands. People might buy a product or donate to a cause, but they’re open for more. They want to be inspired and entertained, educated and informed, helped and rewarded. Too often however, companies and organisations settle for less. They design experiences from a brand’s point of view instead of people’s point of view. They prioritise communication over connection. As a result, these companies and organisations fail to respond to changing expectations and their brands fade into the background. Companies and organisations seeking to engage people’s emotions take a different approach. They strive to understand the interests, concerns, values and priorities of their stakeholders. They share authentic content and experiences that enrich people’s lives. And they nurture communities of trust through co-creation.

More than half of the world’s population uses social media. Each reaction, hashtag and comment leaves behind a trail of clues for brands to follow. Digital monitoring helps companies and organisations to find brand mentions and participate in relevant conversations. It’s an essential first step towards practicing empathy, but it shouldn’t be the last. While digital monitoring can tell a brand what people say, it won’t explain why people say it. To get a better sense of the why, brands must also consider digital listening. Digital listening enables companies and organisations to map out stakeholders and understand the issues that matter to them. It provides insight into who is shaping the discourse about certain topics — and how that discourse changes over time. When companies and organisations understand the landscape and stay on top of trends, they can avoid blind spots and proactively empathise with stakeholders.
Fifty-eight per cent of the content created by the world’s leading brands is seen as clutter. It’s poor, irrelevant and fails to deliver emotional benefits. The truth is not all content and touchpoints are created equal. Sixty-seven per cent of people think video is the most transparent format on social media. Research also shows that augmented reality experiences correlate most highly with purchase and advocacy. Companies and organisations should consider how they can use shoppable video, documentaries and augmented reality to engage people’s emotions. They should also explore how they can partner with virtual beings like Lil Miquela to push the boundary of what emotional connection can look like. But branded content and experiences are just a start. Companies and organisations that aspire to be agile and resilient must learn to co-create in community.

Brands with vibrant omnichannel communities excel at empathy. They regularly empower members to ask questions and support one another. They also invite people to provide solutions and share user-generated content. People are 2.4 times more likely to say user-generated content is more authentic than brand content. They also find user-generated content 9.8 times more impactful than influencer content. When companies and organisations co-create content in community, they come across as more transparent and authentic. They also deliver complex outcomes, such as loyalty (seventy-seven per cent) and culture change (fifty-four per cent). Omnichannel community is an invitation to a shared emotional experience. It’s a space where brands and people can develop reciprocal relationships that stay resilient in times of uncertainty and change.

EMPATHY IN ACTION

Humanitarian NGO Mercy Ships partnered with Oculus for Good to develop a 360-degree virtual reality experience called ‘Mercy’. The film tells the story of a 14-year old girl named Edith who suffers from a tumour on her jaw. Edith’s healing journey takes viewers from her village through the jungle to a hospital ship where she receives free surgery. The virtual reality experience allows Mercy Ships to cut through the clutter and raise awareness about the work it does to deliver healthcare to the world’s poorest people. It also opens the door for Mercy Ships to build trust and emotional connection.
A new compass for change

Communication strategies often have lots of moving pieces. One team might be engaging with journalists and bloggers at an event. Another team might be tasked with crafting thought leadership pieces. Still another team might be optimising a website landing page. Without common objectives and aligned incentives, it’s easy for silos to grow. One study shows that the average team wastes six weeks per year due to poor collaboration and communication. Companies and organisations that wish to apply empathy in communications measurement should start by adopting an integrated evaluation framework. One example is the Barcelona Principles 3.0 developed by the International Association for Measurement and Evaluation of Communication (AMEC).

The Barcelona Principles 3.0 highlight the importance of setting measurable goals before any campaign is launched. Social media objectives should always support communications objectives. And communications objectives should always align with organisational objectives. The Barcelona Principles 3.0 also put a strong focus on identifying the outcomes and impacts of communications activities. This process should not be limited to outcomes and impacts that affect stakeholders. It should also measure and evaluate wider contributions to society. Finally, the Barcelona Principles 3.0 are holistic in nature. They stress the use of qualitative research to complement big data. They call for the measurement and evaluation of online and offline channels. And they require that insights be rooted in integrity and transparency.
Empathy in communications measurement aims to create a learning culture. Companies and organisations with learning cultures communicate shared goals and develop shared accountability. They break down departmental and data silos. They also create space for teams to run weekly experiments and explore data. Find out what’s working and what isn’t. Ask questions like ‘why?’, ‘so what?’ and ‘now what?’. Building on these insights helps teams optimise results and provide input into strategy. Companies and organisations can go even further in combining empathy and data science through predictive analytics.

Agile companies and organisations are not satisfied with understanding what happened. They want to predict what’s likely to happen. With the right assumptions and data, predictive models can give companies and organisations foresight. Consider how social media data can help teams to uncover emerging needs and issues. Use website data to target the right person at the right place at the right time. Explore CRM data to improve cost efficiency and measure return on investment. All types of data can help enrich the predictive model. When companies and organisations have an idea of what’s likely to happen, they can plan for empathy and design more agile strategies.

Empathy in communications measurement demands that companies and organisations adopt an integrated evaluation framework. One example is the Barcelona Principles 3.0, which calls for companies and organisations to measure and evaluate outcomes that affect stakeholders and society. Empathy in communications measurement also aims to cultivate a learning culture that guides the development of more agile strategies and tactics.

When companies and organisations have an idea of what’s likely to happen, they can plan for empathy and design more agile strategies.
The path towards digital empathy

Empathy is a rich concept that describes the ability to understand others, share their feelings and offer help. It’s core to the human experience, but often fringe to the brand experience. Companies and organisations that exercise empathy make better decisions. They connect with people emotionally and provide more satisfying experiences. Companies and organisations without empathy tend to operate on false assumptions and risk missing positive outcomes. A study by M&C Saatchi found that a lack of empathy in business costs big brands over 300 million dollars in lost revenue every year. As we look ahead to a post-COVID-19 world, digital empathy will be crucial for affinity and agility.

Digital empathy is a communications approach that uses digital technology to understand and respond to people’s values and priorities through shared content and experiences. This approach can be described in four steps: Step 1 - Listen, Step 2 - Integrate, Step 3 - Share and Step 4 - Evaluate.
Step 1
Listen

The first step towards digital empathy is listening. Companies and organisations need to have a stubborn commitment to seeing the world through the eyes of their stakeholders. This process requires an ability to connect the big picture with small details. We recommend analysing social media conversations, online news and search patterns to identify issues that matter to stakeholders. It will also be key to find out who is influencing the discourse and what they’re sharing. With this context, companies and organisations should use interviews and surveys to explore the nuances of what people think, feel, say and do. Then they should consolidate their insights into empathy maps to define personas and visualise the omnichannel journey.

- Use digital listening to map stakeholders and understand the issues that matter to them
- Conduct surveys and interviews to explore the nuances of what people think, feel, say and do
- Consolidate your insights into empathy maps and define personas
- Use journey maps to visualise what a typical brand experience looks like
The second step towards digital empathy is integration. We recommend that companies and organisations look at their purpose through the lens of stakeholder needs and values. It’ll be important to develop a narrative that explains the value they offer and how they benefit the world. It’ll be equally important to align activities with the SDG framework and measure progress on indicators. Then companies and organisations should define communications objectives and align them with organisational objectives. Full integration calls for companies and organisations to upskill and empower their employees. Use digital learning to help employees master new skills. Provide empathy training and reward emotional intelligence. Activate leaders and employees as brand ambassadors and thought leaders. Long before companies and organisations earn the trust of external stakeholders, they will need to earn the trust of internal stakeholders.

- Align on vision, mission, values and purpose
- Harmonise communications objectives with organisational objectives
- Use a logic model to guide communication activities and drive measurable outcomes
- Develop an organisational narrative based on stories and facts
- Prioritise stakeholders and define a path towards thought leadership
- Use the SDGs as a framework to showcase your care for people and the planet
- Upskill and reskill employees through digital learning and development
- Provide empathy training and reward emotional intelligence
- Profile leaders on social media to humanise the brand
- Set up an employee advocacy programme with gamified incentives
The third step towards digital empathy is sharing. We recommend that companies and organisations move from user experience (UX) to human experience (HX) to communicate value, meaning and purpose. They should also build and empower omnichannel communities. Encourage user-generated content and co-creation to build trust. Use videos, podcasts and augmented reality experiences to create an emotional connection. Leverage shoppable content to simplify the path to purchase and boost e-commerce sales. While companies and organisations share, they should continue to perform digital listening. Not only to improve content and experiences, but also to test new tactics. Find out how virtual beings can amplify messages and drive emotional engagement. Explore how blockchain and artificial intelligence can verify information and reward behaviour. The key is creating a space where brands and people can develop reciprocal relationships. Omnichannel experiences don’t only belong to brands. They also belong to people who join them.

• Design for the human experience (HX)
• Build and empower omnichannel communities
• Encourage user-generated content and community co-creation
• Develop videos, podcasts and augmented reality experiences
• Create shoppable content to simplify the path to purchase
• Partner with virtual beings and influencers
• Explore the use of blockchain and artificial intelligence
Step 4
Evaluate

The fourth step towards digital empathy is evaluation. Companies and organisations should align their communications measurement and evaluation to the Barcelona 3.0 Principles. They should also do everything they can to create a learning culture. Break down departmental and data silos. Empower teams to run weekly experiments and fail forward. Questions like ‘why?’, ‘so what?’ and ‘now what?’ can help drive insights for visual reports and strategy development. We also recommend that companies and organisations go further in combining empathy with data science to anticipate the future. Predictive analytics can help brands adapt to evolving needs and issues. It can also help brands to connect with people through a crisis.

• Adopt an integrated communications evaluation framework
• Choose metrics that build organisational value and drive positive outcomes
• Use growth hacking to make adjustments and enhance results
• Make and test predictions to improve assumptions in your predictive model
• Measure and evaluate communications activities across touchpoints and channels
• Develop visual reports to highlight results and provide input into strategy
Digital empathy equips companies and organisations to better understand and respond to the people they serve. It builds on transparency and authenticity to fuel emotional connection across channels of engagement. It also accelerates organisational performance and real-world outcomes. Looking ahead to a post-COVID-19 world, digital empathy will play a large role in the rise and fall of brands. Companies and organisations that ignore digital empathy are more likely to operate on false assumptions and alienate their stakeholders. Companies and organisations that practice digital empathy are more likely to build trust and connect emotionally with their stakeholders. The reward will be nothing less than brand affinity and organisational agility.

“The reward will be nothing less than brand affinity and organisational agility.”
About Leidar

Leidar is an international advocacy, branding and communications consultancy. We help our clients set their course, navigate and communicate effectively. We call our approach Leadership Navigation.

SET YOUR COURSE

A clear destination and direction define the journey towards business success. Leidar is the Norse name for the North Star. And with a clear North Star, you can navigate confidently and successfully, creating engaging communications.

NAVIGATE

We guide our clients towards their destination, avoiding trouble spots, and staying on course for success. A strong brand story, bold thought leadership and distinctive design drive advocacy to create competitive advantage and stakeholder engagement.

COMMUNICATE

You will communicate your written and visual content to the audiences you want to reach, using the right channels, co-ordinating your work across those channels. This will create sustainable relationships and successful outcomes.

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End Notes


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