



Empathy in a Pandemic

The OMD UK **GUIDE**



Introduction

Empathy. A word that has been said and heard in advertising circles countless times over the last couple of years. It has most definitely become the latest industry buzzword, so why therefore, has it taken a global pandemic for brands to **actually** display it in their communications?

As the last few months have shown, authentic empathy – rather than the all too tentative version practised by some – is a critical component to great brand communication. A period encompassing both a deadly pandemic and deep social unrest has shown the power in a more nuanced understanding of people, properly embraced in brand behaviour, and a certain alignment between social engagement and commercial objectives. Brands that have recognised the often uneven impact of these situations – economically, culturally, socially – and engaged distinctively, have benefitted. It hints that a new, more naturalistic model for communications could emerge.

Our opinion is that true empathy is when brands depict and reflect the outside world as it really is - with authenticity, bravery and purpose. It's about being more grown-up, or having the maturity as a brand to speak to your consumers when things are bad as well as good... with the former often having some risk attached. But ultimately it needs to be recognised by consumers. Brands displaying empathy need to be distinctive and create impact with consumers – otherwise what's the point?



Empathy vs sympathy

Dave Trott describes the difference between sympathy and empathy as:

“**Sympathy** is when we want other people to feel good, so we do whatever would make us feel good. **Empathy** is when we put ourselves in the other person’s place.”

During the events of the last few months, some brands have, as we’ll see, quickly shifted from a transparent “buy from us” approach to a more thoughtful “we understand what you’re going through” model. However, more generally – when brands attempt to convey empathy in comms, it is more in line with what Dave Trott would consider as sympathy, displaying a world that they as a brand would like it to be. For example, brands will often use cultural moments, news headlines or stories and reflect them in comms in order to tell a quick gag. Others will be tone deaf in hard times, trying to communicate that “they know what you’re going through” whilst making billions. This is not empathetic; brands attempting to convey empathy forgot that actions speak louder than words and their attempts at it talking about it, in isolation, often backfired.

It’s our opinion that the brands most successful at displaying empathy in recent months (and more broadly) have dealt with and reflected the world as it actually is.

These are brands who have jumped in, been willing to engage honestly and authentically, even in a tricky subject matter, have been the ones that have succeeded in earning respect and reward indirectly - despite the perceived risk. Nike and their activity surrounding Colin Kaepernick spring to mind as a brand that has done this well in the past, as does Bodyforms’ ‘#VivaLaVulva’ campaign or similarly Dove’s ‘Real Beauty’.



Dove



The need for distinctiveness

A recent YouGov survey has highlighted that empathy alone isn't enough: distinction remains critical. It's key that brands that want to adapt to external context do so in a way that is akin to their established brand identity or tone of voice that consumers are already familiar with.

In the survey published earlier this year by YouGov, it's suggested that consumers are starting to see through the façade of brands displaying "empathy" in their advertising during the Covid-19 pandemic and subsequent nationwide lockdown.

"Brands are being cautious with what and how they communicate with their consumers to avoid appearing insensitive to the current situation, with many adopting an empathetic tone. However, in recent weeks there has been criticism of increasingly unoriginal messaging and creative, particularly within ad campaigns"

The study goes onto to highlight that of those surveyed:

51%

agree that brands / companies are over-communicating with them

69%

agree that brands / companies are delivering similar messages to one another

42%

are tired of hearing, or believed the term 'we're all in this together', is overused

Of course, some of the outputs above will be due to market conditions. With ad spend down and eyeballs up, it's natural for consumers to feel as if frequency (or over communication) is high. We could all probably recite the Microsoft Teams advert word-for-word, couldn't we?

But this highlights that adopting empathy in communications isn't enough, particularly at a time when every other brand (in or outside of your category) is doing the same. With multiple brands adopting the same or similar messaging, your brand will get lost, and, even if you do stand out, you risk appearing opportunistic. Therefore, brands need to display empathy but still do so in a way that is as distinctive and motivating as what they would normally create; there is no escaping the need for consistency.



A formula for success

If empathy means reflecting the world as it really is for consumers, but that both commercial success and consumer credibility comes from distinctiveness, what can we learn about the behaviour – successful or otherwise – of brands in the last five months?

Formula 01 Creating content that meets a consumer need

Joe Wicks morning PE classes via YouTube:

Like him or not, **Joe Wicks (aka. The Body Coach)** has become a brand in his own right. When it was announced that schools would be closing, Joe Wicks quickly announced he would be hosting PE classes for all ages, free of charge, to help the UK keep fit via his YouTube channel.

This is a great display of empathy from Joe Wicks as he is meeting a consumer need and in turn attempting to help parents, many of which would have welcomed his PE classes with a big sigh of relief. Joe Wicks' daily morning PE classes have helped parents to keep their kids entertained at the start of the day, as well as to provide them with some much needed structure to their day – something that would otherwise have been lacking when it was announced schools would be closed. The PE classes were also widely accessible, as they were streamed free of charge via his popular YouTube channel.

These free PE classes are also a great example of creating distinction for his own “brand” as he became an even greater

household name almost overnight, with almost all media and news publications highlighting what he was offering to families all over the UK. The Body Coach has done all he can to offer parents a silver lining at the start of lockdown and became a Guinness World Record holder in the process, after one of his online fitness classes was watched by nearly a million people. On March 24, the Body Coach's class was broadcast to 955,158 around the world – a record number of viewers for a workout live streamed on YouTube.

He since reduced the frequency of his classes to three times a week after stating he “needs a bit of a break”, but his efforts to support parents across the country should be applauded.



Brewdog's "Barnard Castle Eye Test" IPA:

Brewdog have become known for distinctive advertising and comms of late, such as their "most honest ad ever" campaign in 2019, but most recently they reacted to the Dominic Cummings lockdown scandal with a limited edition IPA. In an effort to jump onto cultural conversation, and the fact that many UK consumers were frustrated with Cummings' actions, they released the "Barnard Castle Eye Test" IPA. This limited edition product launch being a great example of displaying empathy with their consumers. It's assumed that Brewdog anticipated the frustrations of their audience and turned this into an opportunity for the brand to earn some positive PR, in turn showing how they understand and behave as a brand in a way that is similar to their punters.

When Cummings' actions began to be reported, Brewdog founder James Watt quickly asked his 67,000 Twitter followers to vote for the best name for a new, limited edition beer: 'Cummings & Goings'; '260 Miles'; 'Stay at Homes'; were a few contenders but the final winning choice was 'Barnard Castle Eye Test'.

This is a great example of a brand displaying empathy with consumers. It gives the brand a more human, and less corporate, personality and emphasises and pokes fun at a serious topic that their

consumers were angered by. Not only this, but all profits from would go towards their production of free sanitiser for the NHS. Once on sale, Brewdog's website crashed due to the amount of traffic proving how this display of empathy enabled the brand to create distinction and impact with their consumers.

This Brewdog example is one that rides cultural conversation in a way that is aimed to ultimately make consumers laugh about a serious topic, and one that they felt comfortable enough to act on.



Brands reacting to the Black Lives Matter movement:

On the other side of this theme ‘riding cultural conversation’, there have been many brands displaying empathy with consumers off the back of the Black Lives Matter movement following George Floyd’s murder on May 25th.

Many brands reacted to the cultural conversation from a position of discomfort, something that we believe is an important thing for brands to do if they want to be truly empathetic with consumers. Many brand responses to the Black Lives Matter movement were criticised for jumping on a bandwagon, or for corporate hypocrisy, by consumers. However, some were received with praise.

For example **LEGO** admitted there is still “much to do” and pledged to donate \$4million to organisations dedicated to supporting black children and educating all children about racial equality. But Lego didn’t stop there, they also paused all marketing content that was promoting toy sets that included police characters.

This is a great example of a brand positively displaying empathy in difficult circumstances for two reasons:

1. Walk the walk: It’s distinctive in the way that Lego have pledged to make a difference with action which will aid the movement in the long term (vs just posting empty messages of support online as many brands did)
2. Relate with your consumer: Lego have reflected the sentiment and tone of voice that many consumers themselves would have experienced in recent weeks. This sentiment being one of recognition, and recognition that racism is unfortunately still extremely prevalent in society. And that this of course needs to change.



**WE STAND WITH THE BLACK COMMUNITY
AGAINST RACISM AND INEQUALITY**

THERE IS MUCH TO DO

**WE WILL DONATE \$4 MILLION TO ORGANIZATIONS
DEDICATED TO SUPPORTING BLACK CHILDREN
AND EDUCATING ALL CHILDREN ABOUT
RACIAL EQUALITY**

5:24 pm · 3 Jun 2020 · [Twitter Web App](#)

48K Retweets **8.4K** Quote Tweets **234.6K** Likes

Formula 03 Speaking to your consumer as they would to one another (media, creative)

KFC Back on Deliveroo

The third and final building block brands should use in order to truly display empathy with consumers is via communicating with them as they would with one another. This can help brands to show that they understand their consumer on a deeper level via more authentic communications, in turn positioning the brand as being more human vs. corporate, and therefore you would assume, more likeable and one that consumers would be happy to part cash with.

A great example of this in recent weeks can be seen when **KFC** announced they were back on Deliveroo.

Many brands used a “we missed you” message when they reopened, as did KFC. But KFC did so in a way that poked fun at their consumers attempts to recreate their KFC menu favourites whilst the brand was shut during lockdown. The ad which was set to ‘All by myself’ by Celine Dion, showed consumers home attempts at fried chicken recipes, hand drawn brand logos and even buckets of chicken followed simply by copy that reads “We missed you too...but we’ll take it from here”.

Not only is this a display of empathy in that it reflects what KFC’s consumers have been going through at home during lockdown, but as above it pokes fun and communicates with their audience as they would themselves with a friend, but its also an example that stood out from the crowd and was distinctive. Across the month of May this KFC campaign “achieved the highest uplift in Ad Awareness of any brand in the UK with a +10.7 rise” according to YouGov.



In summary

5 golden rules for empathetic brand communications:

1. Genuine empathy requires an element of risk taking, and should form part of a longer term brand ambition (vs. a reactive tactic) in order to be seen as authentic and therefore effective
2. Create distinction. Don't just follow the crowd and copy those around you (as a safer option), create empathetic comms that is distinctive and sets you apart from the competition
3. Create content that meets a consumer need, and shows that you truly understand your audience
4. Ride the cultural conversation – but do so when the cultural context is both positive and more negative
5. Speak to your consumer as they would one another, this will help to bring your brand closer to your consumers in a way that is more authentic, human and likeable

