

The Empathy Gap: Don't Mistake Yourself for Your Target

BY LINDSAY PEDERSEN

Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.

– The Golden Rule

We all know the Golden Rule and we're told to live by it. A solid maxim that's resonated for millennia, some form of this guideline has appeared in every one of the world's major religions.

But it's the wrong rule when it comes to marketing.

The goal of the marketer is to tap into the *consumer's* needs and wants – to empathize with her, to meet her where she lives. If we don't,

If we market with the Golden Rule, we're going to fail.

and instead we market as if we ourselves were the target, we're going to fail. We'll fail to serve the consumer and ultimately fail the business.

We specifically don't want to do unto consumers as we'd have them do unto us. Our task as

marketers is subtly but profoundly different: we must do unto them as *they* would want, not as *we* would want.

Successful marketers consistently strive to see their product or service from the perspective of the target customer, so that each of the four Ps – product, place, price and promotion – is centered around delighting that particular customer. By doing so, we bridge what's called the *empathy gap*.

What is the Empathy Gap?

Let's look in on a typical married couple.

The husband is uncomfortable with others choosing material goods for him. It's not that he's ungrateful when others buy him gifts, it's just that he knows exactly what he wants and prefers to make those choices himself. Plus, he hates the idea that someone might spend money on a gift he will never use.

He loves gift cards. He thinks they're one of the greatest inventions ever conceived. He feels truly understood when someone gives him a gift card.

But his wife doesn't like giving him gift cards. She prefers giving him what she considers *thoughtful* gifts. She doesn't much like receiving gift cards from him. They seem impersonal and unimaginative. She wishes he'd give more thoughtful gifts.

Reluctantly, over time, she's learned that a gift is supposed to be about the recipient, not the giver. So now she gives him gift cards.

A true gift should be about
the recipient, not the giver.

She might soften the blow to her sensibilities by supplementing the gift card with innocuous little gifts and gestures, such as stocking the freezer with his favorite ice cream bars. He's learned too, and reciprocates by giving her gifts that don't have a magnetic strip on the back.

This couple is navigating an empathy gap. Two people could hardly know one another better, yet they still project their own individual preferences onto one another. If people this close get it wrong, think about how likely it is that marketers might fail with a well-intentioned but incorrect assumption about the desires of their target market.

Empathy is the ability to see something through the perspective of another. Problems develop when we project our own preferences onto others, assuming incorrectly that they will value what we value. This empathy gap is closely related to *next-bench syndrome*.

Hewlett-Packard and the Origin of Next-Bench Syndrome

The term “next-bench syndrome” was coined to describe behavior that was strongly encouraged at Hewlett-Packard in the sixties and seventies, when it was a hotbed of technical innovation. Engineers were given extraordinary freedom to tinker. When someone came up with a product that caught the attention of the engineer at the next workbench over – a gizmo that delighted a gizmo geek – that product was often commercialized. During this era, the engineers creating products were perfectly representative of HP’s target customer, and thus the next-bench approach worked beautifully.

Next-bench syndrome: catching the attention of the creator at the next workbench over.

Where Next-Bench Syndrome Falls Short

Despite HP’s initial success, next-bench syndrome is more often a blind spot. In many cases, the creator is not the target, and next-bench syndrome is not good business practice. At best, it prevents an innovative idea from being as well-received as it could be if it were conceived with the accurate target in mind. At worst, it can fuel innovation and messaging that has no market, thereby wasting huge amounts of time and money.

In the case of HP, for example, when the creators were building for highly technical engineers and researchers (like themselves), the products succeeded in market. But over time HP’s target evolved into a more mainstream consumer. The creators continued to design for themselves, and the product introductions fell flat. In other words, when the creators were themselves the target of the product they were designing, it worked because there was no empathy gap to bridge. There was pure empathy.

When techies design for non-techies, an empathy gap must be bridged.

In contrast, as the company grew and the creators were designing for

a mainstream consumer who differed from them fundamentally, they encountered an empathy gap. Had they recognized and sought to overcome this gap successfully (as did the married couple in our earlier example), they would have made every effort to learn what made their potential customer tick – what that person cared about, valued and desired – and built and marketed products accordingly. Instead, HP did not always navigate this gap well, and the resulting innovations didn't gain mainstream adoption.

Failures in Empathy

I've seen the consequences of next-bench syndrome in many other industries, not just high tech. In every case, the pitfall stems from failing to recognize and respect the empathy gap between the product or service provider and the target customer. In a recent example, I saw a team of entrepreneurs pitch an idea to investors, and in this case, the product was targeted to a low-income consumer. The investors evaluating the idea were decidedly not low-income. Instead of putting themselves in the shoes of low-income consumers who had wildly different financial needs, they mistook themselves for the target and declined to invest.

How to Bridge the Empathy Gap

Common sense tells us to give the people what they want. But that's not the whole story. Henry Ford famously said, "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have answered 'faster horses.'" The pathway to success lies in:

- Discovering the deep-seated, unspoken, perhaps even unconscious desires of your target.
- Creating an offering and communicating that offering in a manner informed directly by your understanding of those desires.

It's not easy. And it's not just product developers and investors who risk a lack of empathy. Smart, experienced, highly-trained marketers have fallen prey to the empathy gap and next-bench syndrome.

TiVo's Case of Next-Bench Syndrome

In 1999, a group of visionary entrepreneurs introduced the technology we now know as a Digital Video Recorder (DVR), coupled with a cool graphic interface. They made the bold claim that their device would “Change the way you watch TV.” Whimsically, they named it TiVo.

Eventually, they succeeded. Today, many of us can't imagine a world without a DVR. It's the way TV should work. But it took a while to get there and TiVo's success wasn't as quick or comprehensive as it could have been. Their missed opportunity could be attributed in part to next-bench syndrome at play in TiVo leadership's early marketing decisions.

The TiVo people were enamored with their admittedly revolutionary product and its potential to fundamentally change the way people interact with television, and that bold concept took the fore in their initial marketing efforts. Unfortunately, it was too bold for the average consumer. The target did not understand and thus couldn't be sold on this revolutionary product.

As it turned out, the easiest to grasp and thus most compelling aspect of DVR technology for consumers in 1999 was the simple ability to *pause live TV*. When the TiVo team eventually realized that – when they bridged the empathy gap – they started specifically marketing the ability to pause live TV, moving away from the more broad, less clear call to “Change the way you watch TV.”

Because the target was mainstream and not particularly tech-savvy, TiVo needed to start with something their audience could grasp – something functional – in order to entice them to invest in this new technology. Once these consumers actively experienced TiVo's functional benefit of pausing live TV, they could experience and fall in love with the rest of the TiVo offering that the TiVo team was so excited about.

TiVo could have anticipated that consumers first needed to grasp a functional benefit, but they did not, due to the blinding effect of next-

Funny But Not Empathetic

TiVo's initial advertising features a humorous commercial that opens with Joe Montana on a golf course poised to apply "anti-itch cream" to his golf buddy's body. The scene is interrupted by the tagline "Skip the stuff you don't want to see." It's a really funny, entertaining spot, and viewers laughed. But they didn't buy. They simply didn't have a handle on what TiVo was.

bench syndrome. As TiVo was preparing to commercialize the technology, they held a series of focus groups and discovered that the participants did not intuitively understand TiVo. The product marketers should have taken note when the moderator needed fifteen minutes just to explain the technology before participants understood. This should have been a red flag that "Change the way you watch TV" would not resonate with the target, and that the target instead needed a starting point with easier-to-perceive benefits. Leading with a simple functional benefit would be better at getting the product in the home, where the customer could then learn for herself how much better TV is with TiVo.

Nike: Just Doing It the Right Way

TiVo launched with a marketing message that was too lofty and broad, and thus too confusing for a mainstream audience. Nike, on the other hand, started with an extremely narrow focus and over time grew into a brand that successfully wields some of the most lofty, broad messaging imaginable.

Today, we instantly associate Nike with the emotional benefits of accomplishment and victory when we "Just Do It." But when Nike launched in 1971, the company was all about function, developing shoes meant to appeal to the competitive runner. They evolved into a position touting the emotional benefits of higher performance to a wider audience of active people, eventually arriving at a place where they established an aspirational resonance with a very broad group of consumers, running the gamut from extremely active, competitive athletes to relatively inactive, everyday consumers.

Had Nike advertised with “Just Do It” in 1971 instead of 1988, it would have come across as confusing and disingenuous.

If Nike had launched with “Just Do It” when consumers did not even know what Nike was, it would have come across as confusing, disingenuous and ultimately not credible – it would not have bridged the empathy gap. They had to first earn their reputation by anchoring themselves to a meaningful, relevant, motivating functional benefit. TiVo did not do this and so lost a lot of time and money in getting consumers to adopt.

Oiselle: Marketing with No Empathy Gap

Designing and marketing when you have yourself in mind can be appropriate for companies with more specialized targets. One example is early HP when the target was engineers, before shifting to a mainstream consumer. A contemporary example is a brand I love called Oiselle. The founder, designers and marketers are female, elite runners and they make running apparel for female, elite runners. This is significantly more specialized than most other athletic brands such as Champion or Under Armour and even the upscale, female-focused Lululemon. Oiselle enjoys the advantage of not having to bridge an empathy gap to win the hearts and wallets of their customer. There is no gap – just empathy. They can trust their own reaction to their products and communications, because they themselves are the target.

Oiselle recognizes that next-bench syndrome works in their favor.

REI: Successfully Evolving Beyond the Next Bench

I’m interested in watching how Oiselle evolves as their business grows and draws more mainstream consumers. This is an exceedingly tricky challenge. One business that has successfully met this kind of challenge is REI. REI employees – from retail to designers to marketers to supply chain managers – tend to be outdoor enthusiasts

and experts. They know their stuff. If you're in the market for cycling shoes, your salesperson could talk for hours about the advantages of clipless pedals. If you need ski goggles, your salesperson will tell you everything you need to know about the tradeoffs of polarized lenses.

But notice that REI salespeople balance their expertise with approachability, earnestness and lack of conceit. They recognize that their target is more nuanced than the hardcore enthusiast. It extends

REI's team of diehard outdoor enthusiasts actively welcome the aspiring outdoor enthusiasts as well as their fellow diehards.

to a group that certainly aspires to that lifestyle, but can't live it as deeply as they'd like. These are folks who may find time to go backpacking just once a year, but want the same level of quality as the person who goes out every weekend. They're people who used to be diehard outdoorsy types but now have children and careers, nostalgically settling for less frequent enjoyment of nature. REI

recognizes the difference, respects it, and consequently bridges the empathy gap.

This recognition is evident in their product design, price point, communications, sales style and store design. Take their flagship store in Seattle, for example. It sports not just a world-class rock-climbing wall, but also a playground for children. You won't find Mountain Hardwear (or any other hardcore outdoor adventure brand) with a children's section, let alone a playground, in their retail stores. Mountain Hardwear people would likely roll their eyes at the suggestion. REI strikes a balance that upholds their outdoorsy expertise while still respecting and delighting their more mainstream customers.

Empathy: The Key to Marketing That Works

All successful marketing has empathy at its core. With an empathetic mindset, marketers can engage all four Ps – product, place, price and promotion – to position and activate their idea with maximum impact. Bridging the empathy gap at each of the four Ps can provide a critical advantage in the marketplace – while neglecting the gap, at any single

P, can easily undermine your entire concept. HP misstepped with their product; TiVo misstepped with their promotion. High-impact marketing engages empathy not just with one P variable, but all four.

Marketing with empathy might be easy when the target is just like you, but the rest of us need to work to recognize and navigate the empathy gap. The most effective marketers leapfrog the Golden Rule (“Do unto others as you would have them do unto you”) and instead live by the marketers’ mantra: “Do unto others as *they* would have you do unto *them*.”



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