



By Richard D. Czerniawski

DEVELOP EMPATHY AND GET REAL!

You can only understand people if you feel them in yourself.
John Steinbeck

I think it is fair to say that we marketers should strive to empathize with our target customers. After all, empathy is about seeing, feeling and understanding what another person is experiencing—from their perspective. It could better lead us to discover legitimate and productive customer insights. This would even include our being able to imagine what someone else is thinking and how they might respond to a new product or planned marketing initiative. Developing empathy could enable us to better serve our target customers with products and services that they would appreciate and prefer. It would help us connect in a profoundly meaningful way to create brand loyalty.

I've heard that reading novels boosts our empathy quotient. Learning about many different characters, the situations they encounter, how they feel about and, more importantly, manage them can provide us with valuable insights into human behavior and broaden our perspectives. However, nothing bolsters our empathy quotient and ability to relate with target customers than expanding our experiences through being and living among them. We need to join their circles, do what they do and how they do it. We need to feel what they feel. The best way that I know how to do it is not by going through reams of research data but joining in with them.

Politicians tell us they feel our pain. Well, do they really? At a breakfast meeting this morning, a friend informed me that a particular politician claimed she hadn't driven a car since the 1990s. Instead, she has been chauffeured everywhere ever since those old days. Additionally, she has someone make up her hair every morning. Hmmmm, how curious. Yet she may very well claim that she feels our pain and is working in our best interest. REALLY? What do politicians know of our interests if they are busy serving their own?

A retired marketer, one whom I've respected and admired for his devotion to better understanding his brand's target customers, used to have mock-ups of packaging for new product ideas made-up for him. He would place the packaging on retail shelves, in the appropriate section of the store, and stand apart where he could observe consumers without calling attention to himself. When consumers approached and reviewed the packaging, he would intercept them, introduce himself, and then ask questions about what drew them to the packaging. What did they think about the product idea? How might he make a product that they would prefer, etc?

I'm currently reading, *AMERICAN SPARTAN – The Promise, The Mission, and The Betrayal of Special Forces Major Jim Gant*. Major Gant was instrumental in the development of the counterinsurgency strategy and operational plans to combat the Taliban in Afghanistan. He believed that the way to bring freedom and peace to the Afghan people was to empower them to deal with the insurgents that terrorized and destroyed their villages and way of life. To achieve this, Major Gant believed the American military needed to gain the trust of the Afghan tribal people. He and his small team embedded themselves in the culture and way of life of the tribes he supported. He and his men dressed like them. Ate what they ate. Slept where they slept and embraced their way of life. Major Gant became a son to a tribal leader and a brother to his adopted father's sons. The author states, "Jim had become more Pashtun than the Pashtuns."

We need to be less like the politicians whose agenda is to promote and care for themselves. Instead, we need to be more like the retired marketer whom I've respected and admired and like Major Jim Gant. If you want to bolster your empathy to anticipate and better serve your target customers, become a member of the tribe. Immerse yourself, and you will come to know them far better than pouring through marketing research.

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