THE POWER OF EMPATHY IN HELPING BRANDS STAY RELEVANT & GROW

THE CONCEPT OF EMPATHY MARKETING is not new. It can be defined as marketing that shows consumers that brands genuinely care about them, but also understand and relate to them. Never has that been more important than in the last 7-8 months as our country has faced a global pandemic. It has had an impact on our families, our economy, our communities, our political climate and our daily life. As marketers, we have never been in such uncharted territory, but many of us have adapted and found ways to continue serving our customers.

HERE AT GEILE/LEON MARKETING COMMUNICATIONS, we have been monitoring the latest research, articles and conversations on how the most successful brands are incorporating a more empathetic approach to their marketing. Interestingly, consumers have been vocal as to their expectations from brands during these crazy times. We were especially interested to learn that if brands can strike a genuinely empathetic approach, consumers indicate they will be loyal to them beyond the pandemic. Brands can truly see a positive impact on their long-term growth and success if they can strike the right balance of empathy and brand messaging in their marketing communications efforts.

OUR BIGGEST TAKEAWAY from the last 7 months is that brands with a genuinely empathetic voice benefit in terms of consumer loyalty, reputation building and, ultimately, market share. Most importantly, they can feel good about themselves for doing the right thing and doing right by their customers. In a recent study by Ipsos conducted in early May on behalf of PepsiCo Beverages North America, 94% of Americans surveyed said that empathy is important to making society work. The study also found that 2 of 3 Americans (68%) agree that how a brand responds to the coronavirus crisis will impact whether they engage with that brand in the future.
RETURN ON EMPATHY™ IS REAL

WE’VE COINED THE PHRASE RETURN ON EMPATHY™, which is defined as both the tangible and intangible benefits brands receive from empathy marketing that’s done right. Additionally, we emphasize the marketing and messaging must be genuine and truly strike an emotional chord with consumers.

THE MOST RECENT DENTSU 2020 CMO SURVEY validates what will concern CMOs most over the next 12 months: shifts in consumer behavior and sentiment.

WITHOUT FURTHER ADO, here’s the case we are making for why marketers should consider Empathy Marketing and truly experience a Return on Empathy. Not only can it have a positive impact both immediately and for the long-term, but I also think we can all agree that empathy is a good thing for ALL of us to practice not just in our marketing, but in our lives!
HERE'S WHAT CONSUMERS ARE SAYING

MEDIA FRENZY GLOBAL & RESEARCH PARTNER ARLINGTON RESEARCH conducted a major study in Q2 2020 of 13,000 consumers worldwide (2500 in the U.S) on what marketers are saying and not saying during the pandemic. Here are some of the U.S. findings that we think are interesting:

13% of U.S. consumers surveyed worry that the businesses who have gone quiet (no news or content being shared) during the pandemic are in financial trouble... in this case no news is...bad news!

45% of those surveyed want to be inspired by brands so they can feel hopeful about the future. This, in turn, will inspire them to spend money with those brands long after the pandemic.

GOING BACK TO THE IPSOS STUDY cited above, these are some other interesting takeaways:

90% of respondents continue to think that brands need to show empathy with actions and not just words, and 86% think that showing empathy is critical to creating greater loyalty.

56% A majority of the respondents feel the most empathetic way a company can communicate is by changing tones and topics in marketing and advertising to directly focus on the crisis.
HERE’S WHAT CONSUMERS ARE SAYING

A recent study from Morning Consult sheds light on how consumers’ attitudes toward certain ad types have evolved during the pandemic.

40% are more likely to purchase as a result of an ad demonstrating how a company’s product or services can be used to combat the spread of coronavirus.

42% of adults are more likely to purchase as a result of an ad demonstrating how a company’s products or services can help improve comfort, happiness, and well-being.

HOW HAVE BRANDS ADDRESSED THIS?
I read an interesting article in the September 2, 2020 issue of Ad Age on how the pandemic is quickening the pace of marketing change at General Mills. They interviewed Brad Hiranaga, Chief Brand Officer for General Mills North America. Sales that typically grow at a low- to mid- single-digit clip at best were seeing double-digit growth in the cereal category and baking ingredient category as consumers were preparing and eating more meals at home during the pandemic. Hiranaga was quoted as saying, “I think we are all much more empathetic and better as marketers to understand those problems. What I think COVID’s done is really accelerated areas that we always knew were important, but now are at the forefront of everything we do.”
BRANDS DOING THE RIGHT THING
— GENERAL MILLS —

A GREAT EXAMPLE OF UNDERSTANDING THE CHALLENGES FACED BY CONSUMERS was the change made to the long-running Box Tops for Education program. In late summer/early fall, the program moved from trimming box tops to an app-based receipt scanning process. But in light of many children learning remotely, marketing that used imagery of kids heading back to the classroom was scrapped. The focus of the program changed to helping kids access the Internet and laptops as they participated in online learning, and efforts included teaming up with Chance the Rapper on a program to support teachers. Check out this Instagram post introducing this effort!

FOR ME, THIS COMMUNICATION FELT AUTHENTIC, TIMELY AND INSPIRATIONAL demonstrating that the Box Top Program remains relevant and empathetic to the challenges education faces during a pandemic.
ANOTHER BRAND, BUDWEISER, LOCATED RIGHT HERE IN THE LOU, had to adjust for a world where sports were effectively canceled. Budweiser repurposed their traditional sports marketing with a campaign that used the names of sports teams (the Warriors, the Giants, the Magic) as descriptions for the real heroes during this pandemic – healthcare workers, first responders and teachers.

I THOUGHT THIS STAYED TRUE TO THE BUDWEISER BRAND and creatively acknowledged that there were more important issues of the day to recognize and honor. And partnering with the Red Cross made it all feel right. They took some of the marketing budget earmarked for sports partnerships and used it to help the Red Cross set up blood donation centers in sports stadiums and arenas throughout the country.
OVER THE PAST FEW MONTHS, we have had a number of clients ask us about interjecting humor in their advertising. Our response to them has been that it is dependent on the category. Making light of the pandemic can be a slippery slope, but it can work for some companies.

FOR EXAMPLE, I think it can work for a candy company. The current campaign by Snickers takes a look at our dependence on video conferencing in a way ALL of us can relate to. It’s something that wouldn’t have been funny 7 months ago, but it is today.
**What You Need to Know to Have Return on Empathy with Your Marketing**

**01 Stay Flexible.** As we see new spikes in the virus and states considering tightening restrictions, you must stay nimble with your communications and messaging. Don’t run those standard “evergreen” campaigns when you know stressed out, worried consumers may need something geared to how they are feeling and coping with these dramatic life changes. To not acknowledge what’s going on in the world and with people can be a real disconnect and can be the difference between a successful marketing campaign and a failure.

**02 Remember No News is....Bad News.** Study after study shows that consumers want you to communicate how your brand is responding to changes in the marketplace. If you are only doing curbside service, tell them. If you are closing a plant for two weeks because of a Covid outbreak, inform them and let them know the plan for shipping product from another location. They want to know what you are doing to make their lives easier during these challenging times.

**03 Actions Speaker Louder than Words.** You need to take action in many cases so customers can see you genuinely care about them right now and are not just focused on the bottom line. Take actions that demonstrate your empathy.

**04 Take Care of Your Employees.** Consumers have made it clear that how companies treat employees is going to be a major factor in their purchase decision. Negative publicity from disgruntled employees can spread quickly as consumers are increasingly hypersensitive to companies mistreating employees.

**05 Be Prepared for the “What If” Scenarios.** The 2020 CMO survey from Dentsu addresses what prepared CMOs are doing to deal with the uncertainty they face.

### Non-Negative Actions

- Launched special COVID communications to customers: 61%
- Deployed listening tools to monitor customer COVID-19 sentiment or trends: 47%
- Developed scenarios for planning purposes: 42%
- Promoted e-commerce offerings: 40%
- Changed customer policies: 40%
- Altered ad creative: 30%

### Negative Actions

- Canceled or postponed customer-facing marketing events: 44%
- Delayed a campaign launch: 41%
- Reduced permanent, temporary & contractor head count: 37%
- Canceled or altered commitments to agencies: 35%
- Paused or canceled any long-term projects: 33%
- Canceled a media buy: 28%
THE CONCLUSION

EMPATHY MARKETING HAS SEEN A RESURGENCE possibly because of the pandemic, but it’s always been a consideration. I believe what we are seeing is the power of brands that show empathy and how their empathy is having a long-term impact on consumer purchase behavior and brand loyalty. Also, I think it is fair to say this empathy shouldn’t be focused just on the pandemic. In 2020, we’ve seen a national discussion regarding racial justice. A July 1, 2020 Marketing Charts article cited a recent Ipsos study that surveyed 1,500 U.S consumers and provided some interesting insights:

17%

Nearly one-fifth reported that one of the top three factors in deciding whether or not to purchase or engage with a brand in this current climate is equality of opportunity across gender and ethnicity.

68%

A majority of respondents want to see brands show empathy to those who suffer from discrimination, while 6 in 10 want brand messaging to educate the community on systemic racism.

BRANDS CAN EXPERIENCE A POSITIVE RETURN ON EMPATHY™, but it requires being aware of what your consumer cares about and understanding the concerns and challenges they face in their everyday lives. Empathy can go a long way in helping your brand grow...

BE MEMORABLE & BE LOVED!
WHO WE ARE

TIM LEON founding partner and President of Geile/Leon Marketing Communications – a brand-driven strategic marketing communications firm located in St. Louis, MO.

G/L serves local, regional and national clients over a spectrum of industries. Their purpose is to help clients solve their biggest brand challenges and to “Make It Mean Something” by emotionally connecting brands to their customers.

WANT TO CHAT?

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OUR SOURCES

IPSOS

Media Frenzy

Media Frenzy

New York Times Online Article

Ad Age (September 2, 2020)

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