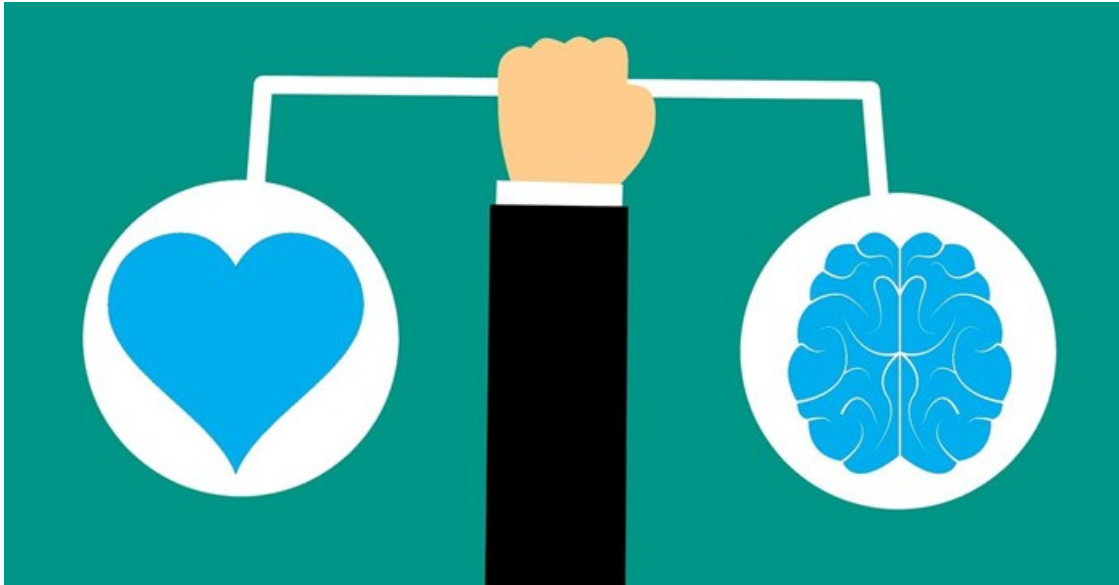


Empathy - a two-way street in customer service

 By Wynand Smit

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It's no secret that personalisation is essential in developing a successful customer experience. Central to that is getting to know all you can about your customer and using that information to drive the interaction.



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One step further is the role empathy plays in these interactions, and that's not just your company driving or encouraging empathetic interactions, it's also guiding your customers into a place where they express empathy towards you and your representatives. If you can get your customers to that place, you're inhabiting an emotionally connected environment that provides the perfect springboard to build and strengthen the personal relevance of your brand to customers.

“ *"Affective empathy involves stepping into another person's emotional state ("I feel your pain"). Cognitive empathy requires a genuine understanding of someone else's condition ("I see what you mean"). Both types have their place in business but the most effective leaders emphasize cognitive over affective empathy". - Theano V. Kalavana* ”

Bots vs. humans in the role of empathy

It's been said that AI isn't effective when it comes to highly emotive and potentially complex interactions – the kinds of interactions that are enhanced by a human touch, but that's not entirely true: AI-driven bots can be developed with empathy as characteristics in their chats. As far-fetched as it may seem, a bot saying "I'm sorry" is all part of taking the conversation to the next level. Ultimately though, engaging with your customers as emotive beings, part of which includes respecting, acknowledging and then truly understanding their feelings, is a great way to reach them as individuals.

Of course, your human contact centre agents can be far better at delivering authentically empathetic service, but this is a skill that doesn't always come naturally to all individuals. Great scripting coupled with poor delivery makes any attempts at empathy sound hollow and false, undermining your efforts. Your customer support team must be capable of both expressing genuine empathy and being able to take the conversation forward to reach a swift resolution.

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The levels to which empathy plays a role depends a lot on the nature of your business. In debt collection, for example, empathy can play a great part in moving the interaction towards resolution, i.e., getting your defaulted customer to commit to paying the debts they've incurred. It's certainly more effective than threatening your previously-loyal customer, as this may impact on your existing relationship and any future business once they've resolved any outstanding debts. It is important to establish an emotional connection to create relevance and to make the customer care enough to commit to payment – a difficult, but an achievable goal with the right training, skills, approach and personnel.

A personalised, human approach

In a more rigid setting such as legal advice, empathy can help to reduce the robotic, contract-driven interaction and allow contact centre agents to engage in a more conversational way, while ensuring that all of the legal compliance boxes are ticked along the way.

As stated, affective empathy can be helpful in some interactions, but it can also be a stumbling block to achieving cognitive empathy when it comes to achieving business strategy. The warm, fuzzy feelings are not your entire goal – they're a meaningful means to an end that is not designed to be cynical, but practical and productive.

In terms of customer experience, adopting a personalised, human approach in customer service will allow your customers to view your brand in the same way: if they feel like they're being treated as humans, they'll be more likely to reflect empathy back at you rather than taking an adversarial position when interacting.

Ultimately, empathy can translate to fantastic CX and resultant marketing opportunities via word-of-mouth referrals and positive brand sentiment that delivers long-term value.

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- Wynand Smit is CEO at INOVO, a leading contact centre business solutions provider.
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