

Is brand empathy crisis-proof?

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Empathy is not an emotional response to a global crisis. It is a strategy that enables you to bring meaning to your brand and the people who give you permission to exist. Why then are so many brands lacking empathy?



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Empathy is not for show and tell

Empathy is often seen as one of those last resort tools, usually hauled out in response to a humanitarian crisis. Houses burn to the ground and suddenly every brand is saying ‘we need to show empathy’. A tsunami hits another part of the world and you can bet every brand is out there ‘showing empathy’. But true empathy is not a ‘show and tell’ emotion you bring out to demonstrate to your customers that you have a heart.

Empathy is not even a shortcut to understanding what your customers feel. You must walk a mile in their shoes to experience it. By that logic, it needs a business strategy to enable it, as much as an intention to drive it. And while most of us are comfortable applying empathy in our personal lives, we stop short of bringing it into the workplace or making it the foundation on which our businesses are built. That is, until a pandemic like Covid-19 comes along and forces us to rethink, relook and remember the value empathy can bring to every brand.

What Covid-19 is teaching us about brand empathy

The reality of a crisis like Covid-19, is that the foundations on which our economies, industries and societies are built are shifting like a tectonic plate, and suddenly we find ourselves staring into the ever-widening abyss, wondering what is missing and how we can bridge the gap between what we once did and what we could do better.

That’s when we suddenly remember empathy – the ability to experience and understand the world from a different perspective. And when that perspective belongs to your customers, colleagues and employees, there is suddenly a lot to be gained from walking that extra empathetic mile.

Brand empathy is not some *wishy-washy* sentiment or hashtag you tag onto your latest advertising campaign. In fact, brand empathy is not an emotion so much as an action. It might start with brands telling stakeholders that it knows how they're feeling right now because we're 'stronger together'. But if brand empathy starts and ends with a pithy slogan, it's just clever advertising, it's not empathy. Because it's the intention, more than the action, that drives and enables empathy to be a sustainable strategic driver in any business.

Brand empathy is an intention, not a reaction

In times of crisis, we expect brands to step up and give back to their communities. That's just good business practice. So most customers expect, if not demand, that brands get behind food drives and partner with poverty alleviation initiatives driven by NGOs and Community Action Networks (CANs).

What customers and employees don't expect, are actions born and driven from a real sense of understanding what they're going through. Actions that cut to the bone and align with the core purpose of your business and the meaning that your customers/ employees derive from your products and services.

In the Covid-19 context, empathy is the banks giving payment holidays and waiving bank fees and penalties. It's insurance companies reducing premiums because they know their customers are taking 30% pay cuts or losing jobs. It's the landlords offering rental reductions to tenants whose supply chains have all but shut down. And in addition to 'doing the right thing', these changes and relief breaks add up to big credits for brand loyalty in the long term.

Here are just a few shining South African examples...

Nothing says empathy better than offering someone a safe haven. We love that [Investec](#) has partnered with Capital Hotels and Apartments as part of the Get Well Hotel initiative, making hotel rooms available to their medical professional clients so they can self-isolate or recover from Covid-19 without putting their loved ones at risk.

Another brand showing empathy for the people in its extended industry is Pernod Ricard South Africa. Through its [#KeepTheSpirit initiative](#), the group has committed R2m to help support nearly 1,000 bartenders and waitrons who can't work or support themselves during this time.



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For food retailers, it's only natural to support food security in a time of crisis. And support it our retailers are. But the ones that stand out are the ones that are asking deeper, empathetic questions about the mental health of their employees and the ability of their customers to be part of the solution instead of simply hiding out.

[Shoprite](#) is a good example. They recognised the enormous stress their employees went through in the lead up to lockdown, when South Africans were flooding the stores in a wave of panic buying. In April 2020, they rewarded their staff with an 'appreciation bonus' to the collective value of R102m.

Being owner-managed, Spar retailers know firsthand what it's like to be a struggling small business owner. Small businesses that aren't deemed 'essential services' are walking the fine line between holding out and closing down. So, an act of empathy is much needed. Leading the charge is [Spar Palm Grove](#). The store recently closed its stationery and frozen burger sections, putting up signs to encourage its customers to support the small businesses in the area who are open and selling these very products. Now that's real empathy.

Empathy is the future forward

Gone are the days when empathy was just an emotional response to a 'temporary' crisis that would fall away when everything returned to 'normal'.

Empathy is about understanding that meaning and purpose-led behaviours both enable and enhance personal and community wellbeing. And that both are in a business's short- and long-term interests.

The best time to implement empathy across your business is right now, before the tectonic plates realign and you're stuck with the same old cracks in a brand-new system.

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