



Building
empathy
for deeper
INSIGHTS



Written by
Tommy Stinson
EVP, Insights



Have you ever wondered why supermarkets and pharmacy chains sell sympathy cards and not empathy cards?

A review of recent literature seems to indicate that empathy would be a better way to comfort someone in dealing with difficulty. And our experience uncovering insights for our clients points to empathy as the more insightful, helpful, and human avenue to understanding others.

Merriam WEBSTER

defines **sympathy** as,

“an affinity, association, or relationship between persons or things wherein whatever affects one similarly affects the other.”

At Ahzul we think of sympathy as akin to researchers or stakeholders hearing about someone's experience, putting themselves (temporarily) “in their shoes”, and quickly jumping to decisions based on what the outsider thinks will meet the consumers' needs. Notice that this is all about “us” and “them”; sympathy is two parties affected, individually, with little real engagement between the two.

Contrasting the isolated understanding that underpins sympathy, our experience shows that **empathy** creates a deeper connection that truly understands others' experiences in their own terms, with others' own frameworks and cognitive structures. Brené Brown helpfully and insightfully defines empathy as,

“an emotional skill set that allows us to understand what someone is experiencing and to reflect back that understanding.”¹

The key words here are “emotional”, “understand”, and “reflect”.

¹ Brené Brown (2021). Atlas of the Heart: Mapping Meaningful Connection and the Language of Human Experience. Random House.

At ahzul, we believe that

empathic consumer understanding

is at the heart of any effective strategic decision. We advocate empathy in every encounter with consumers – it's the basis for insight truly deep enough to provoke decisive action and lasting strategies. Yet, at the same time, we recognize how easy it is to fall into the trap of settling for **sympathetic** understanding, yielding easy answers but insufficient insight.

Getting it right has a material impact on our clients' businesses and their long-term prospects, from product design and development to marketing and long-term customer relationships.

There are three primary pillars of empathy that make it the foundation for each and every engagement we undertake. And these point to exactly why we believe that sympathy simply falls short.

1

Sympathy is me-centered; **empathy is other-centered.**

Sympathetic understanding is based on evaluating others' experiences and, in turn, responding from a place of detached self-awareness. This means that, when researchers take a sympathetic approach, they aren't truly user or customer focused. By focusing on empathic understanding, however, we are rigorous in putting aside our experiences and comparisons and fully focus on the other, learning more about them and the foundational needs, experiences, and ways of seeing the world that make them unique.

2

Sympathy is based on an agenda; **empathy forces us to suspend our agendas.**

Researchers often settle for a sympathetic understanding when they think their questions have been answered. They tend to begin with an inflexible pre-defined definition of the problem and then conduct research to solve that problem – whether it's the actual issue or not. When we incorporate empathic approaches, however, we have the flexibility, openness, and humanity to let people share stories without constraint and to remain open to unexpected aspects of their experiences. Often, this is fertile ground for novel insights and, in turn, recommendations and strategies that better address consumers' needs – and set up our clients for better long-term success.

3

Sympathy imagines how others feel; **empathy truly understands.**

Research is fundamentally sympathetic when a researcher stops listening to participants and, instead, imagines themselves as the star of the story. This imagining gets in the way of real listening, missing an important opportunity to reach deeper insight. This leads to solution design that gives primacy to that researcher's experience rather than designing for the consumer.

Empathy is difficult, but necessary to create a solid foundation for strategic decisions. **At Ahzul, we help facilitate an empathetic mindset for ourselves and our clients by doing the following:**

a

Allow for – and seek out - emotion.

Moving beyond the 'what' to the 'why' and the attending feelings can help us to better understand each person's story, beyond what our own experiences have led us to expect to hear or encounter. We use projective techniques such as free association or blob trees that give participants tools (and permission) to speak more honestly and transparently.

b

Build in time to truly listen and create openness to the unexpected.

Empathy takes time – it requires real listening, paying deep attention to what's said and unsaid. It requires that we allow people to tell their stories at their pace. We intentionally build "listen" time into discussion guides and research time, avoiding the tendency to pack interview slots so full that no time remains for flexibility or lingering over a topic.

c

Suspend our agendas and maintain vulnerable openness.

Business needs require that we approach fieldwork with a top-down, bottom-up mindset; we design research based on assumptions and go into fieldwork with hypotheses. But executing that work well means that we hold those structures lightly, actively working to make sure that they don't introduce bias and create sympathy rather than empathy. Suspending agendas and facilitating openness is fundamental to how we achieve empathic understanding.

We've **written before** that the insights industry – especially qualitative – can be a positive force for change in our collective discourse. Digging deeper to reach an empathic understanding is crucial to making this a reality. Where we **empathically understand** each other we find greater tolerance and deeper connections. At its core, we believe empathic research is a stronger foundation for a consumer understanding that inspires informed action and sound strategies.

Want to learn more about strategies *for getting to a truly empathetic* understanding of your audiences? **We d'love to chat!**

Written by

Tommy Stinson
EVP, Insights



Contact

Miguel Gomez Winnebrenner
Principal
312.860.3191
miguel@ahzul.com

www.ahzul.com