

SUMMARY

WIRED TO CARE

DEV PATNAIK AND PETER MORTENSEN



Summary of “Wired to Care” by Dev Patnaik and Peter Mortensen

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Learn how companies prosper by creating
widespread empathy.

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Introduction

For three years, a young designer named Pattie Moore woke up each morning and turned herself into an eighty-five-year-old woman. She strapped herself in a body brace to keep her shoulders hunched forward, she hid her auburn hair under a white wig and painted her eyelashes gray. She even plugged her ears so she couldn't hear and put on horn-rimmed glasses that blurred her vision. After transforming herself into a woman more than three times her actual age, Pattie would then walk out into the world, ready to experience life from a new perspective. Why would she do this? It was during a brainstorming session about the design of a new refrigerator that Pattie realized that products fail to accommodate the elderly and frail. She remembers her own grandmother struggling to do basic tasks, like opening a carton of milk or even pulling a refrigerator door open. Now, she had the chance to design a new fridge and she wondered if there was a way she could help other people's grandmothers continue to cook as they got older. The other designers stared at her blankly. One shrugged and simply stated, "We don't design for those people." At that moment, Pattie decided to change the trajectory of her career.

She realized that society had little empathy for the elderly, so over the next three years, Pattie conducted her experiment in more than a hundred cities throughout the United States and Canada. Her experience revealed that the world is not designed for eighty-five-year-olds. Everyday tasks like opening doors and boarding a bus were daunting and difficult. It was because of her work that companies like Boeing, Merck, and Toyota developed new offerings and differentiated their products. As it turns out, marketing to the elderly makes life easier for everyone, young and old. Through her work, Pattie Moore made life more livable for people all over the world. But she revealed an even more important lesson: "People discover unseen opportunities when they have a personal and empathic connection with the world around them." Throughout *Wired to Care*, you'll see exactly why creating an empathic connection with your customers is the key to success,

and you'll see how the biggest companies in the world have launched their success simply through the act of caring.

Hire your Customers and Put Yourself in Their Shoes

When it comes to having empathy, the simplest way to begin is to be like other people. In other words, girls have an easier time understanding other girls while boys find it easier to understand other boys. Simple, right? So how can this work in a business? For companies, the quickest way to gain empathy is to hire your customers. That's exactly what Harley-Davidson did, and the empathy starts as soon as you arrive in the parking lot.

When it comes to parking, the way a parking lot is organized can say a lot about the company's hierarchy, its values, and how it sees the world. You see, most companies designate the first row of parking for the highest executives and reserve the best spots for senior management. At Harley-Davidson's headquarters in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, a posted metal sign states, "No cages. Motorcycle parking only." For those who don't understand motorcycle slang, cages are what riders call automobiles that lock people away from the wide, open world. So if you just pulled up to the headquarters in that Ford Taurus you just rented at the airport, you're welcome to park in the back of the lot!

The parking lot at Harley-Davidson then sets the tone for the rest of the experience. As you walk through the office, you'll find shrines of motorcycle culture: endless displays of photos, signs, exquisitely painted motorcycle gas tanks, snapshots of employees' recent bike rides, banners from rallies, etc. You'll notice that everyone sports T-shirts and vests emblazoned with logos and that the employees fully embrace the Harley lifestyle. It's important to note, however, that riding a motorcycle is not a requirement for employees at Harley-Davidson. In fact, many don't. This goes to show how well the company has instilled its values to all employees, even those who have never ridden a bike! So while Harley hires its customers, the empathy doesn't stop there. "Riders must have empathy with nonriders and vice versa. Cages are as unwelcome in Harley-Davidson's business philosophy as they are in the parking lot."

Between 1986 and 2006 when American companies were losing billions of dollars and laying off employees, Harley was enjoying growth in ways they had never seen before. The main reason? Harley made widespread empathy a key element of corporate strategy. Before that, Harley-Davidson was on the verge of bankruptcy as Japanese competitors introduced cheaper, lighter models that completely dismantled the market. In response, Harley transformed itself into an icon of American freedom. The empathy that Harley employees had for their riders helped them make better decisions every day, each one helping their customers in new ways. Soon, Harley was commercializing new opportunities faster than anyone else and creating customer loyalty that other organizations envied.

When companies like Harley-Davidson create widespread empathy, they begin to blur the lines between producers and consumers. They erode the “us vs. them” mentality. As Lara Lee, Harley’s former head of services stated, “We don’t spend a lot of time talking about ‘what customers want.’ So far as we’re concerned, we are them and they are us.” In other words, creating an empathic connection with your customers can have profound effects on a company, more than just increasing its growth rate. It can give new meaning to the work that people do and improve a person’s quality of life. Perhaps that’s the greatest reward of all.

The Golden Rule

You've heard about the Golden Rule of life: Do unto others as you would have done to you. Well, it's time to use the golden rule in business as well. In the mid-1990s, one of the largest companies on the planet was about to release a radical new product that would take their business to a whole new level. At the time, the game console business was beginning to take off and companies like Atari and Nintendo were quickly building a fan base. Sony, however, was readying itself to launch the PlayStation 2 which would become more than just a console.

The PS2 was a high-powered entertainment console that would do more than just allow its users to play video games. It was also capable of playing DVD movies, importing digital video, and connecting to the internet. It was this invention that forced Microsoft to act quickly. In comparison to Sony, Microsoft had little experience in designing and selling hardware and they wouldn't be able to release their console until late 2001. By then, the PS2 would likely be in about 10 million households. So Microsoft was prepared to spend billions of dollars; more importantly, they recognized that they needed the help of engineers, designers, and marketers to help them create the ultimate game console.

The developers decided to try something new. Unlike Nintendo and Sony, Microsoft wasn't going to build a console for everyone, their console wouldn't be marketed towards "prepubescent moppets" who "play with magic mushrooms and fairy princesses who needed to be rescued." Instead, they were going to create a game system that would become "playable versions of action movies, with testosterone-fueled experiences that were even more immersive than any summer blockbuster." Microsoft was going to create a machine for hardcore gamers, "hardcore gamers who loved to kick some ass. Guys who spent hours playing intense, complicated, and sometimes violent computer games that got their blood rushing. Guys like... themselves"

Just two years later, Microsoft launched the Xbox and its signature game *Halo*, a first-person shooter game that starred a masked hero who traveled across galaxies and fought aliens. Xbox became an overnight sensation, selling more than 5 million copies of *Halo*, making it a top-selling title of its generation. Eventually, Microsoft launched its next version, the Xbox 360, which outpaced Sony's Playstation 3 by a margin of two to one. The Xbox was so successful that Microsoft used the same developers to create a product to rival Apple's iPod: the Zune. A thicker iPod, the Zune also had a complicated interface and wasn't designed for anyone in particular.

The Zune managed to sell 2 million units while Apple sold more than 84 million iPods during that same period. So why were they so successful at creating the Xbox but not the Zune? The main factor was empathy. One member stated, "The biggest challenge with Zune was trying to figure out who we were building it for. With Xbox, we knew those guys. Hell, we *were* those guys." If a company wants to thrive over the long term, they need to step outside and discover what is happening around the world; they need to see the world through other people's eyes. "People are wired to care. Organizations need to be wired to care, as well. When that happens, the effects of empathy can be profound. Companies prosper. Communities thrive. And we all have a better day at work."

Become an Open Empathy Organization

Everyday companies have to make important product decisions. They ask questions like, “*What’s going to sell?*” and “*What do people want?*” To answer these questions, businesses turn to statistics and reports that predict what customers are looking for. In fact, in the business world, reducing information into chunks of data is quite common. Unfortunately, these companies are missing something important: their connection to customers. Instead, meetings should be more than just discussing numbers and marketing trends. They should show empathy.

One of the best examples of this was when Disney first proposed the idea of creating an animal kingdom theme park. At first, the company was uninterested and the “numbers” showed that the park would unlikely make a profit. To prove the numbers wrong, executive Joe Rohde went to drastic measures to create empathy. At the meeting, Rohde brought a Bengal tiger to show Disney executives the true appeal of wild animals. Immediately, the project got approved. When the park finally opened, it quickly became the most popular in the country and it now draws in over 8.9 million visitors a year.

As you can see, the rewards of becoming an empathic organization can be great. In today’s world, however, businesses rely heavily on quantitative data which can make empathic innovation more difficult than ever. Luckily, there are three tips for creating an innovation culture of widespread empathy. The first step is to make it easy. Provide lightweight methods for people in your company to connect with the outside world. For instance, Target executives walk through and shop at a Target store at the HQ premises. Netflix also does this by giving its employees a free DVD player and subscription to the service. Therefore, not only do they become employees when hired, but they also become customers who use the product. As they use the service, they discover what they love about it while also looking for potential improvements.

The second tip is to make it every day. Surround your work environment with information about the lives of your customers. This can be seen at Nike. Rather than relying on numbers to tell them what customers want, Nike provides basketball courts, soccer fields, and running tracks for their staff to use. Instead of a typical work environment, Nike has created a training center so employees can truly get into the mindset of their customers.

The last tip for empathic innovation is to make it experiential. Stop relying on insight from PowerPoints and go feel what other people are feeling. IBM did this with its “Operation Bear Hug” in which top executives regularly interacted with top clients to feel what it was like to be an IBM customer. Pixar also did this when they sent a producer of the Ratatouille movie to work under French Laundry chef, Thomas Keller, to get a feeling for what it is like to work in a kitchen.

Sometimes connecting with customers requires a bit more creativity. For example, Nike decided to enter the Japanese market. However, before doing so, they made sure to visit the country and take in what Japanese teenagers were doing. Everything from what they were watching to how they were spending their time. Upon returning to the U.S., they recreated Japanese teenagers’ bedrooms. They decorated them with posters and played popular Japanese television programs. Each employee was then able to immerse themselves in the Japanese culture to truly get a feeling for what the Japanese market would want. In the end, their creative approach paid off. Nike has become one of the few U.S. companies to become successful in Japan.

Reframe your Customer's Perspectives

If you live in the United States, you know what it's like to walk in any store at the beginning of August. As 70 million students gear up for school, stores are bombarding their customers with Back to School sales. No matter where you go, K-Mart, Wal-Mart, or Dollar General, you find the same scene. The shelves are stacked high with notebooks, pencils, and backpacks. With students ranging from five-year-olds to eighteen-year-olds, retailers play it safe for fear of excluding a particular group. In other words, it's just easier to sell the same things as everyone else.

Back to School sales have been the same for as long as anyone can remember. However, it was Target who decided they needed to stand out from the crowd. While they typically enjoyed success during Back to School sales, they wanted to take things to a new level. Instead of launching a few cool products or doing a fun advertising campaign, Target created an entirely new approach. They wanted to reframe the customer's perspective, so they focused on a key time of transition. When people get married, have a baby, move to a new house, or even get a new dog, their lives can get a bit crazy which makes them more open to trying new things. For Back to School, this meant Target needed to learn more about kids who were going off to college for the first time.

Target's team spent weeks hanging out with families of kids going off to college, they spent time in their homes, went shopping for college, and simply followed them around in the course of their daily lives. Through this experiment, the Target team learned something incredibly important: going off to college is an ongoing conversation. Sometimes it even became a debate as families began buying things for a life they hadn't yet lived. Parents are far removed from college life, if they ever went at all, making the shopping process ambiguous and stressful for first-timers. Target realized they had the opportunity to be part of the conversation, they had the chance to paint a picture of college life for college kids.

As kids are transitioning to a new life, many anxieties come with wondering if they are prepared or not. So Target created laundry bags with washing instructions printed on the inside label, that way, students who had never done laundry could discretely learn how without anyone else noticing their incompetence. Similarly, they took all the kitchen tools that any student would need, from pots and pans to knives and forks and created a “Kitchen in a Box.” In the first year of the program, 2002, Target’s third-quarter revenue increased by 12 percent. At the end of the day, Target understands that customers are looking for more than just products, they are looking for confidence in stepping into a new life.

While Target reframed their empathy, other companies reframed the way they solved and understood the problems of their customers. In the mid-1980s, Kodak was facing increasing competition from Japanese companies who were providing increasingly cheaper products, including film. At the time, Kodak believed that its customers perceived them as a film company and aimed to solve their customer’s film problems. However, they soon realized that their customers saw them not as a film company, but as a photography company. This realization allowed Kodak to market itself as a company that could help its customers capture memories, so they launched the disposable camera. The product was a huge success and it all started by reframing their perspective.

Empathy Can Make You Want to Go to Work

In a world where we have had incredible leaders like Gandhi and Mother Theresa to change the world, it's hard to believe that something as simple as a cleaning product can impact the lives of others. Many companies in these "low-interest categories" agree. They believe that customers will buy their products regardless since everyone needs a clean home, right? So these companies believe they can't possibly do anything to make the product better. However, the idea of a low-interest category is simply a myth. All it takes is a change in perspective and an empathic connection!

Imagine the following scene. A comfortable, middle-class living room in the suburbs outside Chicago. Seated around the coffee table are John and Christie, a married couple in their late 30s, along with their teenage sons Brian and Shaun. Christie explains how she needs help cleaning around the house but is only met with snickers and rolling eyes from her sons. Meanwhile, her husband does nothing to help the situation. The scene is uncomfortable to watch. Christie, the mother, is clearly feeling the weight of the household chores and feels underappreciated for everything she does. However, the scene is not entirely out of the ordinary. Many mothers around the world feel the same way. Here's where the Clorox company stepped in.

Household chores, like cleaning, are underappreciated. Moms do them every day but they rarely receive something as simple as a "thanks." Therefore, Clorox realized that Moms like Christie didn't need a new lemon-scented cleaning product, they just needed a little acknowledgment. They needed to know that someone, somewhere, cares. So Clorox created a strategy for how they were going to care for the caregivers, they wanted to create brand messages that empathized with what moms go through. They also created products that not only cleaned the bathroom but turned mom into a hero.

Eventually, Clorox launched the Green Works line of products that were made from substances like coconut oil, lemon juice, and corn alcohol. They wanted moms to trust the products they cleaned their homes with and trust that they weren't exposing their children to noxious chemicals. In other words, Green Works considered the entire perspective of caring for a family, from hygiene to personal health. Now everyone in the company, including managers, chemists, packaging designers, and marketers at Clorox have a clear picture of who they really work for. Simply put, "Clorox is an organization that's working hard to care for the moms who work hard to care for their families."

When executives at Clorox saw the impact their cleaning products had on millions of mothers across the country, many were moved to tears. They began to feel the importance of their job, even though they originally believed they were just an ordinary cleaning company. This empathic connection with their customers allowed employees of Clorox to feel what their customers felt and believe that what they did at work made a difference.

Final Summary

Today, business is more than just crunching numbers and reducing your customers to a simple excel sheet. It's about creating an empathic connection with your customers and putting yourself in their shoes. When you can experience the real needs and problems that your customers go through, you're able to open yourself up to an entirely new perspective. This perspective then allows you to create products and market them more effectively and successfully. And the easiest way to create empathy is to hire your customers. When your customers become employees, they are more likely to understand what the people truly want. This can be seen in organizations like Harley-Davidson and Microsoft who created a culture around the hobbies they enjoy most: motorcycles and video games. On the other hand, when you fail to put yourself in your customer's shoes, you fail to create what they really want. Instead, become wired to care, and you'll find success in more ways than one.



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