Empathy: The Currency of Human Connection and Innovation

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GUEST POST from Soren Kaplan

Having worked with innovation teams from global companies like Visa, Colgate-Palmolive, Kimberly-Clark, Disney, Medtronic and many others, there's one consistent success factor when it comes to innovation, no matter what you're doing: it all starts with the customer.

Companies spend oodles of time and money trying to understand customers. They conduct surveys, hire market researchers, run focus groups, analyze social media, and the list goes on. What's often missed, however, are customers' deeper needs and underlying pain points that really matter to them. Quantitative surveys, for example, might give you a sense of a market's overall sentiment about a topic, but you won't get to know someone's personal struggles and underlying motivations from checkboxes on an online form.

Instead, you need to truly put yourself in the customer's shoes. It's not just about intellectually understanding their situation. It's about tapping into the emotions they feel, and even feeling them yourself as part of the process of connecting to their experience.

Empathy Reveals New Opportunities

I recently led a leadership development program for a large health care provider with hundreds of hospitals. They wanted to understand their patients better, so they could come up with innovations to help them stay healthy and avoid costly visits to the doctor and hospital. Initially, the team had ideas to provide promotional materials on how to eat healthier and exercise.

As part of the process, a small team went to visit patients at their homes in rural areas. At one house, they discovered a giant water tank had been built by a company that towered over their patient's home–and it was slowly dripping water on the roof, creating a whole variety of problems, including causing the beginnings of respiratory issues for the woman living in the house due to mold. The team was shocked.
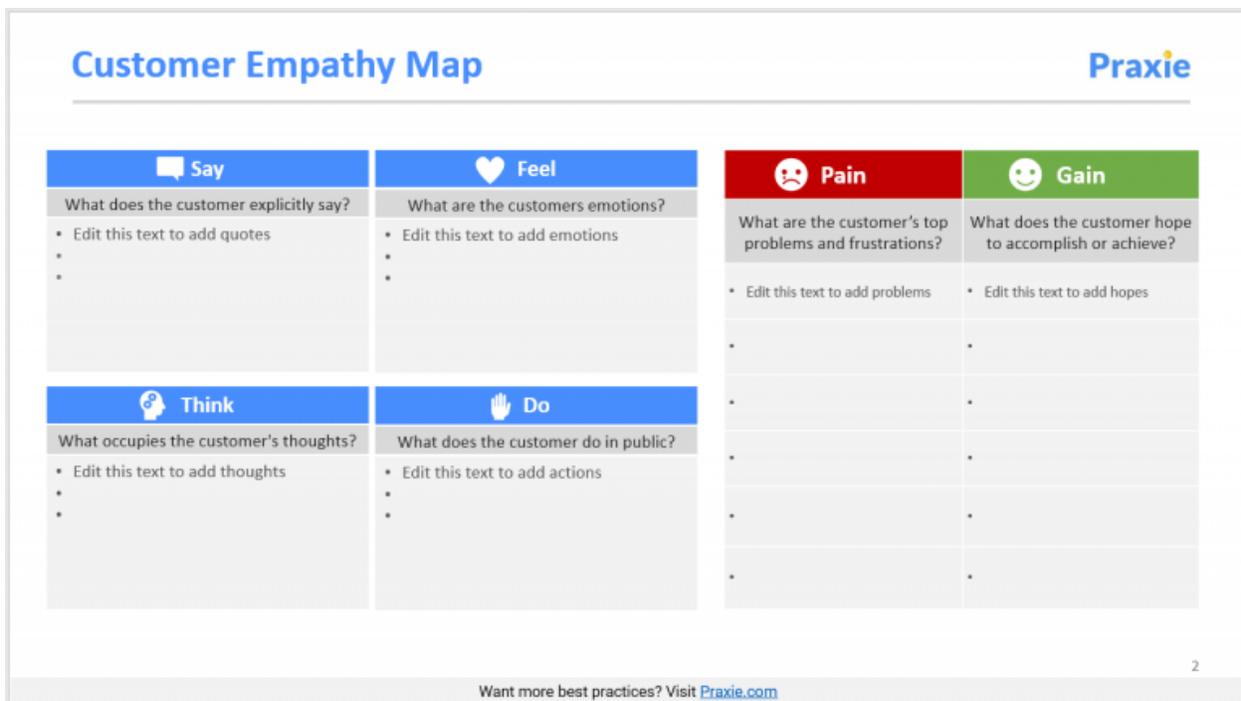
The team realized that pamphlets about healthy eating and exercise wouldn't do much to help. They also recognized that in certain cases they might need to provide radically different types of support to their patients as part of ensuring their overall health, beyond just providing traditional health care. They helped the woman contact the water tank company to fix the leak. They have also since expanded their approach around prevention to address

various "social determinants of health" in communities like poor quality water, lack of healthy food, and other issues that lead to health issues long before someone shows symptoms of a formal medical issue.

Immersing yourself in the world of your customers through visits, observation, interviews, and other interactions can provide a new perspective around issues, problems, and assumptions.

Capture Concrete Observations

Empathy is a core element of "design thinking," a common approach used for product and service innovation. It's also a concept that can be hard to understand when it comes to translating what you might see and hear into something meaningful about the customer. Here's a template for doing just that from Praxie.com.

The next time you connect with a customer, consider the following to help capture concrete observations:

- **Say:** What does the customer explicitly say?
- **Feel:** What are the customer's emotions?
- **Think:** What occupies the customer's thoughts?
- **Do:** What does the customer do in public?

By providing a structure for cataloguing your observations, you can turn what might seem as ambiguous into something tangible.

Turn Observations into Insight

It's one thing to observe customers. It's another to translate what you observe into real insights that help catalyze new ideas.

Once you've cataloged your observations, take a step back. Consider the ultimate "pain points" that your customer experiences. What are the customer's top problems or frustrations? Also be sure to consider the "gain" the customer hopes to achieve. What does the customer hope to accomplish or achieve?

Answering these questions helps move general observations into insights that can be used as the basis for generating new ideas.

Give the World Your Empathy

Empathy is the currency of human connection. We all crave it. And when we give it to others, we build and deepen relationships. Try empathizing with others. You'll see the returns in the form of a better world, and greater innovation.

Image credits: Praxie.com, Pexels

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