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CUSTOMERS

Putting Yourself in the Customer's Shoes Doesn't Work: An Interview with Johannes Hattula

by Scott Berinato

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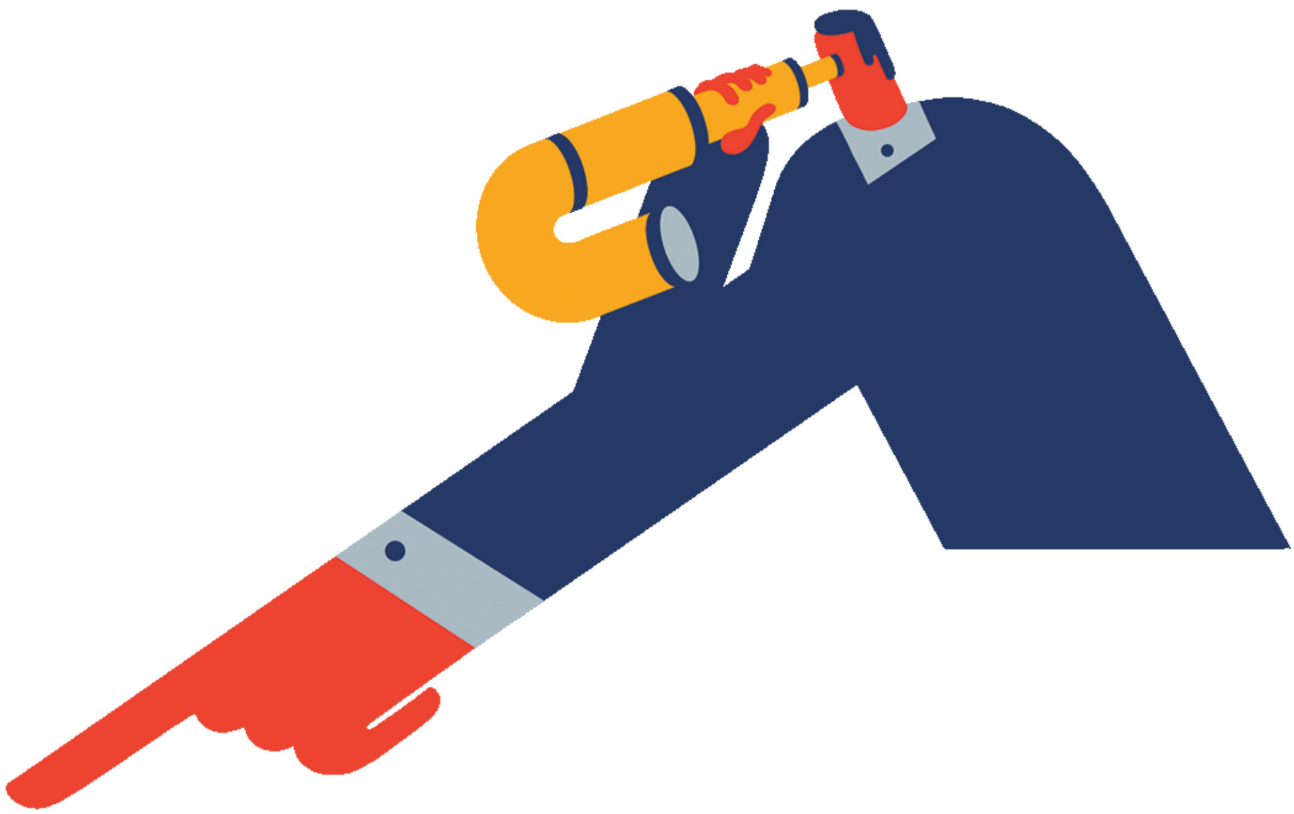

MÁGOZ

The research: In a battery of experiments, Imperial College's Johannes Hattula and his coresearchers Walter Herzog, Darren Dahl, and Sven Reinecke interviewed marketing managers about their personal preferences for a selected product or service. The researchers then primed some managers to be empathetic by having them describe a typical customer of the offering and imagine that person's thoughts and reactions. All managers were asked to predict customers' desires and took a survey assessing empathy levels. The more empathetic managers were, the more “egocentric” they became; that is, the more likely they were to say that the customers’ preferences were the same as their own.

The challenge: Is attempting to instill empathy with customers pointless? Will we always think customers want what we want? **Professor Hattula, defend your research.**

Hattula: The effect was consistent. The more empathetic managers were, the more they used their personal preferences to predict what customers would want. Another key finding that should get people’s attention is that the more empathetic the managers were, the more they ignored the market research on customers that we provided them.

HBR: What kind of customer preferences did you focus on?

In one experiment we asked managers to develop a new car model and choose the features customers wanted. In another we had them decide on a new ad campaign for Rolex. In a third they were asked to set the price for a sandwich at a café. In every case, predictions about what customers wanted matched the managers’ personal preferences more closely when the managers had been primed to be more empathetic.

They were projecting?

Yes, even when the customers were totally different from themselves. In the sandwich experiment, for instance, the customers were students. Completely different people, but the managers still projected their own preferences onto them.

But they had objective market data that showed otherwise? Why were they willfully ignoring that?

We find that empathy activates the managers’ own consumer identities and thus their personal consumption preferences. When we ask them to imagine customers buying sandwiches at a café, they visualize themselves walking into the store and looking at their options and what they might pay. Once that image is activated, it’s a very strong force and influences subsequent decisions.

So we’re basically self-centered to a fault.

Yes. The term we use is “egocentric.” That tendency is so strong that we’re willing to ignore objective data when we make predictions about others.

What does this tell us about qualitative research and the general idea of creating a customer orientation?

There's a lot of literature that says we should focus on customers and put ourselves in their shoes. It's assumed that when you're empathetic, that's good. You know your customer. We questioned this entire idea, and the results suggest that we have to think more carefully about this empathy approach, because it can backfire.

But what if the empathetic managers were both egocentric and right?

That would be possible only if, first, the objective market research was flawed and, second, the managers' own preferences perfectly represented the customers' preferences. We think that such a situation is very unlikely.

Would the same effect be present between executives and their employees? If a CEO is trying to put herself in her managers' shoes, is she going to get it wrong?

We haven't yet studied that, but probably yes. Marketers are also consumers, and that's what makes this activation of their own consumer identity so strong. Similarly, most executives are also workers with bosses, so if we prime them to try to empathize with their employees, they're going to freight their perspective with their own experiences.

What if I were out in the real world, though, where my marketing decisions have real consequences? Would I be more likely to pick up that market data knowing my performance would be evaluated, knowing I might lose my job if I made bad decisions?

One thing from our research that should show how strong the effect is was that no matter how seasoned the marketers were, they behaved the same way. Marketing managers with decades of experience ignored the objective research just as much as young managers with only a few years' experience. We'd have to study the real-world situation more carefully, but the empathy effect is clear.

Is it possible that the managers just misinterpreted the data?

We've all seen before how managers can frame data to fit their narratives. They will find the data that supports their egocentric view if they can. Putting themselves in the customer's shoes may make that worse.

Can we overcome this? Is there a way to reconcile empathy and egocentricity?

We think so! In another experiment we seemed to mitigate the effect simply by making people aware of their bias. In this case we asked managers to decide if a video-game company should sign an endorsement deal with the soccer player Cristiano Ronaldo. Managers we didn't remind of the bias behaved just like the primed subjects in the other studies: Empathizing with customers increased their egocentric preference predictions. However, managers who were made aware of the bias were able to check it.

Is there anything else we can do?

We wonder about team decision making. We studied individuals making a decision. But a group approach could be one way to reduce the effect. With a group you would get different, perhaps opposing opinions and realize that you were predisposed to think about yourself just from hearing others talk about experiences that are different from yours. In a group you would bring up why one person was thinking one way and others another way. Warren Buffett is doing this, for example. When his fund has a meeting he invites in people with completely different opinions about the investment strategy. He creates disconfirming opinions. This could be a way to overcome this empathy-egocentricity problem.

Now I'm thinking about HBR readers, and I predict they will love this interview.

You would.

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Scott Berinato is a senior editor at *Harvard Business Review* and the author of *Good Charts: The HBR Guide to Making Smarter, More Persuasive Data Visualizations*, forthcoming from Harvard Business Review Press and available for pre-order now.

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Prashanth Sachin a year ago

Putting yourself in customer shoes doesnt work always....but then you need to find an opportunity to find the need of the customer.....you may think in the view of customer....

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