

Bringing people together

Insight is being used to bring the whole picture of humanity – with all its multifaceted, real, messy perspectives – to businesses. Rob Gray reports

Data capture, data science, datapoints, data crunching, analytics. Data is at the heart of corporate life, of what we do at work. Often a sea of data. But what about, to use Professor Brené Brown's famous phrase, 'data with a soul'? What about the human dimension? Shouldn't people and their stories be at the heart of the matter?

The lines are blurring in life – there is less of a distinction between our roles as employees, friends, partners or parents. On top of that, individuals are not only consumers of brands and products, but also of culture, media, trends and natural resources. Meanwhile, business leaders cannot afford to operate in silos, or take a blinkered approach, given the many challenges they face, from market-disrupting competitors to shifting customer demands and wider geopolitical pressures.

Many organisations recognise the need to be consumer-centric, but it is another leap to actually become human-centred in their approach. It's hard to capture a much fuller picture that goes beyond the label of 'consumer' – and, in the main, the research industry is overly reliant on old ways of thinking. Vital insights are missed through a failure to get a 360-degree view of the person behind the data.

There is growing awareness of this problem, both within agencies and client-side. Yet there are obvious impediments to building a 'human-centric' approach when clients face an array of short-term pressures. In that light, humanisation is perhaps at risk of becoming a fad or just another buzzword. So, what is going on?

"It is interesting that, as categories dissolve a little bit, or at least soften, clients are becoming more conscious

of being people-centric," says Paul Child, global client partner at InSites Consulting. "A live example of this intersectionality is electric vehicles. Who owns those? Is it automotive or utilities companies? Both have a stake in it because it's a new category. But if we think about it in pure category terms, we don't really get anywhere.

"In a highly fragmented society, we are all people. As Amazon's Jeff Bezos has said, when anecdotes and the data disagree, the anecdotes are usually right. If we think of qualitative research and human-centric research as anecdote and story building, that's your route to activating insight. It's the stories





Real stories put focus on potential climate change health impact

The Wellcome Trust's remit is to fund science and health research that will impact the world and people. It believes it must listen to people from the ground up to determine where funding should go and how best to implement and communicate that work. Wellcome is currently prioritising climate change as a key area for research and development, and worked with Ipsos on the link between climate change and health.

Community-based ethnography took place in six countries (United Arab Emirates, Kenya, South Africa, South Korea, Brazil, Thailand), engaging local ethnographers, researchers, activists, and filmmakers to be the key ethnographic participants. Researchers first conducted an auto-ethnographic study reflecting on the themes of climate change and health. Co-analysis with them identified emerging themes and paths for further inquiries, leading to the construction of two more phases of fieldwork in which they reached out to their wider communities and networks. Continued analysis and outputs were constructed in partnership with the local ethnographers, culminating in a report and a documentary film. A few of the ethnographers attended the client's screening virtually, giving local community representatives the opportunity to speak for themselves.

"In several countries, people raised the issue of heat and increasing temperatures and fertility and foetal health," says Heidi Hasbrouck, director, ethnography at Ipsos. "There were a lot of stories around that, anecdotes from friends and so on. The scientists dismissed it because there was no scientific proof, then they caught themselves and asked: 'Or is it just that it hasn't been studied?'"

Wellcome subsequently put out an international call for scientific research to understand the links between heat and maternal and foetal health for up to £5m.

people remember and why they make change."

Regulatory drivers

Child does a lot of work in financial services, a sector that, over the years, has attracted considerable criticism around customer service and fairness to consumers.

However, regulatory change led by the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA), which committed in 2021 to becoming 'more assertive', has ramped up pressure on firms by setting higher and clearer standards of consumer protection across financial services, and requiring them to put their customers' needs first. These changes are known as the consumer duty. The FCA

published finalised guidance on the consumer duty in July 2022 and its expectations make for interesting reading, including that firms should:

- Put consumers at the heart of their business and focus on delivering good outcomes for customers; provide products and services that are designed to meet customers’ needs, that they know provide fair value, that help customers achieve their financial objectives, and that do not cause them harm
- Communicate and engage with customers so they can make effective, timely and properly informed decisions about financial products and services, and can take responsibility for their actions and decisions
- Not seek to exploit customers’ behavioural biases, lack of knowledge or characteristics of vulnerability; consistently consider the needs of their customers, and how they behave, at every stage of the product/ service life-cycle
- Continuously learn from their growing focus and awareness of real customer outcomes
- Ensure that the interests of their customers are central to their culture and purpose, and embedded throughout the organisation
- Monitor and regularly review the outcomes that their customers are experiencing in practice, and take action to address any risks to good customer outcomes.

The onus is on firms to gain a deeper understanding of people and ensure human insights, rather than just data, inform product development. Nationwide Building Society, an InSites Consulting client, is seeking to do just that. “As a member-led organisation, bringing our members’ experiences to life and putting them at the centre of how we create our products and services is key,” says Livvy Gill, research manager at the building society. “The stories from our research add to our data to provide a more colourful and engaging picture. While we continue to use primary and internal data to inform and evidence our decisions, the stories we tell about real people bring that data to life and inspire colleagues to take action.”

Nationwide runs a number of regular pieces through its Member Connect community, combining a survey approach with deep dives, to help stakeholders feel closer to the experiences of its members, and ongoing diary studies to help build “understanding and empathy” over time, according to Gill.

Increasingly, the role for the research team, she notes, is to help activate insight within the society and to inspire stakeholders to become more “member-centric in their approach”. She adds: “The focus on real people, real lives and real experiences helps us solve real problems for our members.”

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Sparking corporate imagination

A recent report from Kantar, *The imperative of imagination*, argues that while imagination may sound like reaching for the stars, it is actually a core competency for success. In our post-big data, post-pandemic world, the report says that insights are the spark of corporate imagination – and finding them means putting humans at the centre of things.

One business leader interviewed for the report described data as “people in disguise”. Another said: “80% of our data is commercial; 20% is consumer. We lose sight of the people buying our products on a regular basis.”

Insights must develop a richer diversity of data, resources and skills about the human experience, beyond the label of ‘consumer’.

“The next step in customer centricity is really putting the human back at the centre, not the consumer,” says J Walker Smith, knowledge lead at Kantar’s consulting division. “The human-centric view encompasses the consumer-centric view; that’s part of people’s

lives – we do consume; we need products; we like ads, frankly, and we don’t really dislike digital – but there is more to it than that.”

Smith says that marketers needed better analytics 15 years ago. Today, however, he feels marketers need greater empathy about the human situation and the lived experience of people as they go through their day-to-day lives. He cites Colgate-Palmolive’s work in North America as an illustration of a brand pivoting to become more human-centric. Lifestyle research showed how difficult people were finding it to remain upbeat in a world that seems to be lurching from one crisis to another. On the back of this insight, Colgate introduced its ‘Smile’ campaign on the power of optimism – allying the brand with a lifestyle idea rather than a traditional category one, with the underlying message that Colgate is on people’s side.

Wellbeing leapt up the corporate agenda during the pandemic and, together with regulatory and environmental, social and governance pressures, has meant that the C-suite is more inclined to consider the human dimension than was arguably the case four or five years ago, even when introducing business model changes in response to volatility and new opportunities. Those who do are steering a smart course. A report from the University of Oxford and EY, *The future of transformation is human*, found organisations that put humans at the centre of their transformation journey are 2.6 times more likely to be successful than those that do not (73% chance of success versus only 28%).

The human-centred organisation, defined

According to IBM's framework on the issue, the ideal organisation is a human-centred one. Perhaps that stance is a little surprising for a technology-focused business, but there is evidence from analysts that organisations with a human-centred design outperform those that don't prioritise people in terms of higher revenues (McKinsey report in 2018) and the speed at which they deliver outcomes to market (IBM research from the same year).

IBM defines a human-centred organisation as one that exists to fulfil a purpose for its users, customers

and community, and orients all of its innovation and operations activities around those people. It has instilled the principles of human-centred design and sought to apply them to every aspect of the organisation.

A human-centred organisation:

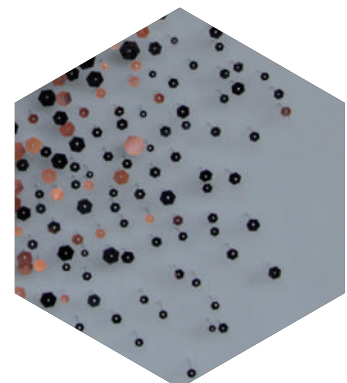
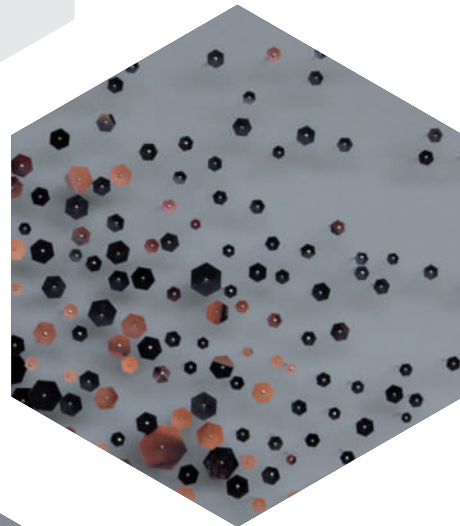
- Focuses on creating better human experiences
- Builds resilience and de-risks innovation through continuous iteration and learning
- Cares as much about the experience of its diverse, empowered teams as it does about its customers

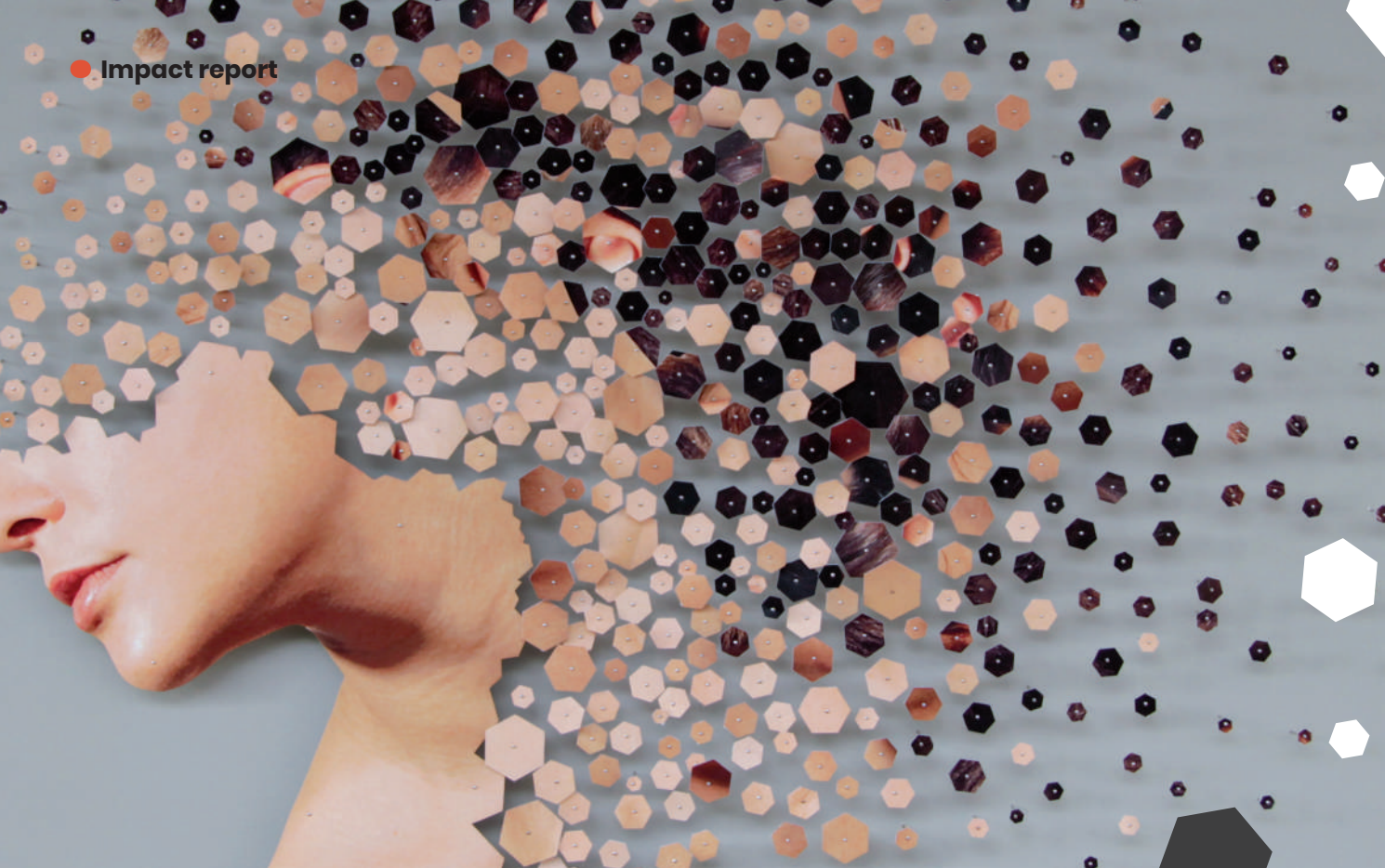
- Intentionally, actively embeds these principles into the fabric of the organisation.

IBM accepts that 'building this organisation is ongoing; a utopian ideal, if you will, that we continually strive to meet'. A focus on human outcomes is essential – for example, by allowing users/customers to actively participate in the design and delivery of their experiences and by measuring success against metrics relevant to users, customers, or the broader community of stakeholders, rather than just those specific to the organisation.

Conversely, underperforming transformations don't invest enough up front in the rationale and/or emotional elements of design.

This move to new business models could result in storytelling being given its rightful prominence in the context of insights, says Graeme Lawrence, global managing partner at InSites Consulting. In discussions with global clients about what they are trying to achieve, Lawrence says he has heard aspirations such as '70% of the time should be spent on socialising the insights, 30% of the time should be finding them'.





In general, he sees the client side increasingly picking up on the need to be more human-centric, and feeling “a lot more empowered to do that by being closer to the analytics and making some of the data aspects their own, so that they can tell those stories”. Success, he asserts, will depend on empathy. Ways of achieving that will vary.

“Let’s not get hung up on the methodology *per se*; let’s get hung up on making sure we can get to those stories for those datapoints and helping the client socialise that,” says Lawrence. “As an industry, we can be a bit academic and talk about the methods quite a lot – yes, they are relevant; yes, it’s down to the client-agency dynamic to try to choose the best ones. We must make sure we have recruited participation in the right way. Do we need to do some social listening and other cultural cues first?”

Getting to the stories

The desire for a better understanding of people’s lived experiences has led some to question the effectiveness of tools such as brand trackers, asking whether they are capturing enough of the right information. It has also resulted in some brands taking a fresh approach to audience segmentation.

That was certainly the case for Virgin Media O2 (VMO2) which wanted to go beyond segmenting on the basis of factors such as how much data people wanted, as segments such as this could be equally well

served by any of the other providers in the mobile/broadband category.

“Segmentations often fail because stakeholders don’t believe in them or know how to use them,” says David Watts, consumer insight lead in VMO2’s insight, strategy and planning team. “If we were to succeed, we would need a framework that could help us target audiences effectively, innovate meaningfully and, ultimately, be something that the business would look to for inspiration, direction and confidence.”

Human-centric design was paramount, and VMO2 worked with Incite (not to be confused with InSites Consulting) to create psychological safety for stakeholders. As Watts explains, this gave them “licence to speak candidly and express their needs, hopes and fears, allowing us to determine how the segmentation could be plugged into the practices, processes and culture of the teams”.

The team looked at how people make decisions, using qualitative research underpinned by behavioural economics. This included looking at individuals’ relationship with technology and the home, the context in which a device and data connection becomes an important part of their lives.

On top of this personal dimension, the team explored a social dimension, delving into how tech-savvy people consider themselves to be and the extent to which they are seen as an authority in the area by friends, family and



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colleagues. “These factors play more into our decisions than we in research have historically recognised,” says Jonathan Stone, director at Incite. “We’ll survey people, speak to them one on one or in a group environment, but what gets played back is the rational ‘this is what I want, this is what I need’. But, actually, nobody recognises in themselves how much of an impact other people have on their decision-making.”

Additionally, the research looked at people’s situations – for example, family relationships and spending priorities, including the way the product would be used and how people would be perceived for spending that money. The segmentation is now guiding VMO2’s three-year strategy and, says Watts, feeding every planning decision the business makes.

Health with humanity

Consumer healthcare company Haleon (formerly the consumer healthcare arm of GSK) has recently positioned itself as a business that brings together human understanding and trusted science, with the tagline ‘For Health. With Humanity.’ In line with this, it needs to engage with healthcare professionals (HCPs) – pharmacists, dentists and GPs – to find the best way to connect with them on a personal and professional level.

Haleon asked Ipsos to run a digital ethnography project with pharmacists (and later dentists, with GPs set to come next) to look at how they operate on a day-to-day basis – how they run their pharmacy, the patients they see, and the products they sell. But it also had a more personal side, looking at the strain the pandemic put them under, their role in the community, and how they dealt with Covid-19 at home.

Research was conducted across India, the US, the UK and Germany, and involved pharmacists filming themselves, plus online interviews, to get real insight into the practitioners’ lives – for example, the pharmacists filmed not just their pharmacies, but also their local community and family life.

“We ran through tons of footage of pharmacists’ experiences, collated it, and showed all of this over a day



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to lots of different people at Haleon so they could feel what was going on in each market,” says Oliver Sweet, head of ethnography at Ipsos. The work informed the creation of the company’s ‘HCP pledge’, designed to be a human way to connect with HCPs. This includes seeing the person, not just the white coat, and helping to foster powerful moments between experts and patients.

More organisations need to undertake such exercises. There’s a need to raise self-awareness of insight gaps, to ensure people are at the heart of the process.

Empathy gaps need to be overcome, says InSites Consulting’s Child. “Part of it is still that age-old problem that the people designing products, services and experiences don’t look a lot like their customer base. How do we burst that bubble for them?”

The answer, according to Child, lies in techniques that bring about closeness, which equates to time spent with real people in real-world scenarios. That may span from self-recorded video and audio ethnography to live chats and face-to-face meetings. “Finding ways of bringing humans into direct contact with the teams will be really important,” he continues. “As agencies, we could also get a lot better at seeing our role as championing the human condition to organisations. We need to be ambassadors of what the human condition is.”

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This means using techniques that highlight where some of those disparities are and call for “more triangulation”, more talking to client teams about their expectations, attitudes and behaviours, and making direct comparisons between these and what the customer does. InSites has done work along these lines with the Co-op, which has businesses spanning grocery, funeral care, insurance and legal services.

“Within insight and research, it’s our job to bring real people into the business to inspire and challenge stakeholder thinking – enabling them to understand our customers, members and colleagues deeply,

beyond simply seeing them as a sales prospect, a number on a spreadsheet or in a chart,” says Sarah De Caux, lead analytics and insights manager (customer, member and colleague research), Co-op.

“We spend loads of time engaging with stakeholders to bring these human insights to life and we’re immensely proud of how we are influencing our culture and nurturing a customer, member and colleague-centric mindset. This is

particularly important now, during a period of transformation for us, against a backdrop of challenging trading conditions and when so many of our customers, members and colleagues are facing a cost-of-living crisis.”

Burst the bubble and get up close with people

It’s a cliché – but sadly an accurate one – to say that marketers live in a bubble. They often assume they think and act like the consumers they are trying to appeal to, and they make assumptions based on their own experiences and perceptions. As a result, they might struggle to understand the perspective of someone with a different opinion, which can prevent them from developing empathy for the real people that make up a target audience.

Our role as insight professionals is to help organisations and their leaders – marketers and market researchers – understand what matters. We believe this starts by stepping into the real world. Only then can we see, feel, hear and experience how people really are, and start to close the empathy gap. Yet

understanding what matters by ourselves is not enough. We must enable stakeholders to come on the journey with us, from where they are now to greater connection, immersion and empathy with their end users, buyers and prospects. Understanding comes when organisations put real people at their heart.

We know that some businesses are at the start of this journey, while others are further along. Technology helpfully lowers the barrier to entry to consumer insight on this journey, offering direct access to and interaction with people through online discussions, video diaries or self-ethnography. As the experience and needs of a business evolve, we can guide our clients from the safety of digital research into the wilderness itself, where immersions and safaris provide a more holistic, 3D,

360-degree human perspective. We can move seamlessly from a passive interaction to a more active collaboration.

But wherever a business is on its journey, we help clients to not just collect, observe or witness human behaviour, but also to activate the subsequent insights within organisations and ensure that meaningful, focused changes occur as a result. We tell the stories that matter, to the people who can make a difference, to inspire change.

Stories make us human. Regardless of research methods, we have to find those stories to help clients to act. Only when we act upon our understanding can we help people make decisions that matter.

Laura Hunt, senior business director, InSites Consulting



InSites Consulting

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In a year infused with distress, instability and vulnerability, where we struggled through crisis after crisis, people are now searching for meaning. In 2023, people will recalibrate their roles and re-examine the world they live in and how they live in it. They will seek purpose and meaning, whatever the context. Based on cultural and macro analysis, collaboration with leading-edge consumers, and a 17-market quantification, we reveal 12 'trends' that matter to people.

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