

[Do empathetic marketers make more egocentric decisions?](#)

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[Marketing](#)

Key topics

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Dr Johannes Hattula's research investigates how marketers' personal preferences could be affecting the success of marketing decisions, and how being able to recognise and overcome these biases, can create more effective campaigns

It's no surprise that business leaders frequently try to put themselves in their consumers' shoes to second-guess consumer behaviour. However, some of my recent research suggests empathy is not the best policy after all. There is a general assumption that when marketers are empathetic, when they take the perspective of consumers, they are less likely to be influenced by their own personal preferences and better able to make predictions about consumer choices. But is that really true?

This question is something our research set out to answer in a series of four experiments across different areas of managerial decision making, such as product development, pricing and communication management. Our team, which included researchers Professor Walter Herzog, Professor Darren Dahl and Professor Sven

Reinecke, first asked marketing managers to indicate their personal preferences towards a marketing stimulus, such as a product or an advertising campaign.

Half of the marketers were then asked to be empathetic, to describe a typical consumer and imagine that person's thoughts and reactions towards the particular stimulus, whereas the other half did not receive such instruction. All were then asked to predict consumers' desires towards the same stimulus. However, rather than reducing subjectivity, we were surprised to find that empathetic marketers were even more likely to project their own personal preferences onto their target consumers.

Empathy is not necessarily a bad thing

Why? Because marketers are consumers too; they also go to the shopping mall, the cinema and have a personal life and preferences. What we found is that when you tell them to take the perspective of a target consumer, they automatically activate their own consumer identity, so their own personal consumption preferences become more salient and that's why we see this increase of projection.

But what if you provided them with objective information about consumer preferences? Surely that would reduce the level of the unconscious empathy bias? Not so; in two of the studies we provided the marketers with market research on the preferences of typical consumers in their markets. However, we found that the more empathetic they were, the less value marketers placed on market research and the more they neglected the evidence. The reason for this blindness to information is something I am keen to uncover in future studies.

While the findings are a blow to the perceived wisdom that marketers traditionally employ when using market research to predict consumer preferences, empathy is not necessarily a bad thing. It is important for marketers to be aware of this bias and how it can influence their behaviour and thoughts about consumers.

Why? Because marketers are consumers too

Indeed, when they were made aware of the self-referential tendencies that could be induced by empathetic behaviour, we found that they became more objective and less susceptible to their own projections as a result. In the next steps, we will therefore try to further our understanding of the extent to which marketing

managers are able to avoid the influence of their personal preferences when predicting consumers' preferences. From a practical point of view, group decision-making, where there are a variety of different views on the table, could play a part in reducing the impact of personal preferences.

Addressing and reducing the impact of marketing managers' personal preferences will help to make campaigns more accurate, benefiting marketing budgets and consumer satisfaction alike. With billions being spent globally on marketing and associated analytics, this research gets to the heart of the marketer, and reduces the risk associated with the human factor in what is essentially, a very human profession.

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Dr Johannes Hattula is Assistant Professor of Marketing and teaches Marketing on the MSc Management programme

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