

Are You Working on an Object? Try Working on Subjects Instead

Using the Empathy Map to put relationships first in the creative process — why subjective connections matter more than deliverables.

"Subjectivity is truth, and truth is subjectivity." — Søren Kierkegaard

For about the past 2.6 million years, human beings have left their mark as builders of objects. We've built tools to build still more tools, and structures, and vehicles, and toys, and furnishings, and clothing — and, ultimately, the anthroposphere that covers our planet.

Paleontology suggests we've had an equally long run as communicators: We build things, and then we talk about the things we've built. Those things aren't just physical artifacts, either. Art and science and their commercial applications are all things we create and discuss.

The Digital Era Trap

In the digital era, we create things — and true to our DNA, we tend to think about them as objects. Agencies alone are an endless source of shiny new things, from decks to designs to logos to blog posts. Few of them are tangible, but we still tend to speak about them as objects: as assets or deliverables.

But here's the thing: These things are less significant as objects than they are as subjects. It's that other human capability — talking about things with other people — that gives them value. As subjects.

Relationships Over Artifacts

It's that exercise in comparing and contrasting subjective views that lets us test the validity of ideas and forge relationships with the people we're creating these things for — clients, audiences, customers.

That relationship is the real goal, not the artifact. And in an era when traditional channels of communication have been disrupted, those relationships require more craft and care than ever.

If you forget about them — if you don't put their needs and wants and pains above your own — then they'll see you for what you are: selfish, thoughtless, transactional. Which means you, your agency, your marketing team — you're just gonna be a thingmaker.

You don't want to be just a thingmaker. You want to be a maker of relationships.

The Empathy Map

Decoding the complex, subjective relationships necessary for creativity to thrive requires the empathy to see the exchange from the perspective of the other participants. The Empathy Map is designed to put relationships first in the creative process.

Use it when you start a project to align your team with the people they're creating the work for. If you're making a new relationship, a foundation of empathy is the right place to begin — and focusing on empathy is more important than ever.