

A Forrester Consulting  
Thought Leadership Paper  
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# How Human Is Your Brand?

The Importance And Impact Of Human-Like  
Brand Communication



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# Executive Summary

Your customer relationships have been disrupted by the forces of the digital age, especially with how mobile has transformed consumers' lives. Consumers now expect to get what they want in their immediate context, at their precise moment of need. For brands, these changing relationships have elevated the importance of effectively interacting with customers across each touchpoint and in a coordinate manner. With customer interactions increasingly characterized by two-way conversations, brands must learn to demonstrate their human side by speaking *with* their customers rather than *at* them. A brand's performance in these conversations has a huge impact on customer relationships, loyalty, purchases, and overall satisfaction. To differentiate and drive long-term loyalty, brands must find a way to build lasting emotional connections with customers. This hinges on their ability to speak to consumers in a natural and authentic way — that is, their ability to communicate like a human and to do so across every touchpoint.



“Human communication” occurs when a brand communicates in a way that comes across as natural, or in a way that a real person would talk.

In June 2018, Braze commissioned Forrester Consulting to evaluate the state of human brand communications. Forrester conducted an online survey with 3,081 consumers and five interviews with leading brands to explore this topic. We found that being authentically human is critical in a mobile-first world, and that brands can demonstrate humanity in their communications through four key emotional and functional indicators, i.e., the Brand Humanity Index. We also saw that brand humanity has a real, measurable impact on business outcomes such as purchase intent, customer loyalty, and advocacy. The study yielded three key findings.

## KEY FINDINGS

- › **Being authentically human can differentiate brands in a mobile-first era.** Consumers reinforced mobile's centrality in their lives and behaviors: more than three quarters (76%) use their phones at least several times per day, if not constantly. To keep pace with customer expectations and foster loyalty in this era, brands must build a lasting emotional connection with customers across touchpoints by speaking with them as a real person would, in an authentic and natural manner.
- › **Brands can demonstrate humanity through core emotional and functional attributes.** Our Brand Humanity Index revealed that emotional indicators, including “responsive,” “friendly,” or “thoughtful,” provided some of the strongest drivers to consumers' perception that a brand was dealing with them in a human way. The functional characteristics that most reinforce the human quality of brand communications for consumers were the “natural,” “considerate,” and “personal” elements, ranked in that order.
- › **Brand humanity helps firms differentiate on customer experience and impacts business outcomes.** Customers reward brands who successfully demonstrate humanity with loyalty, with advocacy, and with their wallets. Brands perceived as human enjoy a 20-percentage-point advantage in how likely consumers are to recommend them, a 19-percentage-point boost in likelihood to be “loved,” and a 17-percentage-point advantage in likelihood to purchase, compared to “non-human” brands.

# Brand And Customer Relationships Run On Emotion

Brands know they cannot take for granted how they nurture their customer relationships anymore. Across every touchpoint, brands no longer can get away with simply speaking *at* their customers but must genuinely learn to speak *with* them in an authentic and more natural way. Customer interactions are increasingly about authentic, two-way conversations, and how a brand carries on their part of a conversation has a huge impact on customer relationships, loyalty, purchase intent, and satisfaction.<sup>1</sup>

Traditional marketing approaches have long been based on assumptions of a rational consumer, around whom a brand could create a directed strategy aimed at prompting a rational response. However, Forrester's research has shown that roughly half of brand energy, a framework that measures the power of brands and drives preference, purchase, and premium pricing — derives primarily from the power of emotions.<sup>2</sup>

## MOBILE INTERACTIONS RAISE THE STAKES FOR BRANDS' HUMAN COMMUNICATION

Arguably no factor has had a greater impact on the power dynamic of brand and human relationships as consumer adoption and reliance on mobile devices. Forrester has been tracking the impact of mobile for many years and developed the mobile mind shift framework — where consumers have come to expect that they can get what they want in their immediate context and moment of need — to explain mobile's impact. The mobile mind shift creates an ongoing Pavlovian cycle where consumers' expectations are constantly being either met or frustrated, and brand perceptions are built, reinforced, or dashed on the rocks as a result.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the consumers in our study reflect the centrality of mobile devices in their lives and consumer behaviors. More than three quarters of respondents use their phones at least several times per day, if not constantly, to search for information, engage with video and photo content, and play games and stream their favorite music and shows (see Figure 1).



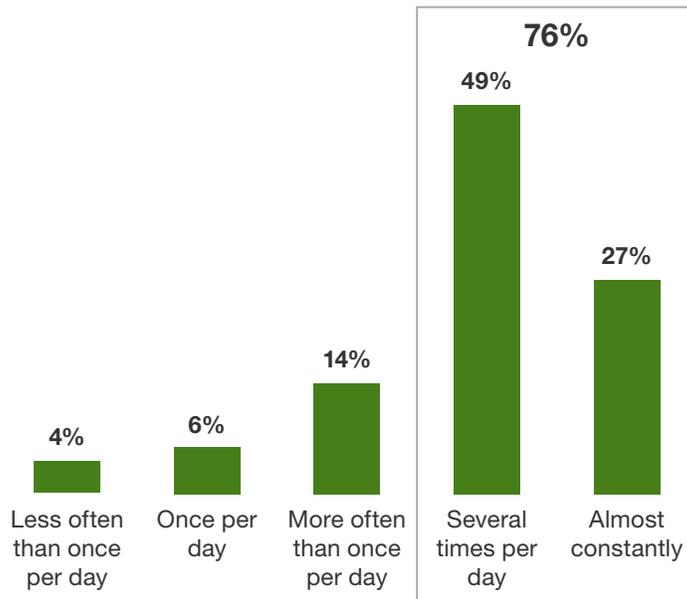
“Mobile has changed everything about how we interact with our customers. Two-thirds of their screen time takes place on a mobile device, and when I go into one of our stores, 20% of our customers have their phones out — talking, looking at shopping lists — and it's so easy for a negative experience to become a post and a need to respond on the spot.”

*Director of marketing,  
top 5 US grocery brand*



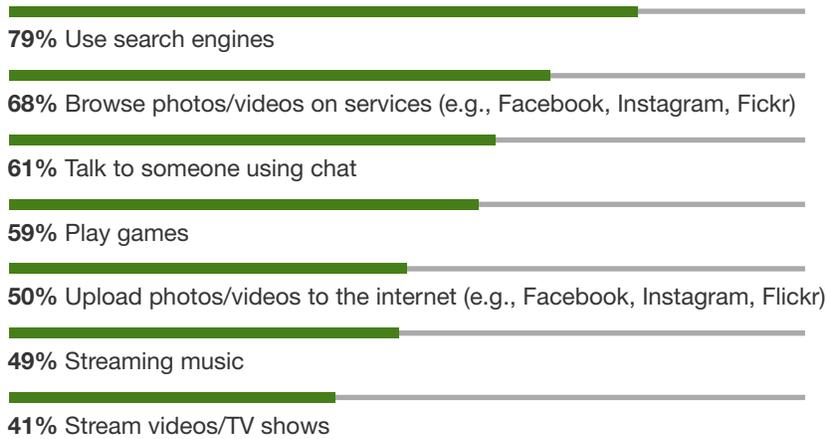
Figure 1

“On average, how often do you use your mobile phone (check email, messaging/texting, talking, browsing the web, using apps, etc.)?”

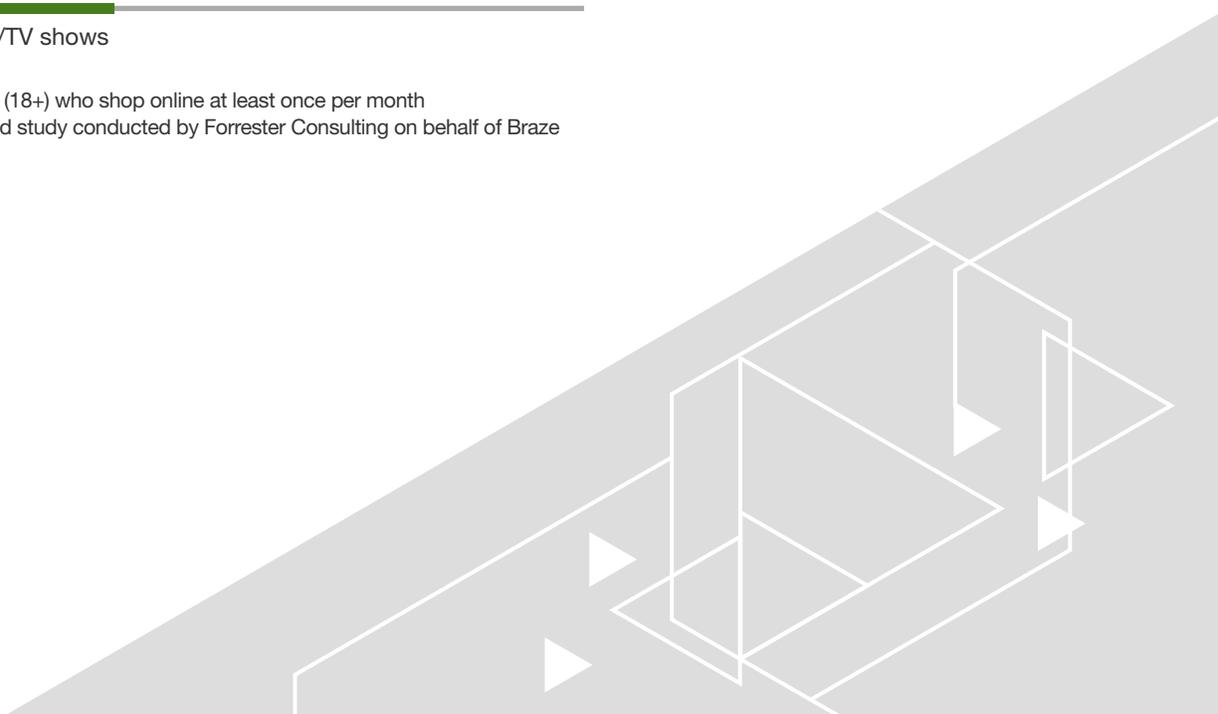


Brands must be ready in the time, place, and context their customers need them.

“Which of the following activities do you conduct on your mobile phone at least once per week?”



Base: 3,081 consumers (18+) who shop online at least once per month  
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Braze



# The Importance Of Being Authentically Human

In surveying 3,081 consumers in three global regions, we found that emotional signifiers also serve as a major foundation of consumer perceptions of how human-like a brand is in their interactions. To better understand these effects, we constructed a Brand Humanity Index (BHI) — mapping out for the first time the emotional and functional drivers that help consumers feel that they are talking to a brand that understands the value of natural, authentic communication. This study catalogued these drivers and found that human-like communications are associated with richly rewarding customer relationships.

## THE BRAND HUMANITY INDEX METHODOLOGY

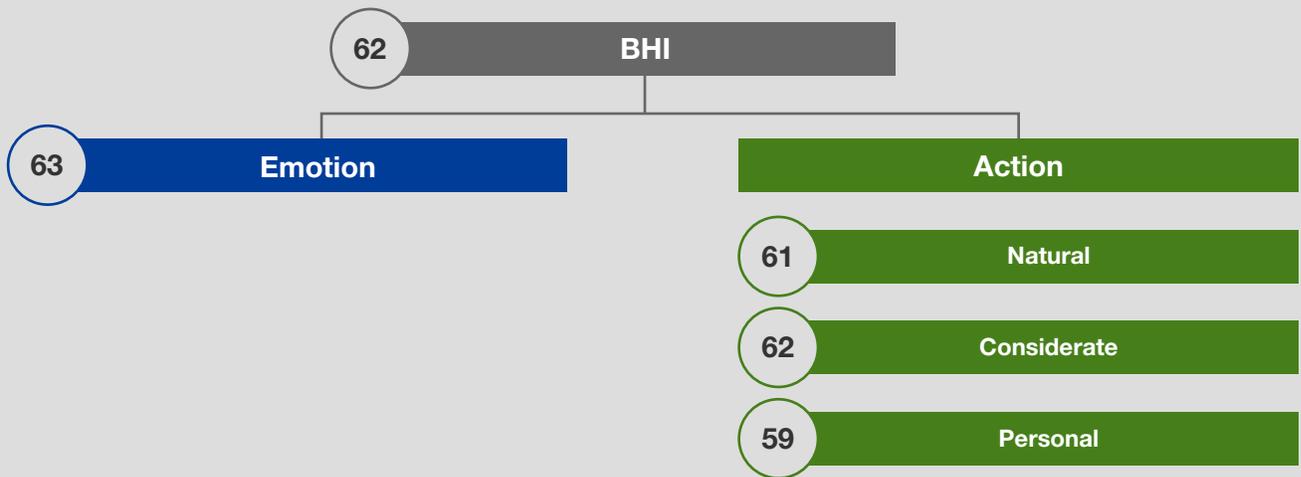
To measure the impact of human communication, survey respondents were asked questions about a recent and memorable interaction they had with a brand, whether that interaction was positive or negative. Thirty different positive emotional associations and 18 functional communication attributes were tested for their predictive value in determining whether or not the brand demonstrated “human communication” during the specific interaction. Human communication was defined as occurring “when a brand communicates in a way that comes across as natural, or in a way that a real person would talk. Human communication demonstrates an understanding of your needs, situation, and history with that company, and is appropriately informal in style.”

The top 9 emotional associations most predictive of the likelihood of having experienced “human communication” were weighted by predictive power and combined into an “emotion” component of the index score. Additionally, three other functional components were composed by categorizing and weighing 10 predictive communication attributes, to represent “personal,” “considerate,” and “natural” communication styles.

Finally, all four components, “emotional,” “personal,” “considerate,” and “natural” communication, were assigned weights based on their ability to predict how likely a consumer was to describe a brand’s interaction as exemplifying human communications. Across the entire global set of consumers, we formed a BHI index score of 62 — the level of emotional and functional triggers that sets the baseline for a human/brand interaction (see Figure 2).

Looking across the countries and verticals included in the BHI, we see that scores are generally very consistent across geographies and verticals. Of the countries, consumers in the United Kingdom, Canada, and the United States received more human-like interactions than the global average, whereas Japanese consumers reported being less likely to have a human-like brand interaction. By vertical, mobile app-driven food delivery and retail or eCommerce companies tended to perform most strongly, with financial services and insurance firms lagging slightly behind the global index (see Figure 3).

**Figure 2**  
**Setting the baseline index for a human-like brand interaction**



Base: 3,081 consumers (18+) who shop online at least once per month  
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Braze

**Figure 3**  
**BHI scores are largely consistent across geographies and verticals**

Country	BHI score	Vertical	BHI score
United Kingdom	64.3	Retail/eCommerce	62.5
Canada	63.9	Mobile delivery or transportation	62.5
United States	63.5	Travel/hospitality	61.0
France	62.6	Media/entertainment	60.2
Australia	62.1	Financial services	59.0
Singapore	61.0		
Germany	60.0		
Japan	52.0		

Base: 3,081 consumers (18+) who shop online at least once per month  
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Braze

## EMOTIONAL DRIVERS OF BRAND HUMANITY

We know that emotions power your brand experience, and they are the second most powerful predictor of brand humanity overall, but what emotions drive consumer perceptions of humanity? The emotional characteristics of the BHI examine how brands should act to drive human reactions and perceptions with their customers. Respondents told us that brands were most effective in driving humanity when they were being useful and helpful. Emotional indicators including “responsive,” “friendly,” or “thoughtful” provided some of the strongest drivers to consumers’ belief that a brand was dealing with them in a human way (see Figure 4).

When thinking through the power of emotional connections, sometimes it’s as useful, if not more so, to think through the elements that are less likely to demonstrate human-like qualities. With a proliferation of interactions and marketing messages and disrupted marketplaces leading to new competitive arenas, it’s crucial for brands to differentiate themselves and focus on how they can best get attention and drive awareness through their customer interactions. Our consumers indicated, however, that brands shouldn’t obsess over attempting to be too unique or entertaining in their interactions. Emotional attributes like “exciting,” “amusing,” “fun,” or “quirky” were relatively weak indicators of brand humanity, indicating that consumers are less driven by what might appear as purely attention-seeking brand behavior.

It’s worth noting that in many cases humor or informal communication style is a significant part of a brands’ existing identity and brands whose customer relationships are already shaped by this identity should remain authentic to themselves — especially in situations where they are able to tie their conversations to productive business outcomes. But consumers tell us that they are far more interested in substance than flash, and brands who competently and warmly rise to meet their needs will be perceived as more human than brands who only attempt to surprise or shock consumers into paying attention.

Figure 4

### Leading emotional drivers of brand humanity

Rank	Characteristic
1	Responsive
2	Social
3	Friendly
4	Thoughtful
5	Helpful
6	Personable
7	Intelligent
8	Honest
9	Reassuring

Base: 3,081 consumers 18+ who shop online at least once per month  
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Braze

Consumers were most likely to cite emotional characteristics that reflected a brands’ willingness to meet their needs and help out in an approachable, pleasant manner.

### THREE FUNCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF BRAND HUMANITY

The functional characteristics of the BHI look at what actions a brand can take to demonstrate and reinforce their sense of brand humanity. This study categorized these actions into three primary categories (see Figure 5):

- › **Natural communication.** These characteristics demonstrate that a brand can communicate clearly and, in a manner, befitting natural conversation. Brands that are strong in natural communication speak like a normal person would, in a tone that’s appropriate for the customer’s preferences and the situation, providing clear and easily understood messages. These functions had the strongest relationship to consumers’ perceptions of brand humanity.

Brands can influence their natural communication index by evaluating and aligning their brand voice to authenticity, empathy, and clarity/simplicity. Developing or updating communication style guides to emphasize these characteristics and hiring and training staff to align to your brand voice can help boost your natural communication score.

**Figure 5: Functional Drivers Of Brand Humanity**

#### Natural

Driver ranking	Characteristic description
1	Speaks like a regular person would
3	Communicates with me in the tone I want them to
5	Sends me clear, understandable messages

#### Considerate

Driver ranking	Characteristic description
2	Shows they value my time and business
4	Is responsive to me when I need it
7	Communicates with me at convenient times
8	Communicates with me using my preferred contact method

#### Personal

Driver ranking	Characteristic description
6	Shows they understand what matters to me right now
9	Provides great recommendations
10	Understands my preferences and avoids what I don’t like

Base: 3,081 consumers (18+) who shop online at least once per month  
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Braze

- › **Considerate communication.** Considerate functional characteristics show that a brand cares about their customers' needs. Considerate brands demonstrate that they: 1) value their customers' time and business; 2) are responsive to their customers' needs; and 3) put the convenience of their customers before their own. These brands understand and use a customers' preferred channel or contact method, not just necessarily what's most efficient or convenient for the business. These functions had the third most powerful impact on predicting a consumers' perception of a brands' humanity, behind natural communication and emotional levers, respectively.

Brands can drive considerate communication by ensuring that the customer has multiple channels available to interact with the brand in their time of need. Texting, chat (human or bot), email, push notifications, call centers — strongly considerate brands grasp opportunities to connect with customers on their terms. Finally, brands should work to coordinate across these channels in a seamless fashion so as to deliver a consistent, cohesive customer experience.

- › **Personal communication.** Personal communication characteristics are all about demonstrating a brands' knowledge of a customers' context and attitudes. Personal brands understand what is most important to the customer, at the moment of interaction/engagement, and provide them with recommendations that reflect their interests while avoiding what they do not like. Though personal communication functions weren't the most powerful in predicting consumers' perception of human communication, they are the most significant functional drivers of customer purchase and satisfaction, which we will explore later in this study.

Brands can boost their personal communication score by leveraging their understanding of their customers' needs and preferences at scale and in near real time. This means mining and applying customer data and insights, like purchase behavior or previous interactions and contact points (and even situational data including location or the current weather), to show your customers you understand them and are ready to help or inspire as soon as they need it. Brands should: 1) leverage insights to provide great predictions of customers' needs and intent; 2) leverage AI to continually hone their algorithms and drive better predictions; and 3) continually sanity check their assumptions by putting customer empathy front and center in their programs and messaging strategies.

## BRAND HUMANITY IS WON OR LOST IN EVERY INTERACTION

Brands today can drive differentiation with their customers by focusing their customer experience and communication around the emotional and functional drivers of the BHI. It is important to note, however, that consumers will make this evaluation of your brand regardless of how or where the contact occurs. While the most common memorable brand interactions occurred during an online or mobile app purchase, or during a visit to a brand's website, they certainly aren't the only instances where brand impressions are formed. At the lowest end of the scale, 11% of customers told us that their last impression took place with a brands' social media presence, which is still a significant source of impressions (see Figure 6).



“Our engagement strategy is paying off in two main ways: first, we see that this kind of engagement increases loyalty, but we are also seeing our customers start to advocate for our brand. We're better able to move you from being our customer to being our loyal customer to being our customer who also brings their friends.”

*Head of marketing analytics,  
global food and lifestyle  
brand*



**Figure 6**

**“Thinking of your experience with this brand, what kind of interaction(s) did you have?”** (Select all that apply)

49% A purchase made online or via mobile (including in-app purchase)

47% Visiting the brand’s website

31% Using the brand’s app

20% Logging in or using a digital service

19% Contacting customer service or support

12% Visiting a physical location

11% Visiting the brand’s social media presence

Base: 3,081 consumers (18+) who shop online at least once per month

Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Braze

## How Brand Humanity Fosters High-Value Customer Relationships

In order to form a human connection with its customers, a brand must correctly hit a number of notes across the different functional and emotional characteristics described in this report. But brands are not to engage in these behaviors simply for the purposes of appearing more human as an abstract exercise. Ultimately, the effort behind becoming human must be driven by purposeful business outcomes. To that end, this study compares the BHI levers on how much each contributes to positive customer outcomes like brand sentiment, likelihood to recommend, purchase intent, and overall satisfaction.

### **BRAND HUMANITY DELIVERS SIGNIFICANT CUSTOMER BENEFITS**

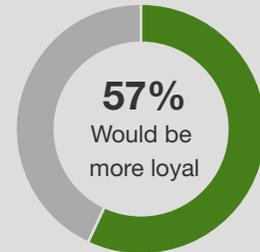
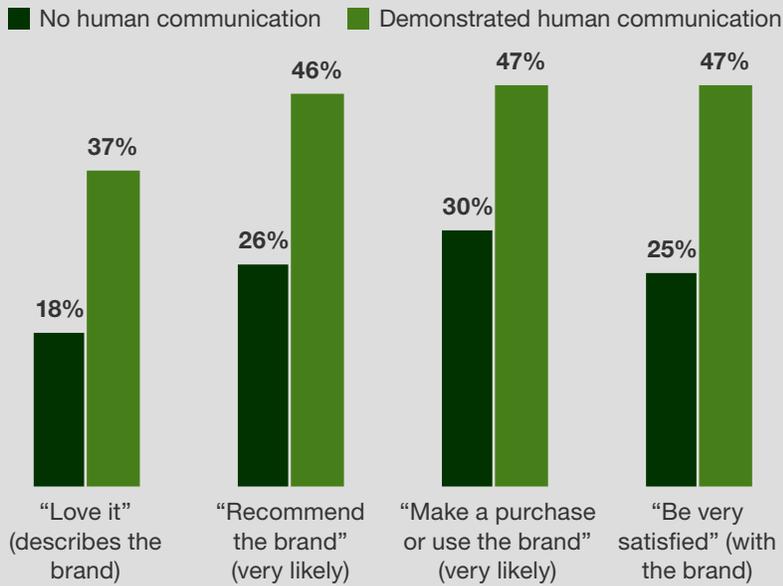
Consumers told us they will heavily favor brands who successfully demonstrate their humanity. For example, 57% of consumers said they would be more loyal to a human brand — human brands enjoy a 19 percentage point boost in how likely they were to be “loved” by customers, outperforming non-human brands by 20 percentage points on “likelihood to recommend.” Consumers are 17 percentage points more likely to make a purchase or use a human brands’ service, and are 22 percentage points more likely be satisfied overall with a human brand compared to a non-human one (see Figure 7).

### **BHI CHARACTERISTICS IMPACT CUSTOMER OUTCOMES DIFFERENTLY**

This study also shows that the functional and emotional characteristics have different degrees of power in driving purchase intent and satisfaction. Specifically, hitting the right emotional notes is most important to driving purchase intent and satisfaction — interestingly, personalized communication has the biggest impact of the functional characteristics on driving satisfaction and purchase intent (see Figure 8).

Figure 7

“How likely are you to . . . ?” (Showing top two positive responses)

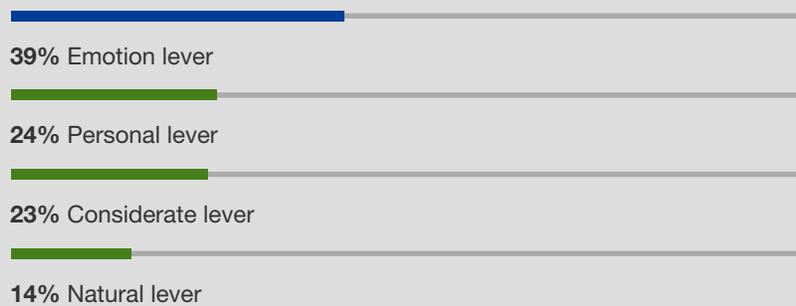


Consumers are 57% more likely to be loyal to a brand that demonstrates human communication.

Base: 3,081 consumers (18+) who shop online at least once per month  
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Braze

Figure 8

The importance of BHI characteristics to satisfaction and purchase outcomes



Base: 3,081 consumers (18+) who shop online at least once per month  
Note: Percentages may not total 100 because of rounding.  
Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Braze

Emotions are the most significant drivers of purchase intent and satisfaction, but of the functional steps a brand can take, personalized communications are most likely to drive desirable consumer behaviors and attitudes.

# Start With Your People And Customer Empathy To Drive Human Connections

No firm we spoke with had a specific strategy in place to drive more human-like experiences today. The brands also represented a variety of industries and sophistication levels when it came to human communication. However, a consistent theme that came across from the data was that two factors drove better results for their marketing and customer experience: 1) the brands' people and 2) the level of customer understanding or empathy.

## YOUR PEOPLE WILL DETERMINE YOUR HUMANITY

Whether in a store, on a social platform, or on the other end of a phone line — your employees will ultimately be responsible for determining how human your brand appears to be. The cosmetics and retail brand we spoke with has taken this so deeply to heart that they now specifically hire both front and back of the house employees in part based on the strength of their communication skills, and then the intrinsically friendly, informal and emotional communication style the company was founded upon is reinforced through training, campaign planning, and daily internal and external communication. The grocery brand who had been in operation for over a century was less intrinsically informal in style, but they realized that opportunities for reinforcing their brand humanity can come from anywhere, be it the praise being listed on social media, the person returning carts, the pharmacists behind the counters, or even to the people responding to complaints. “Every interaction drives perception of your brand,” they said, “and that’s true with our stores and our digital channels.”

## YOUR BRAND’S HUMANITY WILL SHINE ONLY AS BRIGHT AS YOUR CUSTOMER EMPATHY ALLOWS

Just as listening is critical for human conversation, so too must a brands' humanity be rooted first and foremost in customer empathy. The consumer product goods (CPG) brand in our study learned that their customers simply don't respond to messages about their products' attributes and advantages. Their messaging strategy is far more focused on understanding their customers' concerns and needs, rather than communicating that understanding and their ability to respond in kind.

But customer empathy is not just about preparation, data is invaluable for looking inward and determining if your communications are working as you think they should. The online food ordering and delivery brand we spoke to is always comparing how their marketing messages drive the outcomes they want — orders, site visits, and so on. Their messaging strategy is in a constant state of refinement based on their campaigns' results. “The people who we depend on to execute our communications, they're often junior and don't necessarily have a view into our larger objectives,” their CMO reports, but what's effective really comes down to what's measurable. “When we don't take the [lighthearted and topical approach to communicating] we know we don't get the outcomes we want as often.”



“People are increasingly skeptical of brands — believing that they don’t care about the customer and only want their money. To counter this, we work to map their journey as a customer and then map our communications to that journey and to our customers’ needs. They benefit with better products and messages and we benefit with more relevance as a result.”

*Direct to consumer marketing lead, global CPG brand*



# Key Recommendations

Forrester's in-depth survey of global consumers about brand humanity yielded several important recommendations:



**Be human by focusing on the people you serve.** Human connections create real, tangible, business value, and this notion brings us back to the existential truth that brands serve people. While it is easy to lapse into operational, technological, marketing, and other functional mindsets that shape our work, brand leaders must maintain a clear line of human communication between the brands and their audience.



**Humans are unique, and so brands should find their unique blend of emotional cues.** To design and implement human communications, brands must hone in on the emotions to activate, then do so in a manner and tone that is relevant, meaningful, and value-added to the customer. You need the combination of the right brand emotions and the right brand actions to deliver human communication.



**Let empathy guide your brand humanity efforts.** To be human is to have a visceral feel for your customers. It requires deep data and the analytics to gather, analyze, optimize, test, and validate. And then to do it all over again. But beneath the layers of swirling data and intelligence there needs to be a deep-set empathy that puts all the bits and bytes into context. This empathy percolates through the enterprise, shaping not only customer-obsession, but also how culture is built and sustained, and how future talent is recruited.



**Brand humanity still requires expression through machines.** To be human is to be able to express humanity through machines. With the hyperadoption of technology, the growing ubiquity of mobile and digital-impacted revenue, and emerging technologies like voice assistants, consumers have a plethora of channels by which they interact with brands, and they almost never do so in a tidy, organized fashion. The brands that continue to deliver the same human communications through emerging channels — take your pick: chatbots, email, app notifications, social feeds, custom-branded voice personas in smart-home speakers, and many more — stand a clear advantage

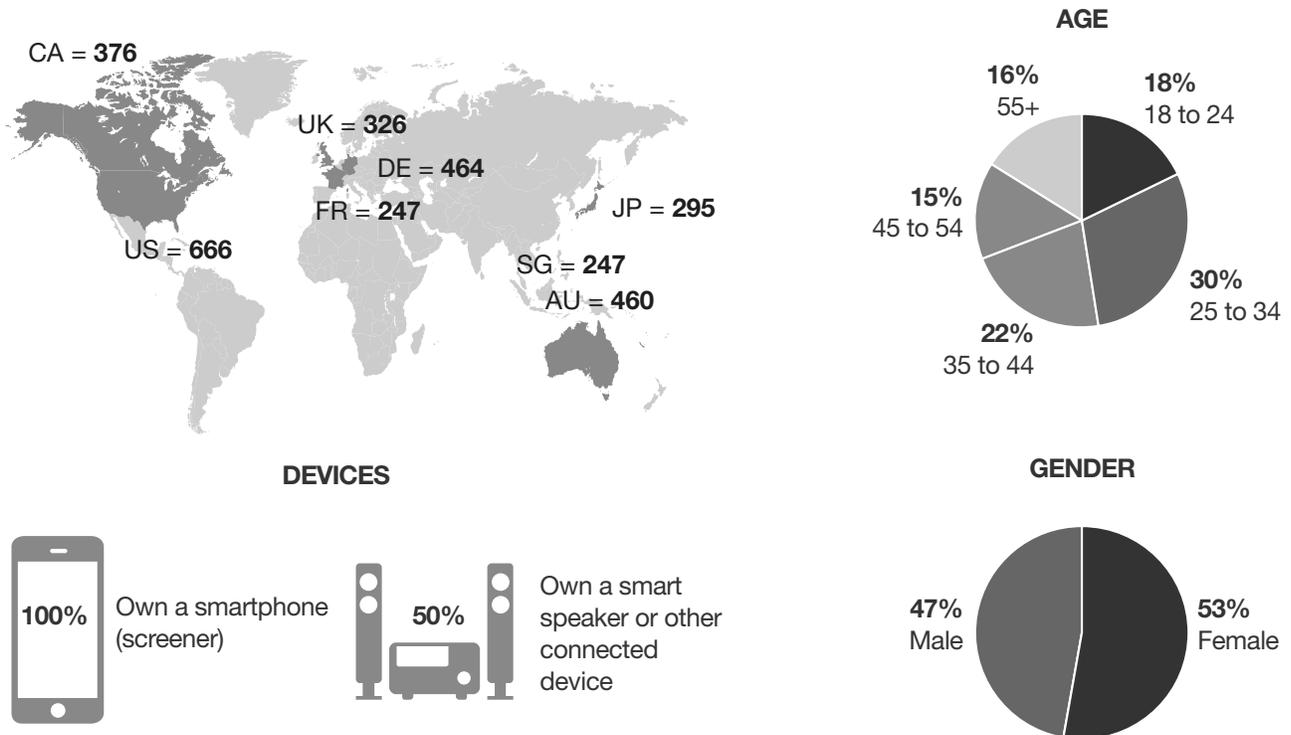


**Building brand humanity will require investment.** Building brand humanity starts inside with the right investments in the people and culture, then extends outside to ensure the right tools, partners, and capabilities are in formation to take on both the delicate art and high science of human interaction. Commitment to and investment in brand humanity will engender not only short-term financial results, but it will go a long way to forging a sustained brand personality and equity that the enterprise can bank on for long-term value.

# Appendix A: Methodology

In this study, Forrester conducted an online survey of 3,081 online consumers in North America, Europe, and Asia Pacific (AP), and conducted five interviews with leading brands organizations to evaluate the drivers, benefits, and approach to human brand communication. Survey participants were online shoppers with natural demographic fallout for their countries. Questions provided to the participants asked about memorable experiences with brands, as well as their online behaviors. Interviewees were asked about their company’s approach to customer communications and the role of human-like communications specifically. Respondents were offered a small monetary incentive as a thank you for time spent on the survey. The study began in June 2018 and was completed in October 2018.

# Appendix B: Demographics/Data



Base: 3,081 consumers 18+ who shop online at least once per month, made an online purchase/used a digital service in the last month, and own a smartphone  
 Source: A commissioned study conducted by Forrester Consulting on behalf of Braze, August 2018

# Appendix C: Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Source: “Emotions Fuel Your Brand Energy,” Forrester Research, Inc., June 27, 2017.
- <sup>2</sup> Source: “The Rise Of Intelligent Branding,” Forrester Research, Inc., June 2, 2017.
- <sup>3</sup> Source: “Mobile Moments Transform Commerce And Service Experiences,” Forrester Research, Inc., May 18, 2017.