

# Consumer Closeness

Why you should be doing it  
and how to do it well

A Mingle Connections Paper  
by Morgan Arnell

2026



# FIRST, A DEFINITION

For the purpose of this document we are calling it CONSUMER CLOSENESS but it gets called many things. We've used 'consumer' but the people you get close to can be anyone. Consumers, customers, patients.... Maybe we should rebrand it 'Human Closeness'.

Similarly, we've chose to use the word 'closeness' but you may also see terms like connection or centrality.

You can call it whatever you like to be honest. The most important thing is the principle that underlies it. And we would define that as:

***“Any time YOU and your colleagues take the initiative to get out and engage with the HUMANS that buy your products and services directly. No moderators doing the talking for you, no one way mirrors to sit behind drinking coffee, no just turning up to a research debrief to be told the ‘insights’.***

***It's YOU rolling up your sleeves and getting involved in the discussion with other humans. Either face-to-face or in a virtual environment.”***



## EXEC SUMMARY

**Most organisations don't lack data about their consumers. They lack closeness.**

**Consumer connection is a practical, human way to rebuild that closeness – and in doing so, build cognitive empathy to unlock better decisions, stronger brands and more motivated teams. It helps close the current gap between consumer understanding and its impact on decision makers**

**It doesn't replace research. It amplifies it. It feeds your 'empathy bank' to bring consumers to mind when they are needed and improves your gut response to consumer centric decisions..**

**When it is led well, owned proudly and linked to real business challenges, it creates impact that goes far beyond the moments of connection themselves**

**The mingle 4c's process has successfully driven consumer closeness in a variety of organisations leading to tangible value both through decisions made and the fuelling of a consumer centric culture**



**Clarify**  
be clear on your objectives. What are you trying to achieve (e.g. bring employees closer to their customers at a conference or event) or what decisions will this activity fuel and achieve (e.g. inspiring potential solutions to a specific business challenge)?



**Connect**  
get out there and connect in a way that best meets the objectives. This could be physically or virtually (see our examples for inspiration). Most importantly, make sure you have the right skills and tools to capture, share and act on your observations effectively.



**Consolidate**  
dive into what you've experienced. Download and share what you've seen, heard, smelt and felt. Uncover the interesting themes, similarities and differences in what was observed.



**Crystallise**  
capture your key insight and its application. How does what you've experienced address your initial objective? Act on what you've discovered.

**Send us an [email](#) to book your free closeness consultation – we can discuss the challenges you face and give you tangible ideas to put into practice.**

# 01

## Why is it important?

*"I find it quite hard to remember the last research debrief I sat through, but I can still vividly remember, the feelings and frustrations of the first laundry detergent user I visited in their home over 25 years ago"*  
Insight Director, FMCG

### There is an empathy deficit

Most organisations don't have a data problem. They have an **empathy problem**.

Despite more dashboards, trackers and reports than ever before, many businesses feel strangely unsure when it comes to the decisions that matter most. Teams debate. Alignment meetings multiply. Insight is referenced but rarely *felt*. Data that ends up in board papers can often diagnose what is happening, but does it get to the why? Somewhere along the way, the consumer becomes an abstraction.

Be honest. When was the last time your leadership team spent meaningful time with a real consumer — in their world, on their terms? For many organisations, the honest answer is rarely — or never.

This "distance" has consequences. Brands lose relevance. Innovation misses the mark. Decisions slow down or default to what feels safe internally rather than what works externally. Consumer-centricity becomes something organisations talk about, not something they practice.

Consumer connection is about closing that gap.

### Closeness builds the most impactful 'type' of empathy

Making the effort to connect directly with consumers builds empathy and it builds the most powerful kind of empathy. Reading about your consumers or attending a research debrief are important. It still builds understanding and empathy. It often gets called **AFFECTIVE EMPATHY**.

There is, however, a different kind of empathy - **COGNITIVE EMPATHY**. This is the understanding you get through doing, through experiencing, through living and breathing. It's the type of empathy you get by taking on the responsibility to step into the consumer's world with them, even if it's just by having a conversation with them.

Building empathy in this way also has a bigger impact on you and is more likely to influence your decision-making longer term

### YOU are not normal

The very fact you are reading this means you probably work in an industry that makes you very different to 95% of the rest of the population.

Even if you or the people you spend time with think you are representative of your target consumer you are not. You can be assured they care way less and know way less about the category than you do. It's very dangerous to think you can in anyway be the voice of your consumer.

Ironically, the further you get up an organization, and the more impact you have on strategic decision making, the bigger the gap between your reality and the lives of the humans that buy your products or services.

Unless that is, you AND the senior leaders in your organisation make time to spend time with them, see your category through their eyes, their language and keep your own perceptions true to their reality.

The more you can draw on those perspectives the better your decision making will be.

### It bridges the insight to action gap

The empathy gap we mentioned at the start of this section can also be reframed as an ACTION gap.

Forrester research confirmed while 74% of firms say they want to be data driven, only 29% say they are good at using that data to drive action.

Fueling consumer closeness in an organization, especially amongst those senior decision makers quite frankly means they can't ignore that consumer voice and simply have to listen.

You could argue that, rather than being a tool to uncover new or earth-shattering insight, consumer closeness is actually there to put the consumer front and centre in our minds. Just as you invest in a brand to make it salient in consumers everyday lives, consumer closeness makes consumers salient on a daily basis for business decision makers.

### CLOSENESS IN ACTION

*"I feel like the voices of the residents I met have followed me from the care home back to the office. It's grounding to have those voices of reality on my shoulder when we get back into the day to day of running our business, they are hard to ignore"*

MD, Pharma

# 02

## How does it add value?

*“The top 2 traits of an effective marketer are CURIOSITY and EMPATHY” Consumer closeness programs fuel both.  
Mark Ritson*

### You make better, more consumer centric, more profitable decisions

It goes without saying that the better empathy you have for your consumers, and the better that empathy is activated amongst decision makers, the better you can tailor your offer to them and differentiate versus your competitors

Brands drift when the people stewarding them become too far removed from the people buying them.

Consumer closeness acts as a corrective. It reconnects teams with the language consumers actually use, the emotions that drive choice, the moments where brands genuinely matter (and where they don't)

In multiple projects, direct consumer exposure has led to sharper brand positioning, more authentic tone of voice and communications that feel recognisably human rather than manufactured

“Your company is 50% more likely to over perform if it incorporates direct employee-consumer connection at multiple stages of the planning process” HBR

“...88% of all CEOs believe getting closer to the consumer is a top business strategy over the next 5 years” IBM

### Closeness helps you drive more value from and better activate existing knowledge

Consumer closeness doesn't replace research. It amplifies it.

It can be used at any stage in the brand cycle or development funnel and can enhance and inform the other insight you collect from more 'formal' methods.

Have you invested a significant amount in a segmentation or demand space model? Why not use a series of consumer closeness sessions to truly bring those segments or occasions to life for your teams. Get teams living with and experiencing those people and places. It will have far greater impact than words in a research report and cement the longevity and value of that investment.

### You make better, faster decisions in the absence of 'formal' research

Let's face it, research budgets have never been tighter. There's not always the luxury of doing fresh research. Decisions may need to be made with your 'gut'.

That's where having built better empathy with a program of consumer closeness really adds value. That effort has paid into your own 'empathy bank'.

Keeping your teams fed on a regular nutritious diet of closeness will enable them to make 'healthier' more consumer-centric decisions on a daily basis.

### You build a more engaged, consumer centric organisation

One of the most underestimated benefits of consumer connection is its internal impact.

It is energizing (we call it the **MINGLE TINGLE**).

People consistently tell us that spending time with consumers is one of the most motivating parts of their job – especially for senior leaders who are often the most removed from day-to-day consumer reality.

When leaders participate, something powerful happens:  
- Consumer-centricity stops being a slogan and becomes a behaviour - Teams feel permission to prioritise the consumer in decisions - Momentum builds naturally across the organisation

Our experience shows that connection initiatives are significantly more effective when senior leaders are visibly involved

*“The company wide consumer activity we used to activate our segmentation has been transformative. Everyone in the business is now excited about the work. Our target consumer isn't just words on a page, only really understood by the marketing department, they live in the minds of the entire organization”*

*Marketing Director, Kenwood*

## CLOSENESS IN ACTION

*“We had a category that had suffered from a lack of focus. Limited research existed and we really didn't know what we didn't know. Within a week we got teams out and meeting with consumers who bought into the category both in home and in store. Those interactions helped us all build visceral understanding of category behaviours, potential barriers and opportunities. We could act differently immediately and make better-informed decisions moving forward. Including understanding the areas we needed to explore with more formal research. All for less than the cost of a couple of traditional focus groups”*

*Head of Insight, LVMH*

# 03

## How to do it?

*"The ability to see the world through somebody else's eyes and to stand in somebody else's shoes...strikes me as the most important quality we need in around the world right now."*  
Barack Obama

### Consumer closeness is 'informal' but benefits from structure

One of the many strengths of consumer closeness is its flexibility. It can take many forms but, from our 30+ years of experience of running programs, we believe our simple 4C's framework fuels success.

It's a great way to ensure you focus and get the most from the learning. Even though consumer connection is a 'low' cost activity, it does require an investment of time so we should be no less demanding of return on investment than we are for any other research.



**Clarify**  
be clear on your objectives. What are you trying to achieve (e.g. bring employees closer to their customers at a conference or event) or what decisions will this activity fuel and achieve (e.g. inspiring potential solutions to a specific business challenge)?



**Connect**  
get out there and connect in a way that best meets the objectives. This could be physically or virtually (see our examples for inspiration). Most importantly, make sure you have the right skills and tools to capture, share and act on your observations effectively.



**Consolidate**  
dive into what you've experienced. Download and share what you've seen, heard, smelt and felt. Uncover the interesting themes, similarities and differences in what was observed.



**Crystallise**  
capture your key insight and its application. How does what you've experienced address your initial objective? Act on what you've discovered.



**CLARIFY** is key to setting expectations but is also important to make sure everyone is able to get the most out of their interactions. It never ceases to amaze us how nervous some senior leaders can be about having a conversation with other humans. We can provide tools and techniques to make sure everyone is comfortable and has the best experience.

How you **CONNECT** is really only limited by our imaginations. Physical or virtual we've pretty much done it all, from working in care homes to partying with aspiring musicians in a rooftop bar in Chicago it often goes well beyond the obvious activities like home visits or accompanied shopping.

**CONSOLIDATING** and **CRYSTALLISING** the learning and experience you get from a closeness activity are often the things that get overlooked. Getting out and interacting with consumers is energising (we call in the **MINGLE TINGLE**) so don't just let that feeling dissipate as you return to your desk and your bulging inbox. Clients are often surprised how much learning can be extracted from what is usually a small scale qualitative exercise. Both stimulating new direction and enhancing existing knowledge

### CLOSENESS IN ACTION

*"We wanted to introduce a consumer closeness activity to our global leadership forum including our CEO and 160 senior leaders. Mingle were not only instrumental in managing logistics and outputs but also challenged us to clarify what we wanted to achieve from the experience. We could have recruited a bunch of typical drinkers and had the same old conversations about beer. Instead, they challenged us to connect our leaders with some really niche segments and we framed the session as 'exploring the edges'. It was inspirational, really challenged our leaders' perceptions and provoked discussions we would never typically hear in such a forum "*

Head of Insight, Heineken

# 04

## Top tips for doing it well

*"In terms of bang for buck, I believe our consumer closeness program is well ahead of any other research investment we make."  
Insight Director*

### Consumer closeness is relatively easy to do. Doing it well is harder.

Consumer closeness needs to stick. A one-off event is a great place to start but that misses the opportunity to transform your culture. To turn "consumer centricity" from something we talk about to something we just do without really thinking about it.

Based on our experience, the difference between initiatives that create real impact and those that fade away comes down to a handful of principles:

#### LINK TO STRATEGIC INITIATIVES

Consumer closeness isn't a 'formal' research technique but that doesn't mean it can't generate learning on your **biggest business issues**. Indeed, focusing on big issues gets participants **engaged** with and **excited** about those topics and may inform the need for future research with your more traditional techniques.



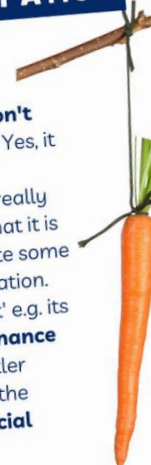
#### BRAND IT, OWN IT, SHOUT ABOUT IT

Consumer connection is an active, visible and highly energising activity. Capitalise on this by clearly branding and owning the activity to drive its visibility throughout the **entire organisation**. Make the output and the action it has inspired visible. Make it something people want to get involved with.



#### INCENTIVISE PARTICIPATION

A common reaction to consumer closeness programs can be **"I don't have time for that"**. Yes, it does take some time commitment but it's really not a lot. Added to that it is always good to create some incentive for participation. That could be a 'stick' e.g. its part of your **performance objectives** or a gentler 'carrot' e.g. we'll tie the activity in with a **social event**.



#### LEAD FROM THE TOP DOWN

The more senior you become, often the more **out of touch** with the reality of your consumers lives you become! Engaging your **senior leadership team** is a perfect first step. Once that group get the **'Mingle Tingle'** it also makes roll out of the initiative to the entire organisation far easier.



#### MIX IT UP

Consumer closeness can take so many forms both **physical** meet ups and **virtual** connections. The last thing you want is it to become dull. Mix up techniques to keep things **fresh and engaging**. That should be both how you connect and also who you connect with and what you discuss. Don't be afraid to **push boundaries**.



### CLOSENESS IN ACTION

*"One measure of success with any of our clients is how well we can truly affect cultural change in an organisation. Transforming 'consumer closeness' or 'customer centricity' from a slogan on the wall of a company's reception wall or glossy brochure into something that they just do, regularly and brilliantly. Something that teams look forward to and get real value from. Ultimately we should end up making ourselves redundant!"*

Morgan Arnell, Co-Founder Mingle

# CLAIM YOUR 1-1 CLOSENESS CLINIC

As you might expect we love a good chat. Why don't we continue the conversation?

In a world where AI and push button solutions are what make the headlines in the research world, we hope this short paper has inspired you to consider bringing some humanity and closeness to your organisation.

We are more than happy to offer AN HOUR of our time to chat through the challenges and opportunities you see in your organisation for better consumer closeness. We can elaborate on some of the themes in this paper and bring to life some of the projects we've delivered for the businesses below

Moët Hennessy



Abbott

graze



Unilever

Heineken



DeLonghi

gousto

KENWOOD  
CREATE MORE

Drop us a line:

Morgan Arnell  
Co-Founder & Director  
[morgan@mingleconnections.com](mailto:morgan@mingleconnections.com)  
+44 7801045864



28 years' experience leading insight teams in global companies such as P&G, Boots, Allied Domecq and Kimberly-Clark.

## Thank You & Happy Mingling!

