Why Every Experiment Starts With Empathy.

Because “more tests” isn’t a strategy, it’s a coping mechanism.

Hi, It's Me...

- **Abi Hough**
  Experimentation + UX research
  (the "why did they do that?" bit)
- **What I do**
  I help teams run better experiments by starting with better understanding - not more tests.
- **What I care about**
  Clarity before clicks: beliefs, trust, and the upstream signals that shape decisions.
- **Today**
  Empathy based on evidence, not vibes.

What we'll cover...

- Why experimentation feels harder than it used to
- What empathy is (and what people think it is)
- Where experiments really start now: upstream belief formation
- Behavioural psychology: useful servant, terrible master
- AI: Actor and accelerant
- The Empathy-First Experiment Loop (what to do tomorrow)

Part 1.

Why experimentation feels harder than it used to

And why this matters now.

The pattern nobody likes admitting.

- Many teams are running more experiments than ever
- But confidence is going down, not up
- Results feel fragile (they work… until they don’t)
- Teams end up testing interface fixes for problems that are upstream

More testing doesn’t guarantee more truth.

But it can guarantee more activity.

Why experiments fail before they launch.

Experiments usually don’t fail because of:

- Tooling
- Stats
- A button colour

Why experiments fail before they launch.

They fail because the hypothesis was born from:

- Untested assumptions
- Proxy goals
- A mismatch between what users were promised upstream and what they find on-site

Those are the arguments we hide behind. Here’s what’s usually underneath.

Many “conversion problems” are actually contradiction problems.

Example: The Checkout Drop.

Imagine this

- Checkout conversion drops
- Team tests checkout (simplify, reassure, tweak copy)
- A couple of “wins”… but revenue still wobbles

Your story was “they got stuck”.

Their reality was they stopped believing you.

Example: The Checkout Drop.

Why didn’t it work?

- Checkout wasn’t the problem
- Checkout was where loss of belief finally cashed out
- The cause sits upstream: expectations, contradictions, perceived risk

It wasn’t a usability failure.

It was a failure in belief.

Your turn:

Where do you think the real cause of failed experiments most often sits?

Part 2.

Empathy: what people think it is

Versus what it actually is.

Empathy has a branding problem.

“Empathy” has been flattened into:

- Vibes
- Niceness
- A workshop with sticky notes and emotional theatre

That’s why I roll my eyes *a lot*.

What empathy is NOT.

Myth 1:

Empathy = Intuition

No. That’s confidence without validation.

What empathy is NOT.

Myth 2:

Empathy = “We know them”

No. If you can’t name their perceived risk, you don’t.

What empathy is NOT.

Myth 3:

Empathy = Quantitative

No. It tells you what happened - not why it made sense to them

What empathy ACTUALLY is.

Empathy = evidence-based understanding of:

- Context: what situation they're in
- Constraints: what limits them
- Motivation: what job they're trying to get done
- Perceived risk: what could go wrong for them
- Belief: what they think is true when they arrive

Empathy isn’t sentiment.

It’s risk reduction.

Empathy starts before the first click.

Users don’t arrive neutral. They arrive with beliefs formed by:

- Ads, emails, affiliates
- Search snippets / comparison pages
- Reviews and social proof ecosystems
- Increasingly: AI summaries and answer engines

What it looks like: Upstream Scan.

Where to find upstream belief

- Search your key query (brand + category + “reviews”)
- Note the *promise* being made (speed, price, ease, guarantees)
- Check AI summary / snippets for the story being told
- Compare to landing page reality: where does it contradict?

This is how you stop treating the website like it’s the start of the story.

Experiments don’t start on the website.

They start where meaning is formed.

Example: The Checkout Drop.

With empathy

What we stop assuming

- “The goal is complete checkout”
- “The problem is friction”

Example: The Checkout Drop.

With empathy

What empathy surfaces instead:

- The user goal is avoid regret / avoid hassle / avoid getting burned
- The drop is a rational response to perceived risk created upstream

Empathy doesn’t add feelings.

It removes blind spots.

Your turn:

When users abandon, what’s most often true in your world?

Part 3.

Empathy as an experiment input

Before, during and after. Repeat.

Empathy isn’t a value. It’s an input.

Empathy improves:

- Hypothesis quality
- Experiment design
- Metric choice
- Interpretation

Empathy isn’t a value. It’s an input.

Without it, experimentation becomes:

- Extremely expensive guessing
- Optimised theatre
- “local wins, global loss”

If empathy is context + risk + belief...

Then it has to show up in how we design experiments.

BEFORE: Earn the right to test.

Before you write a hypothesis:

- What belief does the user bring in?
- What risk are they trying to avoid?
- What contradiction might they be reacting to?

BEFORE: Earn the right to test.

Fast empathy signals (low ceremony):

- Support tickets / complaints themes
- On-site feedback (“what stopped you?”)
- 5–8 short user conversations
- Replay + context (not just rage-click voyeurism)
- Upstream scan: what are we “known for” out there?

What it looks like: Human signals

Into a better hypothesis

- Ticket theme: “I don’t trust delivery dates”
- Feedback: “Why is delivery suddenly £X?”
- Result: hypothesis shifts from friction → belief/risk

This is how you stop using hypotheses to test the wrong thing in the wrong context.

DURING: What are we really testing?

Check:

- Are we changing an interface or changing a belief?
- Are we measuring proxies because the real outcome is politically hard?
- Are we trying to “fix” confusion created upstream?

If you can’t name the belief you’re trying to change, you’re not testing.

You’re decorating.

AFTER: Learning vs winning.

Ask:

- Did we learn something transferable?
- Or did we win a narrow local test that won’t survive contact with reality or replication?
- What does this teach us about risk and belief — not just UI?

A local uplift can be a global trust leak.

What it looks like: Trust Leaks

Local win / global loss (how it happens)

- More urgency: more regret → more returns/support
- More “optimised” flow: lower comprehension → higher cancellation
- Higher conversion today: lower trust tomorrow

Side note: This is how you kill retention.

Example: The Checkout Drop.

Empathy as an input

BEFORE (inputs):

- “Upstream scan finds contradictions (delivery/returns/pricing/claims)
- Human signals confirm where doubt starts

Hypothesis becomes:

- Reduce perceived risk created upstream” (not “make checkout easier”)

Example: The Checkout Drop.

Empathy as an input

Experiments move

- Earlier in journey (clarity + consistency)
- Metrics map to belief (confidence signals), not just clicks

Example: Trial Sign Ups.

Behavioural Science

Because not everything is ecommerce

- Interface story: “form is too long”
- Reality: “fear of spam + unclear limits + ‘what happens after trial?’”
- Empathy fix: clarify terms + reduce perceived sales risk before form

Now you’re testing belief.

Not decorating UI.

Your turn:

Where does your experimentation process most often lose the user’s context?

Part 4.

Behavioural psychology

Useful servant, terrible master.

Why teams love behavioural frameworks.

Because they give:

- Language
- Shortcuts
- Rational explanations

Humans love a rational story.

Even when it isn't true.

Three common myths.

Myth 1:

Cognitive load = “simplify everything”

No. Reduce uncertainty at the moment it matters

Three common myths.

Myth 2:

Loss aversion = “add urgency”

No. Reduce perceived downside or regret

Three common myths.

Myth 3:

Social proof = “sprinkle reviews”

No. Prove relevance + credibility for *this* user

Behavioural psychology helps generate hypotheses.

Empathy calibrates them to context.

Example: The Checkout Drop.

Behavioural Science

Without empathy, psychology becomes theatre:

- “Add urgency”“ (loss aversion)
- Add more reviews” (social proof)
- “Reduce steps” (cognitive load)

Example: The Checkout Drop.

Behavioural Science

With empathy, psychology becomes precision:

- Reduce uncertainty at the moment of doubt
- Reduce downside/regret before checkout
- Prove credibility for this user / this context

Frameworks become useless when they replace evidence.

Empathy pulls you back to reality.

Your turn:

How is behavioural psychology used in your experimentation practice today?

Part 5.

Artificial Intelligence

Actor and accelerant.

Users:
AI is an upstream actor *now*.
And a decision influencer.

AI is now part of the decision journey.

AI is shaping:

- How people discover you
- What they believe about you
- Whether they trust you enough to even click

AI is now part of the decision journey.

AI summaries will kill your clicks

- 18% of Google searches produced an AI summary
- When an AI summary appears, people click less
- People almost never click the cited sources

Pew Research Center, Google searches (US adults), March 2025.

AI cites most often are Wikipedia, YouTube and Reddit.

Not your carefully crafted brand pages.

Pew Research Center, Google searches (US adults), March 2025.

Teams:
Useful. Powerful.
Not necessarily wise.

Where AI genuinely helps experimentation.

- Pattern surfacing across qual/feedback
- Faster synthesis (“what are we hearing?”)
- Drafting variants and hypothesis options
- Clustering objections into themes you can test

The danger: scaled wrongness.

- AI’s superpower is amplification.
- If your assumptions are wrong, AI will help you scale them beautifully.

AI doesn’t create clarity.

It accelerates whatever clarity or confusion already exists.

Example: The Checkout Drop.

AI Accelerant, not judgement

Without empathy:

- AI generates 50 checkout UI tests
- You scale plausible activity
- You optimise the crime scene

Example: The Checkout Drop.

AI Accelerant, not judgement

With empathy:

- AI clusters upstream doubts (delivery/returns/reputation/claims)
- You prioritise contradictions to resolve
- You accelerate clarity where belief is formed

Empathy decides what you accelerate.

Your turn:

Where are you currently using AI in experimentation (if at all)?

Part 6.

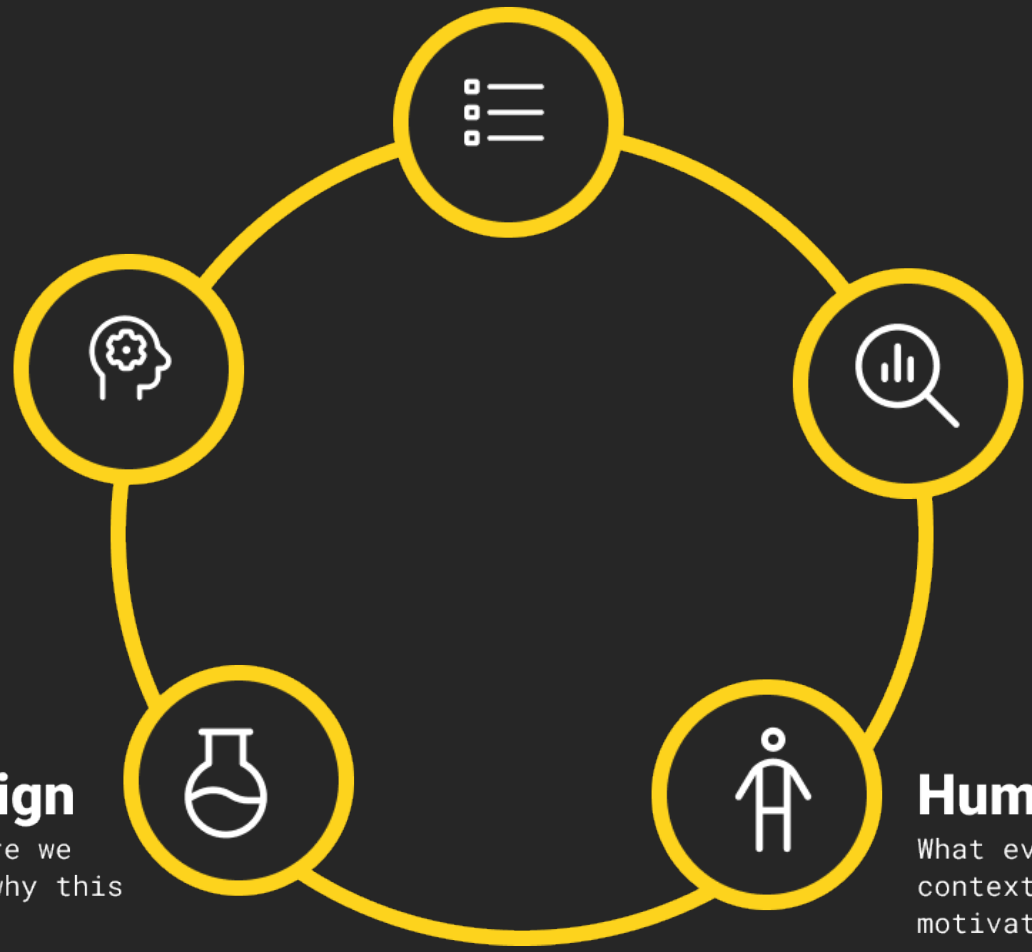
The Empathy-First Experiment Loop

What you can do tomorrow.

The Empathy-First Experiment Loop.

Assumption Audit

What are we taking for granted?



Upstream Signal Scan

What did they see/learn before arriving?

Human Signal Check

What evidence do we have about context, constraints, motivation, risk?

Experiment Design

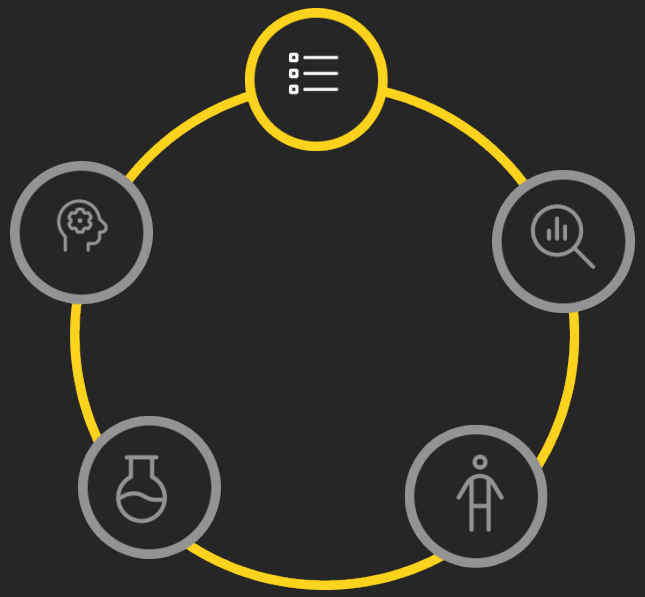
What belief/behaviour are we trying to change – and why this metric?

Learning Review

What did we learn that transfers beyond this one test?

Assumption Audit.

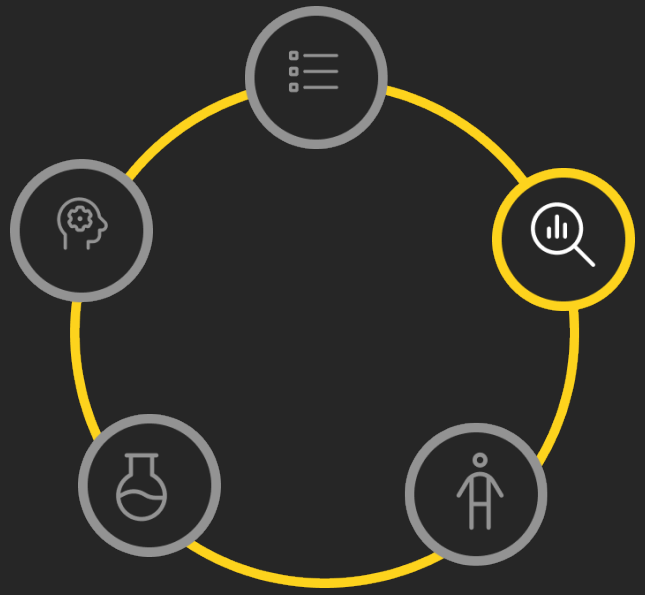
Name the guess before you test it.



- Top 3 assumptions behind the hypothesis
- What would falsify each assumption
- Are we optimising the right outcome (not a proxy)?

Upstream Signal Scan.

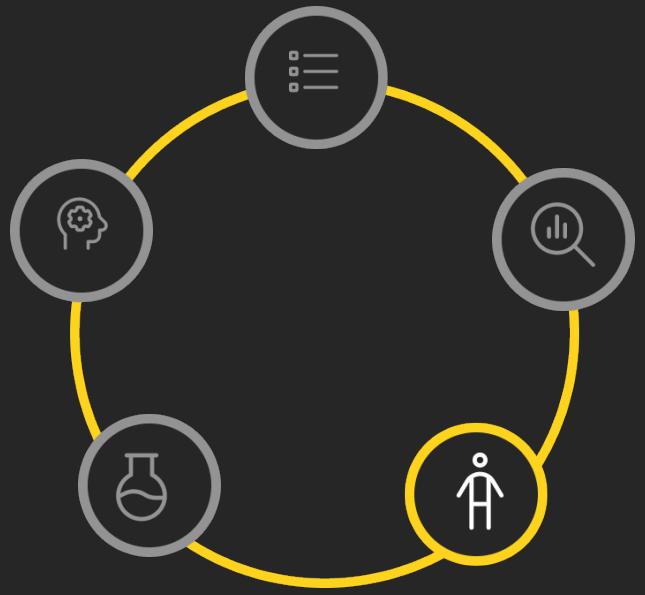
What story did they absorb before they landed here?



- Check ads/snippets/AI summaries/reviews for the promise
- Spot contradictions vs on-site reality (price, delivery, returns, claims)
- Identify the belief that arrives with them

Human Signal Check.

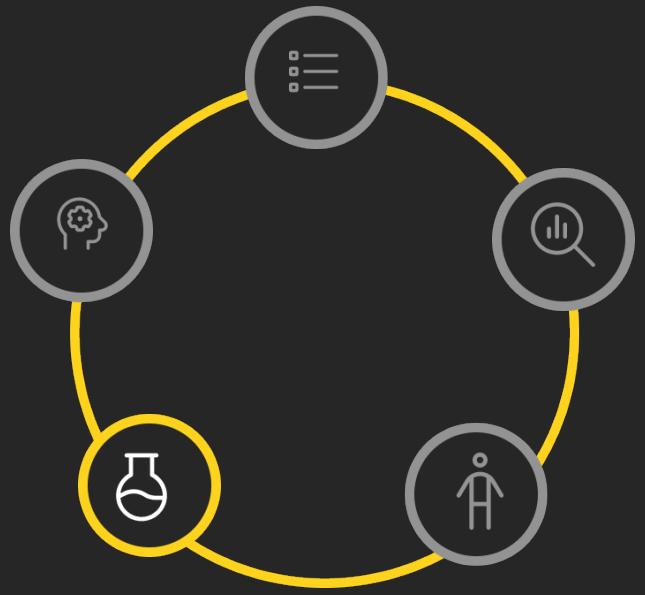
Borrow the user's brain for 5 minutes.



- Pull 1 fast signal (tickets, feedback, short calls, replays)
- Capture objections in their words ("what if…", "I'm not sure…")
- Name the risk they're trying to avoid (regret, hassle, hidden cost)

Experiment Design.

Design for the moment of doubt.



- Define the belief shift: “from X → to Y”
- Change the smallest thing that reduces uncertainty
- Pick a metric that maps to belief + add guardrails

Learning Review.

Turn results into transferable rules.

- What did we learn about belief, risk, or context?
- What segments/channels behaved differently — and why?
- Next step: ship, iterate, or investigate upstream contradictions

The one-hour version (for busy teams)

- Write your next hypothesis in belief language
- Add one upstream check: “what are we promising out there?”
- Add one human signal: ticket themes / feedback / 5 quick calls
- Decide what would falsify your hypothesis (not what would confirm it)

Empathy isn’t a vibe.

It’s how you stop running expensive experiments on the wrong problem.

Your turn:

What’s one thing you’ll change after today?

Thank you!

linkedin.com/in/abihough/

uu3.co.uk

Free Download.

Empathy-First Pre-Flight + Hypothesis Template

bit.ly/4a2cpxy