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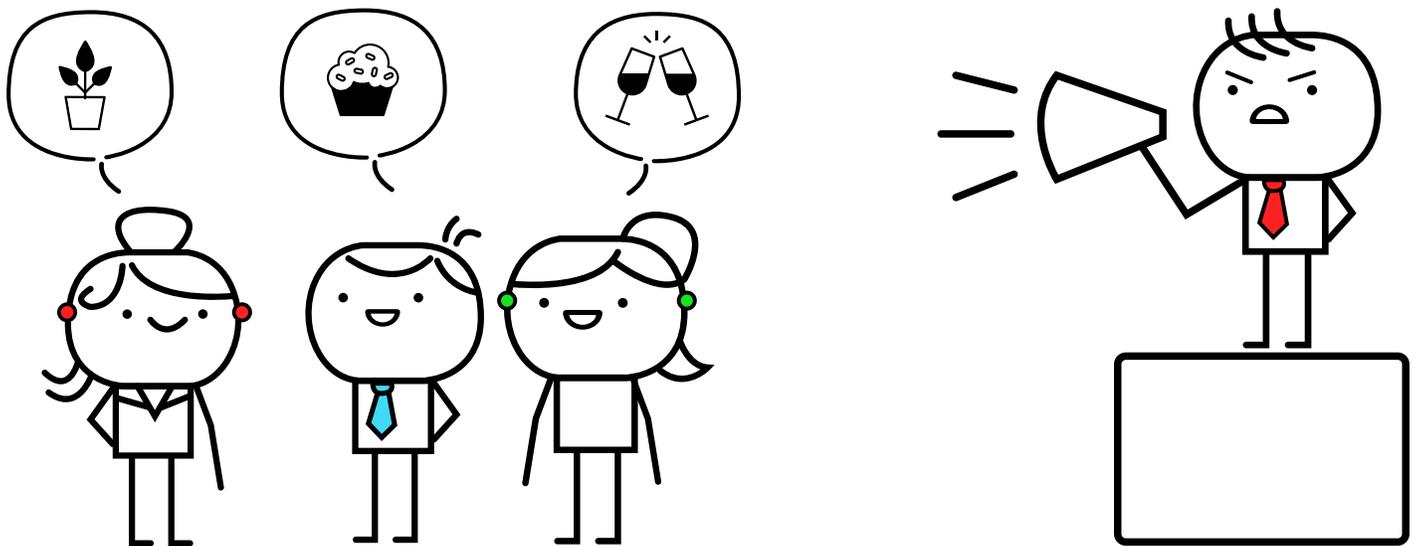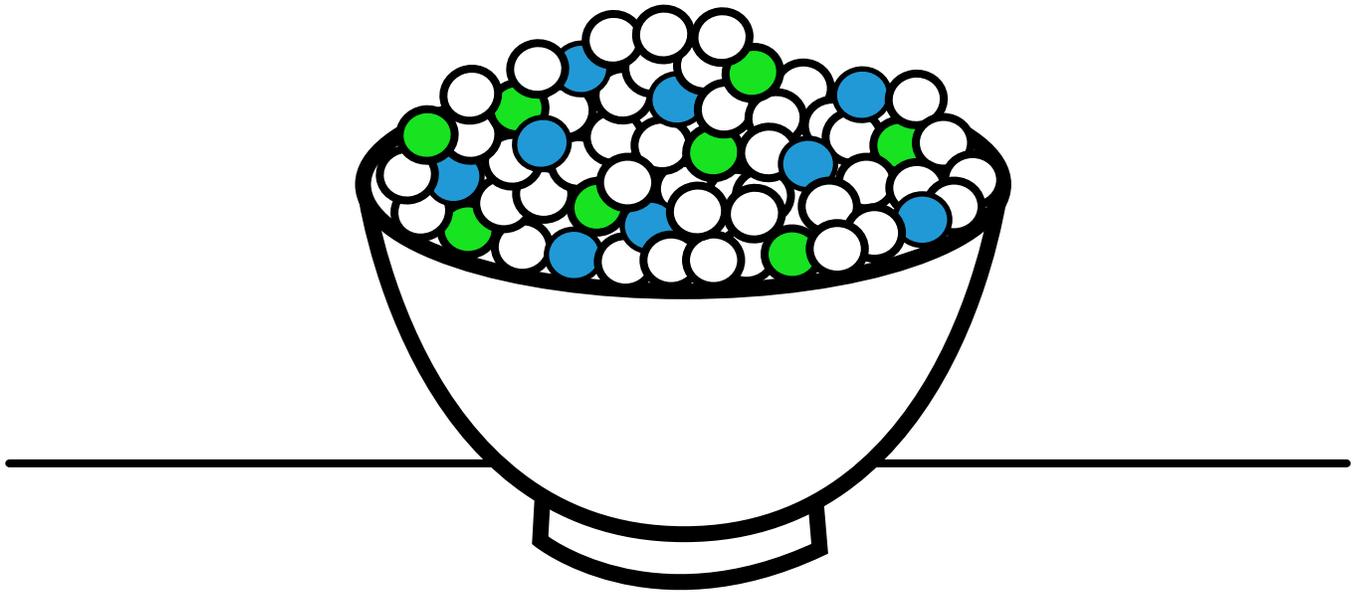
Why Hearing Your Customers Is So Important

Van Halen famously demanded that the brown M&Ms be removed from candy bowls at its concert venues. Beyoncé required her chicken legs to be "heavily seasoned" with cayenne pepper, and Rihanna will enter only dressing rooms outfitted with animal print throw rugs.

These unique **tour riders** get tacked on to artists' contracts as a matter of routine because they're in the position to personalize their space.

As interesting as it is to pull back the curtain on celebrity quirks, technology allows everyday consumers to personalize their experiences just like their favorite pop and rock stars do.

Thanks to technology, customizable experiences touch pretty much everything we do, from the shows and movies Netflix recommends us to even tasks as routine as ordering a cup of coffee. A customer can tell a barista (or even an app) how hot a drink should be, how much caffeine it needs, or even the amount of whipped cream or sprinkles to apply.

Sure, the mantra for customer service has always been that the "customer is always right," but customer expectations have moved beyond that cliché. Customers don't just want to be right — they want to be heard.

Make the customer the only voice in the room.

Personalized, customer-centered experiences are increasingly becoming a **driving factor in brand success**. By 2020, according to a Walker Information study, customer experience **will overtake price and product** as a brand's most important feature, meaning customers are quite literally willing to pay for a superior experience.

Just like an amused audience will suspend disbelief for the duration of a superhero movie, a satisfied customer will ignore an unattractive product feature or cost. An unsatisfied customer will extend no such courtesy.

News of dissatisfaction travels fast: A McKinsey study revealed that unhappy customers will tell **9 to 15 people** about their woes, while 13 percent of disgruntled customers relay bad brand experiences to audiences of **more than 20 people.**
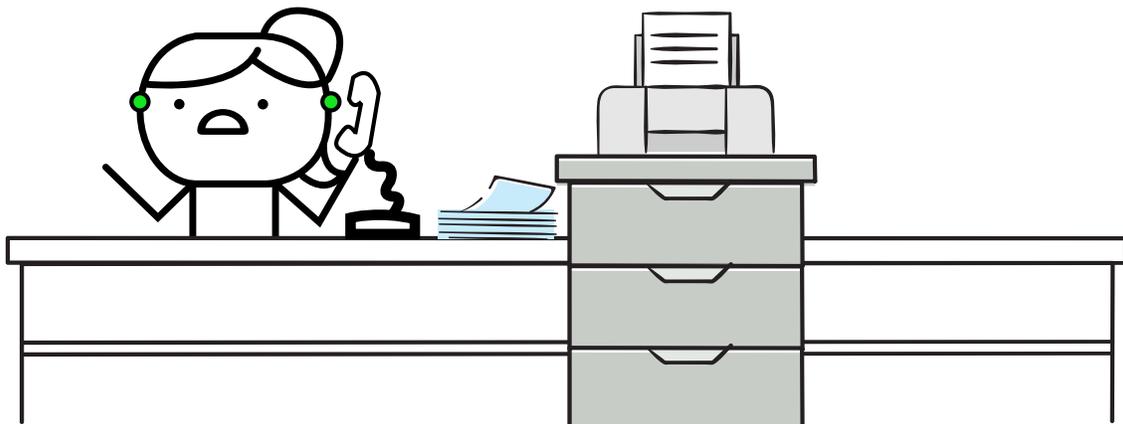
These costs and benefits are likely why Gartner predicts that **more than half** of businesses will redirect their investments to customer experience innovations by 2018. When customer experience can affect profits that way, the question becomes how to know whether customers are happy. The answer is deceptively simple: **Ask them.**
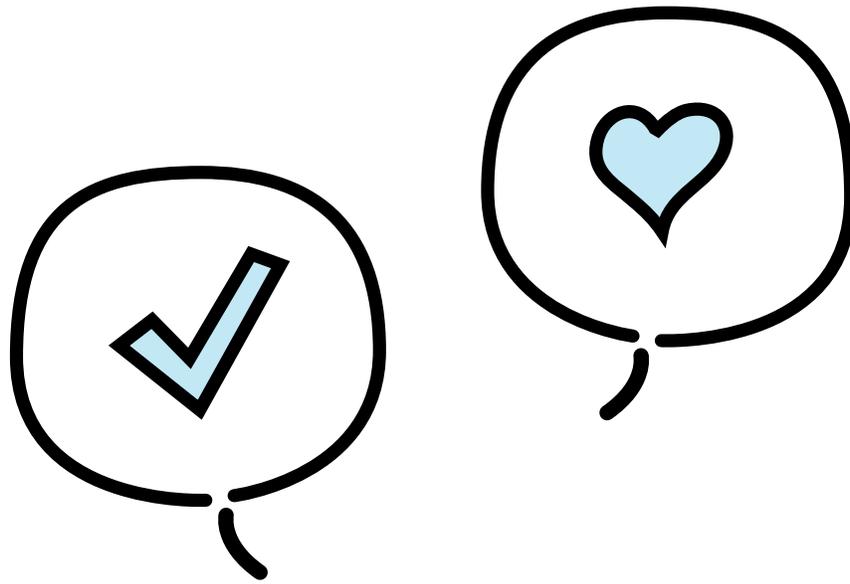
For decades, call centers have been customer conversation hubs. Customer surveys after sales calls can provide quick snapshots of how customers **feel about your brand** and can highlight salespeople who make standout customer service efforts.

Social media adds a more public layer to the customer dialogue. As Jay Baer noted in his book "Hug Your Haters," customer service on social media now resembles a "spectator sport," positioning ranting, raving customer reviews against a customer service staff. How (or whether) the latter responds can speak volumes about how your brand values its customers.

A less strenuous avenue for gauging customer happiness is through website data. Both active and passive measures can evaluate a customer's interaction with your website and can provide a good picture of your customer base.

Being customer-centric is more than just avoiding bad reviews and keeping people happy. A customer-centered philosophy has wide-ranging financial and cultural effects for your business.

From a profitability standpoint, it's cheaper to keep existing customers than to constantly seek new ones.

On a deeper level, making customer interests a top priority takes some of the speculation out of your business planning. When you understand your customers, you've built a solid foundation for decisions concerning new products or campaigns.

Sales must hear everything.

Gathering information about customers is what great salespeople have always done. In this **new customer-centric age,** that role is more important than ever.

Interest, time, and old-fashioned politeness may prevent a customer from responding to a survey or social media post about your product. But those are all somewhat sanitized methods of interacting with customers — it's like seeing a bull elephant in the zoo versus out on the open savanna. Your sales team encounters customers in the wild. The sales team members have nothing to protect them from customers other than their sales skills and their personal relationships.

That sales-customer relationship allows you to dive deeper into what your audience really wants from your product. A customer who knows his or her sales rep doesn't have to give a product or marketing campaign a simple thumbs-up or thumbs-down. That customer feels comfortable enough to offer more nuanced opinions, such as what needs improving, what is perfect as-is, and what is completely bizarre.

That kind of insight is hard to come by on social media because most social media responses skew negative. Sixty-three percent of consumers read negative product reviews on social media, and they're 50 percent more likely to share bad experiences on social media than good ones. That's certainly the place to go when you want to know **what's** going wrong, but it doesn't say much about the **why**.
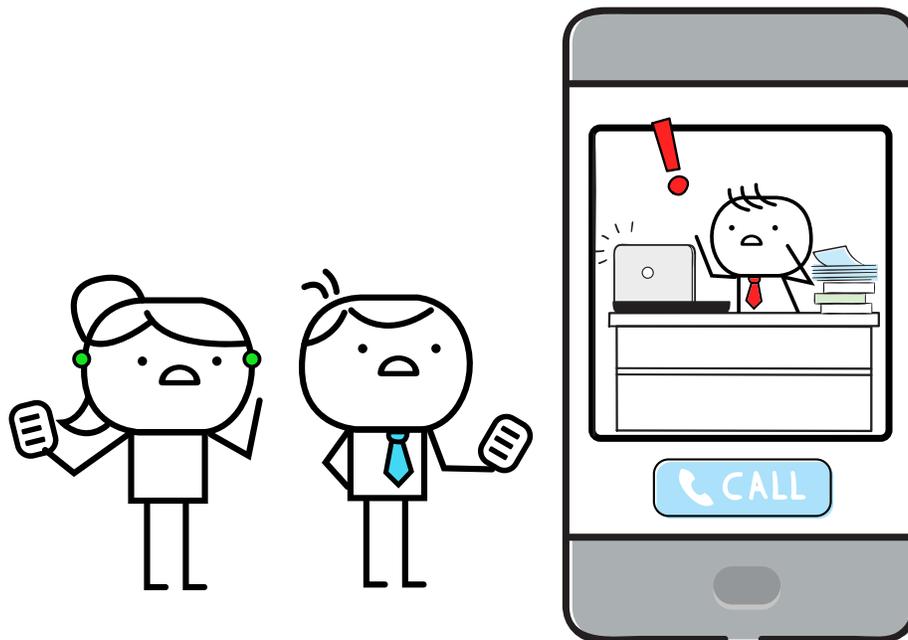
A conversation between a sales team member and a customer **(even an angry one)** distills successes and failures to a granular level. Unhappy customers, in particular, can show sales teams the source of their feelings, where interactions went off-track, and can even help brainstorm solutions.

General knowledge of relationships shows the advantage of this approach. You would never resolve a fight with your spouse if you were relying solely on social media exchanges, just like a higher-level conversation cannot be conducted with angry-face emojis and 'like' buttons. But just like any spat with a friend or significant other, in-person conversations with customers won't always be easy or fun.

When we first developed Eva, Voicera's in-meeting AI assistant, we figured users would be all about the dashboard full of options, but that wasn't the case. In talking with them, we figured out that not all functions of the product were created equal. People loved the "debrief" function more than we ever imagined but used only a limited number of verbal commands.

Our expectations crashed head-on into customer realities, but we came back with some changes. We de-emphasized some of the other dashboard functions, highlighted the "debrief" tool, and pared down our verbal commands. Now, instead of citing a specific command for the AI such as, "OK, Eva, action item," a customer just says, "OK, Eva," and the software takes it from there.

We would never have made those fixes if all we'd had were tweets to guide us. It took a sales-led focus on our customers to have an in-depth conversation.
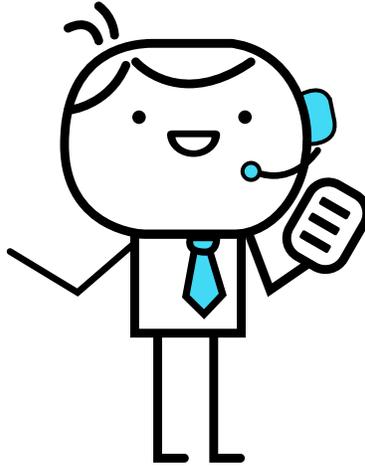
Create a Connection

Building the kind of sales-customer relationship that can transform your business into a customer-centric mecca is time-consuming — but not impossible. Here are a few ways Eva can help build that relationship.

1. Being there without being there.

It's funny and almost a relationship cliché, but you've got to listen first and listen more. Whole books have been written about building trust in relationships, but it always comes back to listening. That means your customer has to feel comfortable talking.

Don't show up to a customer meeting with your entire sales team, a crate of documents, and a platoon of tech support staff. The all-hands-on-deck approach doesn't usually lead to a good conversation, as it can be overwhelming for the customer to interact with more than two people.

You simply can't bring your entire team to every meeting, but Eva allows you to bring every meeting to your entire team.

If your solo sales rep meets with the customer, he or she can remain focused and attentive on the customer in the room, while Eva can help take note of what the customer is saying.

Later, anyone from IT to product development to fulfillment can use Eva's notes to hear directly the voice of the customer in order to satisfy the customer's needs specific to their departments.
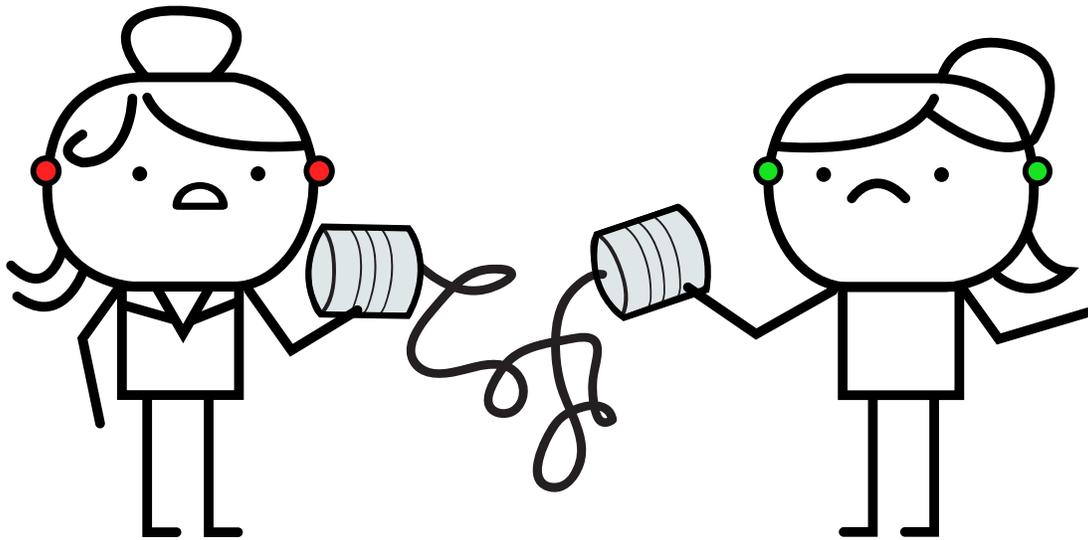
2. Keeping messages from getting lost in translation.

The highlights of an important meeting are sometimes passed along through so many people that the customer's words become muddled. **The last thing you want is an insidious game of telephone** to damage the follow-up on a client relationship. Recording and saving the actual words of the customer is critical, and a smartphone could do that. But just recording the conversation isn't a scalable option for your business.

People already spend too much time in meetings, so why pour time into ones you aren't physically attending? If you are just recording each meeting and forcing your whole team to listen to it, you just exponentially increased everyone's meeting time.

Instead, what Eva allows is for each department to listen to only the pieces that apply to their specific disciplines. If you need your development team to tailor-make an app feature for a client, don't waste the development team's time by making them all listen to 15 minutes of small talk.

Utilize the **Highlights feature**, which tells Eva to mark and capture specific, relevant meeting moments.

3. Encouraging efficient listening.

Not only does Eva allow your entire company to attend a meeting without being present, but it also contains analytical functions that segment a meeting into valuable data sets. That efficiency leads to faster fulfillment of a client's needs, which leads to happier clients. There are a few ways that Eva fuels efficient meetings:

First, you can look at the **WordCloud**, which provides a stratospheric view of what keywords and phrases came up in the conversation. Every word or phrase in the cloud is clickable and can take you to the point in the meeting when that word was mentioned.

Second, Eva makes the meeting **searchable**. You don't have to know that 32 minutes into your meeting you discussed "partnerships." You just need to search the term.

Finally, Eva has an **X-ray function** that predicts which moments in the meeting you would be most interested in. The X-ray is customizable, meaning you can tell Eva upfront which words or phrases should get popped out in any meeting analysis.

Making your business customer-centric is not about knowing which customers hate brown M&Ms, how they eat their chicken, or what kind of mood they need the room to be in; it's about prioritizing your customer conversations and really hearing their voices.

Every meeting is full of meaningful words and verbal static, but Eva lets you sit down in a room with your customer, dull that noise, and hang on to every single one of the customer's words.

In a world where we expect coffee to be brewed to our specific tastes and Netflix to remember our favorite movies, we expect first and foremost to be heard. Your customers are out there talking to you right now — **Eva is going to help you listen.**