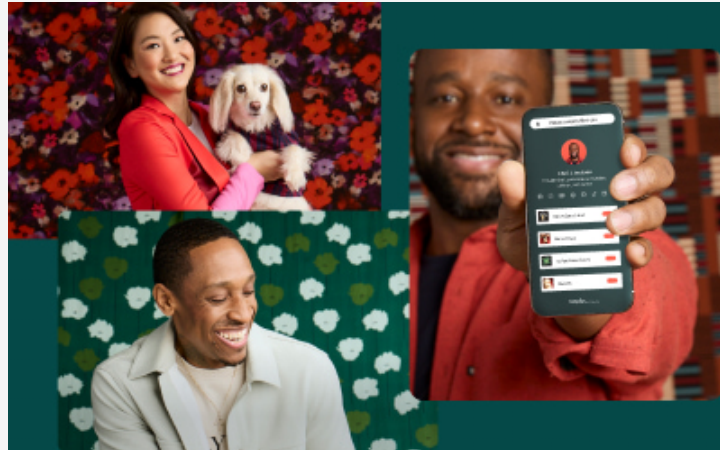



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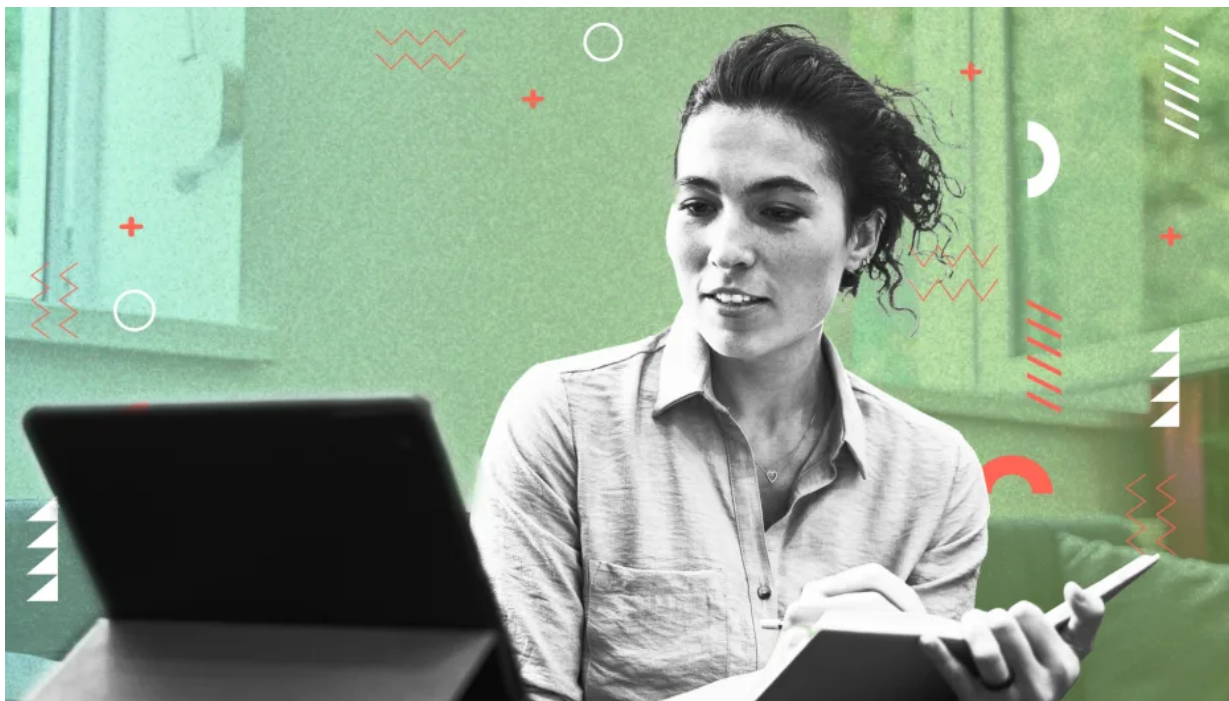
The difference between being customer-informed and customer-led

There's a huge difference in the level of commitment to acting on customer insight—and there's a huge difference in where it can take you as a business.

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BY JASON VANDEBOOM 4 MINUTE READ

Businesses need to know what their customers think—it's no surprise that they've devised many different structures and channels for capturing customer feedback. They have customer advisory boards, which are filled with senior clients from strategically important accounts who are invited to feed into product road maps. They trigger customer surveys from website visits, record customer service calls, and ask people to fill out reports when there's a problem.

Many of these businesses would describe themselves as customer-led. And some of them are. But not all. That's because there are subtle but important differences between being a customer-

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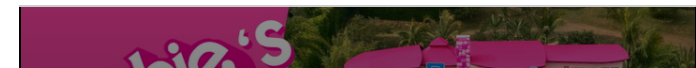
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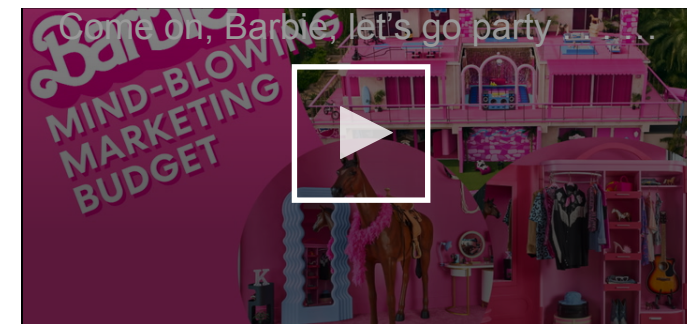
informed and a customer-led business. If you allow certain customers to provide input on the direction of the business in certain areas, then you're customer-informed. If you create a system that aims to capture strategy-shaping insights from potentially any customer, then you're customer-led. There's a huge difference in the level of commitment to acting on customer insight—and there's a huge difference in where it can take you as a business.

FREEING CUSTOMER FEEDBACK

Many businesses integrate customer feedback into a framework that's already set by their strategy. They've decided which customers' ideas matter because they've decided which sectors and areas of the market they'll focus on. They have a marketing-led growth strategy that's then informed and optimized by customer insight.

Other businesses have an engineering-led approach, following the internal logic of their product portfolio to decide what they launch next. They aim to keep iterating and improving their products, produce a road map, and then elicit customer feedback to fine-tune it.

It's important to point out that both approaches make a lot of sense intuitively. They add structure to a mass of insight that could otherwise feel intimidating and overwhelming. They determine in advance which type of feedback should lead to which type of action—and which team should be taking that action. However, they do this by boxing in the scope of customer feedback and curtailing its ability to generate really big ideas.



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Customer-led growth differs because it makes customers value the guiding force behind product development—and it doesn't predetermine what form that value should take, or which customers should experience it. It's more demanding of a business and its leaders—but it can expose you to a far greater range of market and growth opportunities.

THE VALUE OF GIVING ALL CUSTOMERS A VOICE

It starts with a commitment to giving a voice to all customers. Customer advisory boards are great for providing focused insight to help solve particular problems and build particular customer relationships, but they're not really designed to shed entirely new light on your strategy. They probably won't alert you to market opportunities you haven't already recognized, opportunities among smaller customers who could be bigger customers or opportunities in market areas where you're currently underrepresented. To stay alert to all of the forms of customer value that you could create, it's crucial to expose yourself to feedback and ideas from across your customer base.

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One of the reasons businesses often give for not doing so is that it's too complicated. Focused advisory boards are manageable, the theory goes, while trying to survey your entire customer base sounds like a huge research commitment. However, while research can definitely promote broader customer understanding, it's not essential for a customer-led approach. The fact is, customers talk

to, give feedback to, and provide insight to your business all the time. You just have to be prepared to analyze and act on it.

ACTING ON THE CUSTOMER INSIGHT YOU ALREADY HAVE

The broader customer feedback that drives my company's strategy comes from support tickets and comments that our customers attach to them. It comes from feedback forms, online chats, social media comments, and community groups. The nature of these channels means that we tend to get feedback from our most engaged customers—and that's a good thing because the feedback is more informed and constructive as a result. It helps us identify areas to improve and innovate. It also creates long-term advocates at scale: customers who were engaged with our solutions to begin with and now have the sense of being part of our journey.

All of this takes time and resources. It requires people with decision-making capabilities to spend time immersing themselves in the substance of what customers say: reading through tickets, chats, and feedback forms, and operating with a conviction that there are insights of real value to be found. We're a customer-led business because we recognize the value of investing this time. Analyzing what your customers have to say deserves to be prioritized alongside analyzing revenue or growth figures—because, ultimately, it's what those numbers depend on.

MARRYING CUSTOMER FEEDBACK AND EXPERTISE

Being customer-led doesn't mean solving every problem that your customers highlight—or solving them in the way your customers think you should. If you take customer value seriously as an

organization, you don't leave it up to your customers to work out how to generate it. That's why customer-led organizations still have road maps and strategies that are designed by engineering, marketing, and other teams. They use customer feedback to identify pain points and opportunities to solve them. They then use the expertise within the organization to solve those pain points in a way that's more innovative, more scalable, and more capable of delivering value to more customers.

There's an implicit assumption in many approaches to customer feedback—a false logic that because your customers don't understand the business as you do, their experiences, views, and suggestions carry a lot less weight. Actually, the opposite is true. Customer opinions don't come with prior assumptions about how you do things, what's possible, and why. They're driven directly by insight about where there's an opportunity for value that's yet to be met. That can be one of the most valuable sources of inspiration and forward momentum for any business. Rising to that opportunity and finding a way to generate that value? That's where you come in.

Jason VandeBoom is Founder and CEO of [ActiveCampaign](#), the Customer Experience Automation (CXA) category leader.

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BY FASTCO WORKS



As the founder and CEO of **Champions of Change**, Xara Tran understood she was the public face of her Melbourne-based IT consultancy but was wary of smiling nonetheless. The youngest child of Vietnamese immigrants to Australia, she and her crooked teeth hadn't been her family's financial priority. Over time, however, her reluctance to grin had become a professional obstacle. Where was a busy founder to turn for adult orthodontics? True to form, Tran assembled her own ad hoc market analysis and found most clear aligners (which had overtaken braces 20 years before) were too costly, complicated, and time-consuming. And 18 months of regular checkups were a no-go with her travel schedule.

Thinking like an entrepreneur, Tran imagined there must be a telehealth alternative—the orthodontic equivalent to Warby Parker’s much-ballyhooed disruption of eyewear. Unmoved by her dentist’s wariness at the idea, she nevertheless downloaded the **SmileDirectClub** app, opened SmileMaker Platform, and proceeded to scan her mouth with her phone’s camera. She then built a 3D-model of her teeth and received a step-by-step, month-by-month plan showing how SmileDirectClub aligners can straighten them.

As a customer, Tran was delighted, and as a tech CEO, impressed. “Putting on my professional hat, it’s an incredibly thorough end-to-end operation,” she says. Shortly after a second, high-definition scan at a local “SmileShop,” her treatment plan was approved by a doctor and a box containing all her clear aligners arrived in the mail, followed by regular online doctor check-ins—no in-person checkups required. The result was a shorter, more predictable treatment plan costing less than half of similar treatments. Or, as she says, laughing, “about the cost of a mobile phone plan—and I’ve gone through plenty of phones.” But the larger implications aren’t lost on her, either. What would it mean for the millions of young girls like she once was, for whom straight teeth—a once-unmistakable marker of the middle and upper classes—were suddenly within reach?

HIGH-TECH ORTHODONTICS

Although she didn’t know it at the time, Tran was one of the first in SmileDirectClub’s master plan to innovate dentistry through a combination of AI and one of the largest 3D-printing operations under one roof. Now live in the U.S. after a successful trial run in

Australia, the patented SmileMaker Platform will enable prospective customers to make 3D scans of their teeth, bite, and alignment using only their mobile device. Moving through a series of poses, customers not only capture the position of each tooth but also their interaction with each, which SmileDirectClub feeds to machine-learning models trained on two million data points to generate a “Custom Smile Plan” and a sneak peek at what your smile transformation could look like. This first-of-its kind AI technology was issued a patent in April of 2023 for its unique approach to generating 3D models of teeth, which powers the SmileMaker Platform.

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Customers, like Tran, will then go to a SmileShop to receive a high-definition scan or order a doctor-directed Impression Kit that is shipped directly to them to capture high-definition impressions. From there, a treatment plan—called a “Smile Prescription”—is created, and once reviewed and approved by a state-licensed doctor or orthodontist, customers can begin their journey toward a new smile.

“SmileMaker Platform is just scratching the surface of possibility for the future of the oral care industry,” says Justin Skinner, SmileDirectClub’s CIO. With SmileMaker Platform offering a scan in hand, the next step is “SmileMonitoring”—an operationalized version of the daily treatment plan proposed by the app. “We can track your teeth’s movement and compare it to your Smile Prescription, offering specialized guidance,” he explains. “Maybe a tooth hasn’t moved far enough, so keep your aligner in another week—or maybe you’re progressing faster than expected, so you can hop to the next one.”

QUICK AND COST-EFFICIENT

Readers of a certain age might wince at the memory of enduring metal braces for years at a time, with only occasional adjustments. No more. With its doctor-directed telehealth model, SmileDirectClub has shrunk the average treatment time to four to six months. Instead of having to wait for a doctor visit to change their aligner tray, customers can follow their doctor-directed treatment plan from home. “That’s great for patients, because it keeps them engaged—they can see the outcomes so much faster,” says Dr. Jeffrey Sulitzer, the company’s chief clinical officer.

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It also helps bring down the cost of treatment, part of SmileDirectClub’s mission to democratize access to oral care. That, paired with the offer of financing, can bring quality orthodontics within reach of a vast, untapped market—less than 1% of Americans today are treated annually and more than half of all U.S. counties lack orthodontists altogether. “Prior to our arrival, only the wealthy had access,” Sulitzer says. “Now, anyone with a smartphone and an internet connection can seek treatment.”

Taking doctor-directed treatment into patients’ homes has benefits at both personal and societal levels. Similar technology could transform oral health and upend dentistry, Skinner notes. “Do I have a cavity? Do I have periodontal disease?” he asks rhetorically. “Imagine if people became more proactive with their health rather than just waiting until their next cleaning.” This is

exactly where SmileDirectClub's innovation portfolio is headed, with SmileMaker Platform being the first to go to market.

The psychological effects are harder to quantify but no less profound. Tran reports her father had mixed feelings about her successful realignment with SmileDirectClub. "He was proud but also sad," she says. "In Vietnam, to have straight teeth means you're successful—and so he felt he let me down. I told him that it wasn't his responsibility—his job was to keep me safe and happy—and that I would fix my smile later. And I have."

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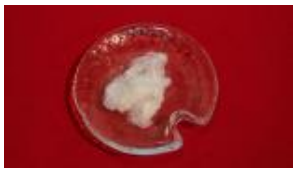
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