krisp | Startek

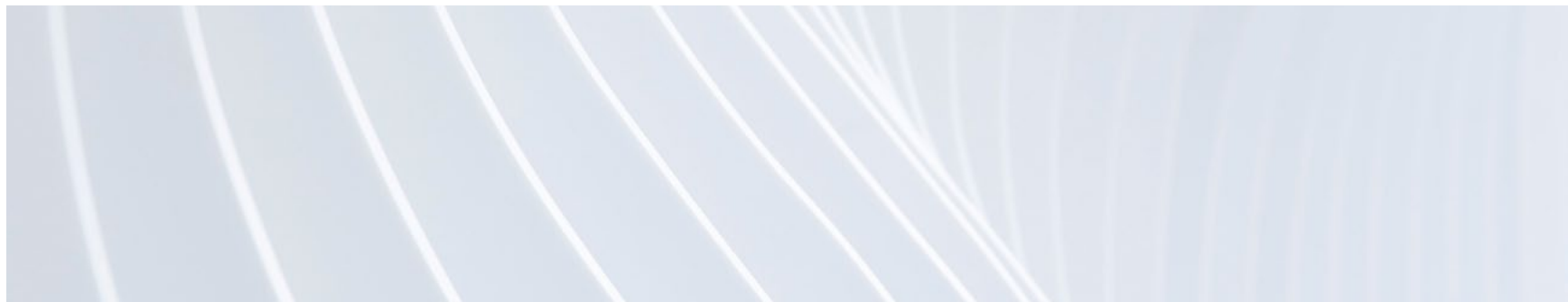# Weaving Empathy Back Into the Customer Experience

4 ways to build more effective customer interactions

Table of Contents

Introduction

The end-to-end customer experience (CX) has evolved rapidly over the last decade. This reached a fever pitch during the COVID-19 pandemic as many businesses, including brick-and-mortar stores, were forced to move their operations to contactless or purely online.

This had a huge impact on the relationship between brands and their customers. Once deeply rooted in face-to-face or phone-based exchanges, customer service conversations now extend asynchronously, with conversations taking place over time across multiple digital platforms and channels—from email to chatbots to social media and beyond.

While this has given consumers more choice around how, when, and where they can get support, the shift to digital has in some ways made the experience feel less personal.

New tools and next-gen technologies, like secure cloud-based solutions and advanced artificial intelligence (AI), have fundamentally reshaped how consumers now engage with brands. These new tools and technologies pull on a wealth of data and insights to automate CX, with the aim of making every customer interaction more efficient and, in many ways, more personalized. However, technology alone can't fully replace the all-important human element that still plays a major role in CX today.

The pandemic made it abundantly clear that consumers are not simply concerned with finding the fastest possible solution to resolve their issue. In the face of lockdowns and other health and safety measures, customers often wanted to hear someone's voice on the other end of the line, a reminder that they weren't alone and that someone was ready to help them.

Almost overnight a renewed focus and need for one-on-one human contact in the customer service experience was suddenly put in the spotlight. And although CX management companies, like Startek®, had been leveraging digital assets and platforms to train their teams on how to listen and respond with empathy for some time now, the pandemic signaled a new realization: the role of CX agents had evolved beyond traditional problem-solving alone. Not only did they **need to listen more intently** during customer calls—paying close attention to cognitive nuances in tone and language like never before—but they also had to **lead with empathy.**

3 human-centric trends shaping the future of the CX

Rapidly changing consumer behaviors have created new opportunities to use digital technologies to create empathy-led experiences. AI and automation are able to deliver fast, frictionless, round-the-clock service at scale. However, to meet evolving consumer needs, digital solutions must be built with human-centric design to make it easy for live agents to intervene, when necessary, to deliver a combination of fast service and human-like connection that results in customer satisfaction and loyalty.

As such, the future of CX is built on three core pillars:

1. **How this renewed need for connection can impact the CX.**

2. **How empathy must be trained and developed among CX agents.**

3. **How AI and automation can be reimagined to amplify the all-important human touch.**

In this paper, we explore how each of these macro trends is a byproduct of the challenges faced by both customer service teams and consumers throughout the pandemic. Then, we provide tips from CX management industry leader, Startek, for weaving empathy into every interaction. And finally, we take a closer look at how both Startek and Krisp are building voice-based solutions to transform CX.

> "**Effective customer conversations today are a mixture of AI and empathy. Customers want to get their issues resolved, but they also expect agents to listen intently and care about finding a resolution.**"
>
> **Abhinandan Jain**
> Chief Digital Officer, Startek

How the COVID-19 pandemic changed customer interactions

While the CX management industry has always led the way in developing market-leading experiences that engage and retain their client's customers, the COVID-19 pandemic nonetheless required us to adapt in real-time to respond to the fast-changing environment. the CX management industry must take this into consideration when reshaping the future of CX across the board.

But first, let's take a closer look at what changes took hold during the pandemic and how those changes have fundamentally evolved customer interactions moving forward.

1. Remote working changes the nature of CX work

Remote work was nothing new for the CX management industry, but prior to the pandemic, it was largely the exception to the rule. While the technology existed to make effective remote work possible, many clients held back—citing concerns about enforcing data security protocols or the inability for supervisors to provide adequate remote coaching and support.

The pandemic forced businesses to reconsider work-from-home solutions and gave CX solutions providers, like Startek, an opportunity to demonstrate that remote work was not only possible but also able to offer new benefits to a traditional brick-and-mortar approach.

Having invested in remote work capabilities a decade earlier, Startek was well-positioned to pivot teams quickly out of the contact center when the pandemic first hit, successfully shifting 55% of its global workforce to remote work in just seven days.

Although technology makes it possible to work from any location easily, adapting to working in a busy home environment was difficult for contact center teams accustomed to working on-site. CX agents were instantly faced with the challenge of prioritizing customer interactions alongside a flurry of distractions and background noises—from dogs barking to babies crying.

There was certainly a learning curve involved with this new way of working. Fortunately, leading CX providers were ready with tools and training to help their people to thrive in this unfamiliar setting, coaching managers and agents to succeed as a connected yet remote team.

Our clients quickly began to see the benefits of remote CX teams: Agents were more engaged, customer satisfaction improved, and staff attrition dropped as a result of moving to a remote working environment. As a result, many organizations that had not considered shifting their CX functions to remote work in the past now consider their new work-from-home model to be an important element of their long-term business continuity planning.

2. Expectations evolved in unexpected ways

At the height of the pandemic, many consumers were working from home while others unexpectedly found themselves out of work. Around the globe, the pandemic created feelings of uncertainty, fear, and anxiety. This alone drove a significant change in consumer expectations around customer service interactions.

Many Startek CX teams found that they needed to employ their soft skills more than ever before. They needed to show customers that they understood the world from their perspective and that they were ready and willing to help in any way possible. And in search of reassurance, customers would wait in line to speak with an agent, even when the information they needed was easily accessible via digital channels. Simply asking customers, "How are you really doing today?"—and then actually taking the time to listen to their response—went a long way towards meeting the customer's needs and delivering a better overall experience.

But this experience wasn't limited to Startek alone. A study conducted by Hiver found that **nearly 80% of consumers expected customer service to be more responsive and more empathetic** in a post-pandemic world. Meanwhile, nearly 10% of consumers expressed that empathy alone can define good CX, with millennials and Gen Z consumers "valuing empathy more than a timely resolution."

Approaches like the Startek Ideal Dialogue methodology were designed specifically to help CX agents conduct more meaningful and empathetic customer conversations. By leveraging and leaning into the science of communication, the Ideal Dialogue methodology empowers staff to be more attuned to the tone of a customer's voice during calls. By analyzing the specific words a customer uses or how their inflection might change throughout a customer service interaction, agents are able to gain a real-time pulse of a customer's sentiment.

3. Digital's growing role in managing CX

Digital technologies played an increasingly important role in bridging the gap between the contact center and the remote work experience. A great example of this is how Startek Cloud taps into the power of AI to provide CX agents with a single platform for managing customer service interactions seamlessly across multiple channels, including voice, email, video, social media, digital, and messaging—with the end goal being to create a more unified and consistent CX across all customer service touchpoints.

Additionally, it became clear that, in a remote working environment, agents not only needed a better way to maintain "temperature checks" on customer sentiment during calls but also have real-time access to their supervisors to receive the same level of feedback, coaching, and training that they would normally get while working in a traditional contact center environment.

This new working dynamic also raised two new technological questions around:

Nearly 80% of consumers expect customer service to be more responsive and more empathetic in a post-pandemic world.

— Source: Customer Support Through The Eyes of Consumers in 2020 (Hiver)

- **Potential quality issues:** The challenge of maintaining the same, high-quality VoIP standards when working from home—especially without knowing what kind of internet, wifi, or phone connection CX agents had access to—became a major issue. This could easily make the agent's job harder and place added strain on an entire customer interaction. After all, if a contact cuts out or a customer can't hear or understand what a CX agent is saying, it quickly turns into a sub-par experience, one that can negatively impact customer satisfaction and overall brand loyalty in a marked way.

  Even worse, for customers calling in about more sensitive issues—specifically, those that require them to share personal information—hearing disruptive "home" sounds in the background makes it harder to build trust and confidence in that customer interaction. This, too, can lead to negative CX.

- **Potential security issues:** CX management companies, like Startek, have very strict protocols in place around data security, including 'clean desk' rules and what tools agents can use to manage customer calls from start to finish. The number one priority is, therefore, to ensure that private customer data is protected. And knowing that issues around data security and customer privacy concerns are at an all-time high, using AI-enabled technology to both protect customers and boost their confidence in customer service interactions is critical to providing a safe and secure experience when CX agents are working from home.

4 tips for creating effective customer conversations

The very nature of customer contacts has changed dramatically over the past few years. As was always the case, when customers reach out for help, they expect to end that interaction with a resolution to their problem. And when that happens, they are more satisfied and, as a result, view that experience as a high-quality interaction.

What's changed recently, however, is an expectation for a more personalized, human-like touch across the entire customer journey, including voice-based customer service interactions. It's the blend of digital, quality, and empathy that now defines a truly effective customer conversation.

How can CX teams bring these pieces together effortlessly? To answer that question, here are four ideas worth considering:

1. Build human-centric customer experiences

At the heart of empathy is a true understanding of your customer's wants and needs. Creating experiences that see the world through their eyes and understand their motivations—all while delivering frictionless solutions to address those needs—requires effort. Unlocking data across your business and breaking down silos to create business-wide approaches is key. CX solutions providers, including Startek, are well-positioned to help derive meaning from unstructured data via cutting-edge analytics.

With a sound understanding of your customers and their needs, you can lean into empathy as the foundation for building best-in-class CX across both digital and non-digital channels.

Human-Centric AI and Automation

AI and automation can deliver fast, frictionless, round-the-clock service at scale. Empathy is even more important when building these kinds of digital solutions.

Empathy enables design with intent, allowing you to focus your digital solutions on clear use cases that deliver automated, AI-driven services that effectively meet your customers' needs. Empathy also protects against the tendency to simply create more channels—all at an additional cost—and, instead, focuses that effort on building seamless experiences that deliver on well-defined customer intents.

In this way, empathy also makes it possible to build accessible, effortless digital CX: from engaging in human-like conversations with digital assistants to having instant access to account information via customer portals.

Because empathy requires us to view each interaction through a customer's eyes, AI and automated solutions from Startek can help retain more customers in the channel, which minimizes the need to escalate issues to live agents, delivers greater customer satisfaction, and drives cost efficiencies.
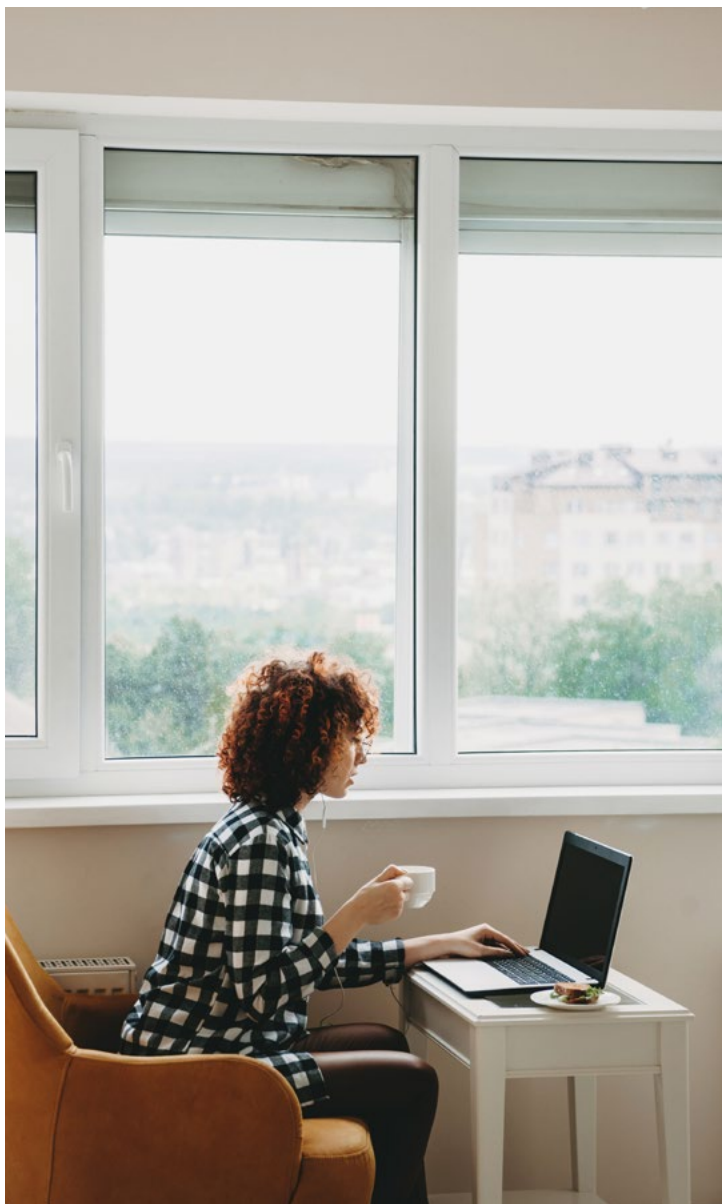
Empowered Agents

As digital customer service channels manage a greater number of low-complexity, high-volume, and easily repeatable interactions, live CX agents become an increasingly important 'moment of truth' in your CX delivery.

Whether via voice or non-voice interactions, only connecting with a live CX agent will meet the customer's need in moments of heightened emotion.

Startek leverages a full suite of cutting-edge tools to put relevant information at the CX agent's fingertips, helping them to hone in on customer sentiment, prompt next-best actions, recommend products and services, and automate administrative tasks to create a more personalized experience overall.

Empowering agents to focus more attention on the customer and spend less time on administrative tasks enables agents to resolve customer concerns at first contact, which delivers greater customer satisfaction and reduces average handle time.

2. Double down on agent onboarding and soft skills training

Empathy isn't something that everyone is naturally good at. Just as it takes time to master on-the-job hard skills, empathy is a soft skill that must be learned and then practiced until it becomes a habit.

That's why CX solutions providers must invest in smart learning and knowledge management platforms. These centralize information and give CX agents 24/7 access to learning resources to drive efficiency and effectiveness. It also ensures that the agent onboarding process is comprehensive and consistent, regardless of geographic location. This becomes even more critical when agents are required to undergo specialized training.

But this is only one side of the coin. With many contact centers operating work-from-home teams, CX solutions providers have put in place robust virtual training and coaching tools that ensure team members benefit from the same access to supervisors who can guide them in real-time to ensure the best customer outcomes. This has required contact centers to invest in agent assist technologies to bridge learning and feedback gaps caused by remote working.

These technologies make it possible for supervisors to work "alongside" and coach agents in a seamless way. Advanced, AI-powered predictive solutions can also provide team members with real-time cues around a customer's tone or sentiment while a call is in progress, helping them to create the most personalized and empathetic CX possible.

The takeaway here is simple: Ongoing learning and feedback are critical for an agent's success in a remote work environment. Investing in the right technology is key to helping them perfect the skills necessary to lead interactions that drive customer satisfaction and engagement.

3. Identify new metrics for understanding the total CX

Customer interactions have traditionally been measured via transactional metrics: the number of contacts, customer satisfaction scores (CSAT), Net Promoter Scores (NPS), first call resolutions, etc. While important quantitative measures for productivity and efficiency, they can't tell you whether or not a customer interaction was purposeful or meaningful.

That being said, there isn't a hard-and-fast metric for measuring 'meaningfulness.' That's why contact centers must go one step deeper to define the elements of effective customer conversations as well as what measures can be used to assess their success (or failure).

CSAT is a relevant way to create a baseline understanding of how satisfied customers are with their overall experience with a brand. But satisfaction alone doesn't tell you, for example, how a customer felt during an interaction. Were they stressed? Were they reassured? Were they confused? These are the new dimensions of customer interaction that can help us begin to understand the real business impact that empathy can have on customer satisfaction, engagement, and trust to create long-term, profitable business relationships.

> **"Transactional metrics around customer interactions are easy to measure, but they can't tell you the total impact of a conversation."**
>
> **Abhinandan Jain**
> Chief Digital Officer, Startek

4. Build a more robust tech infrastructure to support remote work

Even as people gradually return to office-based work, it's clear that a remote working model is here to stay for the foreseeable future. And although CX providers, like Startek, had to act quickly to support their teams while working from home at the onset of the pandemic, lessons have been learned around what works and what doesn't in this context.

For example, heightened security measures, such as endpoint hardening and virtual desktops accessed via secure sign-on (SSO), are critical for maintaining customer privacy and data security. Additionally, transitioning to high fidelity audio codecs, those that can overcome the challenges of local bandwidth issues or other tech challenges that inhibit agent productivity, can essentially render the difference between in-office and remote work obsolete.

Startek has, therefore, had to evaluate and implement solutions like bi-directional noise cancellation from Krisp that, with a click of a button, can eliminate background noise, remove acoustic and room echo, and even hone in on a single speaker's voice during an online call.

The AI-powered "virtual microphone and speaker" Krisp app, available on both Mac and Windows operating systems, integrates seamlessly with all headsets and softphones that CX solutions providers around the world use today. And because all audio (noise cancellation) is processed on a user's computer—and never stored at any point in the cloud or otherwise—there is no risk of any customer information being captured or stored by the app. This is further reinforced by the latest TLS 1.2 security standards and SOC-2 Type 2 compliance.

This technology helps CX agents stay focused, so they can lead more personal, secure, trustworthy, and stress-free customer conversations. It gives them peace of mind knowing that they no longer have to worry about any of the distractions happening around them. As far as the customer on the other end of the line is concerned, it's a one-on-one conversation.
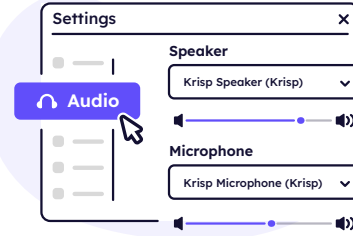
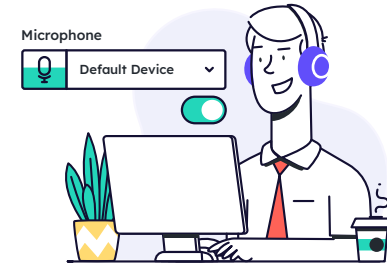# How it works: Krisp AI-powered noise cancellation
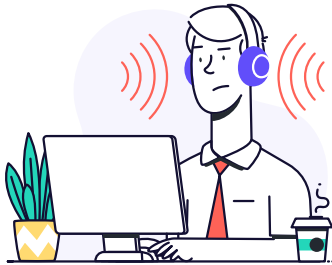
Background noise disrupting your online conversations?

Visit **krisp.ai** and download the Krisp app

Choose Krisp as your speaker and microphone in any online meeting platform

Experience crystal clear audio

10%
decrease in AHT

8%
increase in CSAT

78%
drop in noise complaints

"Background noise during calls can negatively impact CSAT and cast an undeserved shadow on an agent's performance. Krisp helps CX solutions providers overcome these challenges, empowering agents to provide a better overall experience with every customer interaction."

Robert Schoenfield
Chief Operating Officer, Krisp

The Startek approach: The convergence of digital and empathy

What if every interaction made your customer feel understood and valued? How far forward would that propel your brand?

At Startek, we believe that every organization can deliver a meaningful experience at every touchpoint by harnessing the power of empathy, looking through your customer's eyes to understand the world as they see it, and leveraging that understanding to build human-centric experiences that create an effortless 1-to-1 connection.

By applying empathy across data, technology, and people, we enable our clients to close the CX gap and build long-term, profitable customer relationships. To find out more visit **www.startek.com**.

Voice-based customer interactions are here to stay

Although CX continues to evolve rapidly in the face of new platforms and channels that customers can use to interact with brands or reach out to customer service, there will always be a need for digitally-enabled, human-assisted customer service interactions.

This isn't changing anytime soon. What is changing, however, is the need to create connected experiences across channels, understand the customer's intent, and direct customers to the right channel, at the right moment. It is not a question of either digital or live connections that are needed but rather a seamless combination of the two. Whether digital or non-digital, the experience must be built exclusively for customers, one that delivers a personalized experience rooted in a deeper understanding of their specific needs and motivations.

If the COVID-19 pandemic has taught us anything, it's that we, as humans, are constantly in search of personal connection and a genuine sense of empathy in our interactions. This is what the future of CX must be all about.