

Three cool customer interaction technology companies in North America

In a nutshell

Although a small set of companies have dominated the customer interaction and contact center technology markets for many years, smaller companies have quietly created exciting new technologies designed to improve the customer experience or increase operational efficiency. Flying under the radar in many cases, the innovative technology these companies offer can provide enterprises a competitive edge by improving the customer experience. This research describes just three of the many 'cool' companies flying under most contact center's radar screens. While by no means an exhaustive list, enterprises should use this research to begin the process of evaluating new ways or channels to provide customer service; technology providers, on the other hand, need to start thinking about partner versus buy versus build when it comes to these new technologies.

Ovum view

Cool. Some might argue that the very act of defining cool negates any coolness. However, Ovum's research often brings us into contact with smaller companies that simply ooze cool. They tend to be younger companies, almost always companies with product sets less than 10 years old and more often less than 5 years old. They take traditional processes and turn them on their head. They provide companies sensible and direct pathways into emerging technologies and trends. And they do it with a panache distinctly lacking from well-established vendors.

Ovum typically covers the leading lights in the field of contact centers and customer interaction technologies because those companies' market share clearly illustrate that enterprises care about those vendors and their technology direction. But that often covers the same few names at the expense of the smaller companies rapidly innovating around the edges of a traditional market space or forging a whole new path. This report attempts, in a small way, to rectify that situation and explicitly concerns itself with companies rarely in the limelight. The three companies profiled herein all have these things in common—the things that make them cool:

- Younger than the typical contact center technology provider
- Focused on improving the customer experience, often in ways unrelated to specifics on a single agent on the phone with a single customer
- Providing their technology in an on-demand model
- Providing solutions to common real-world issues while, at the same time, leading the way by focusing on cutting-edge issues
- Most importantly, taking what are normally seen as tactical tools and processes and revamping them into strategic assets

Human resources drives operational improvement

FurstPerson: improve the customer experience through better people

Because every enterprise larger than a sole proprietorship needs to hire employees, thousands of companies promise to provide technology and services to drive performance improvement for the recruitment, selection, and retention of new hires. For contact centers that assume that their prospective agents are a fungible asset and expect to do large-scale tactical replacements of agents over time, such basic and generic human resources tools are likely powerful enough. But some contact centers seek new ways to improve their customer experience, having already focused their attention on bettering their technology and operational processes.

For those companies, turning the human resources process into a strategic priority can provide a stable workforce of well-qualified agents, hired into positions for which their skills make them likely to succeed – exactly the types of agent required to drive improved customer experiences. A company so inclined, however, will discover a paucity of options if it goes looking for contact-center-specific strategic talent management tools.

One of the few companies focused squarely on the problem is FurstPerson, a small company that helps contact centers create a more integrated approach to talent management. The company was founded in 1997 to provide temporary staffing for contact centers in the mid-western US. As part of that mission, the company developed its own contact-center-specific tools for talent management. It then began to offer those applications to other companies and eventually exited the staffing business altogether. FurstPerson now offers a growing array of applications and consulting designed to help contact centers reduce turnover, improve new hire job performance quality, reduce hiring costs, increase revenues and profits, and improve the customer experience.

Its applications provide pre-employment assessments and expert hiring systems, and the company also provides associated consulting services. FurstPerson's on-demand applications provide candidate screening tools and pre-employment assessment tests for most types of agent role, from collections to customer support to sales. The benefits that the company touts read like a dream wishlist for most contact center operations executives, including reduced turnover during the first 90 days, enhanced new hire performance in standard call handling performance indicators, as well as increased sales through new hires.

FurstPerson already has about 60 customers with active deployments in the US, Canada, UK, Asia, and South & Central America (through its Spanish language version), and its solutions cover more than 100,000 agent positions. Its marquee name customers include the Dish Network, as well leading telecoms and insurance providers.

Over the past 12–18 months, FurstPerson has also seen burgeoning interest from outsourcers as those companies recognize that they need to improve performance for their customers, and one of the last untapped areas for them is in improving their people. FurstPerson has developed an innovative tool to help offshore outsourcers quickly assess the English language proficiency of non-native speakers, essentially measuring how offshore agents will sound to domestic consumers. Leveraging technology from speech analytics vendor Nexidia, FurstPerson's SpeechScreen uses a

microphone or an IVR interface to run prospective hires through a script, records their speech and then compares that recording to the phonetic standard of the specified language.

The company has also created an innovative solution to target the growing need for agents with strong written communication skills, including agents that handle email, web-based chats, or social media interactions. The 1stScribe solution aims to predict competencies that are crucial to effective written communication. Although contact centers often have hiring tests for spelling and grammar for agents that will perform text-based support, the explosion of usage of social networking by consumers and enterprises alike spells a shift in the percentage of agents performing non-voice-based tasks. Solutions like 1stScribe can help enterprises recruit the right demographic of agent, but still ensure strong communications skills.

FurstPerson also has a core simulation environment that has job candidates play the part of an agent, providing them with three calls to handle. The CC Audition application attempts to measure:

- computer ability – how quickly and efficiently the prospect navigates through the simulation environment
- accuracy – how accurate the prospect is with details and information
- multi-tasking – how well the prospect can manage several tasks at the same time
- customer service orientation – measuring listening skills, decision-making, and how well the candidate followed procedures.

The company has crafted numerous versions of this simulation environment, including one for Spanish speakers, one for home agents, and one for sales-focused positions. The company has also created a version designed to measure how well the candidate can manage talking while also typing and performing computer navigation tasks.

Ovum's view

By focusing on an area in which contact centers have traditionally taken an assembly-line approach and providing a way to transform those processes into strategic assets, FurstPerson has pioneered a new technology category. Its tools help contact centers identify agents that will be well-matched with the tasks required of them – a simple enough concept but one that can directly improve the customer experience of dealing with a contact center. Its inventive tools for measuring written communications will only take on increased resonance as the social media craze continues to flourish. Also, due to its focus on the contact center, FurstPerson has little direct competition. The company must, however, grapple with the incontrovertible fact that most contact centers won't recognize the value of changing their standard operating procedure and will use routinized processes to hire direct replacements for agents that leave. This means that, despite all its positive charms, FurstPerson still has a massive market education task ahead of it.