

The Art and Science of Conversation

Fierce Conversations teaches the art of sensitive conversations and interactions and redefines productive communication methods.

Instead of making the most delicate workplace conversations tense or taut, make them fierce.

Founded in 2001, Seattle-based Fierce Conversations (fierceinc.com) has long been an industry leader in teaching the art of sensitive conversations and interactions and refining the methods of productive communication.

Amid the most atypical of years, the company's own art form – and the platforms therein – continue to evolve with the needs of its clientele.

In the summer of 2020, Fierce unveiled its 3D Simulations tool for virtual, real-life conversation training. Based on the time-honed seven conversation programs which Fierce has crafted over two decades, the simulations represent a digital pivot for the firm.

Previously, the Fierce model was based more on interpersonal interactions and training, holding sessions with Fortune 100 emerging start-ups to teach conversation skills by building scripts and then providing step-by-step execution in a practical, classroom setting.

In 2017, Edward Beltran was brought on as CFO to lead an internal digital transformation for Fierce and to concurrently build a digital foundation for the next levels of strategy. Working with a trio of pillars – Sustainability, Application, and Scale -- as transitional tenets, Beltran saw the proverbial writing on the wall for the need of a greater digital influence.

"Previously, we had no other way for populations to absorb the content we were providing; everything was in-class or in person," reflects Beltran, now the CEO of Fierce Conversations.

"And this would take people off-line for a couple of days, depending on what model the company wanted to work with to instruct their

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employees.

"The reality is that not everybody has the opportunity to be taken off-line," Beltran continues. "Think about a retail company. Their most critical assets are their customer service representatives who are connecting with customers every day. Or take a medical setting, where you're never going to pull the nurses off the front line. The next generation model requires different modalities to learn."

Beltran equates the modern model of micro-learning to the alacrity study of watching a YouTube video.

"It's about getting to the punch line faster and on scale. Going off-line for days, or having to read a long book or go through a bunch of binders isn't palatable; a lot of folks just want to get to that punch line, followed by reinforcement," he adds. "In addition, taking all these executives and employees off-line, even for just a few days, is expensive. The pillar of scale is about us getting these punch lines, these scenarios, out to mass audiences at a very low cost."

The new 3D Simulations from Fierce present succinct, 15-minute, real-world scenarios and training using avatars on each end of the conversation; the situations, atmosphere, and even the people are created upon an adaptable platform. Specified workplaces and customized solutions can be provided to present the look and feel of the workplace and a company's environment, just as the subject matter may be tailored to a company's real-time issues or encumbrances.

"This isn't meant to replace human interaction or conversations; it's meant to augment and make it easier," Beltran is fast to note. "And, from a logistics perspective, you can now practice as many times as you want, whenever you want."

The conversation simulations aren't crafted to talk about the weather. Rather, across and amid an unprecedented year of challenges the world over, the engagements touch upon topics both sensitive and discordant, ranging from

race to gender to inclusivity to COVID-19.

"Some conversations around touchy topics aren't as effective in-person," Beltran says. "What we're dealing with right now – from divisive politics to racial issues in our country – a classroom setting, with being split into groups and talking face-to-face, that's a lot more difficult for many people to truly engage in these conversations; even though it's a simulated situation, it can lead to these sensitive topics turning into heated discussions. The 3D Simulations can present a safer environment to effectively explore how to engage in these kinds of conversations."

Numbers bear out the effectiveness of virtual tools. According to global consulting firm Accenture, experiential learning improves learning quality and retention by 75 percent. For dollar signs backing the numbers: Allied Market Research predicts that the virtual/simulation training market, now valued at approximately $204 billion, will triple in value in the next seven years.

Earnings aside, Beltran is a big believer in the value of more efficient training leading to more effective application for employees.

"It's about making the connection easier, more palatable for employees to quickly connect dots; making it as easy as possible is key," he says. "By allowing people to experience an environment which matches their day-to-day workspace, that provides the look of their customers and what their customers say, it all goes to allowing the employee to more easily grasp their own approach."

Specifying a recent success story, Beltran examples a company struggling with customer communication across the onset of the novel coronavirus months.

"We're working with a large telecommunications company right now, and I went to their regional sales manager back in the spring, during the early days of COVID, and asked about the biggest day-to-day challenge for the employees. He told me it was the virus, in that customers were coming in and were on either end of the spectrum – some were super-agitated about either employees or themselves wearing masks, while others were very edgy and jumpy about maintaining their personal space."

Simulation scenarios were built out in less than an hour and soon sent to test market. "From a customer service perspective, engaging on this was key," he adds. "The manager had done a good job with the personal approach but was having issues with how this approach was deployed out to the employees."

Further examples of clientele, both timely and topical, provide evidence of the efficacy of the 3D Simulations.

"We also recently had a large hospital chain come to us with issues they were having in the dynamics between nurses and doctors," Beltran explains. "So, we built-out scenarios for them around how to provide better feedback in those communications, and how nurses could either confront or delegate to the doctors. And the results were amazing. We were actually able to deploy these same scenarios to a couple of our other large health care clients."

As a key accent to the simulations, Fierce has also created its Conversation Catalysts series for teaching and training. Offering diverse perspectives and expert voices to promote understanding techniques, the highlight series includes 3D Simulations with the likes of Dr. Yasmin Davidds on "Assertiveness in the Workplace" and Kaplan Mobray on "Microaggressions in the Workplace."

At a moment in time, when building bridges through effective communication is more crucial than ever, the best tools are needed to create rivers in lieu of dams. Efficient and effective, the 3D simulations from Fierce are bringing a needed toolkit. "The timing provided applications that were needed at this moment, but I truly believe that this is the move to address the three pillars we've created," he says. "When people have a heightened sense of need for a solution in their narrative, the connection happens a lot faster." — By Judd Spicer, California Business Journal.

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