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Profile

BACKGROUND INFO ON INNOVATIVE BRITISH COMPANIES

LoopUp

We meet the British company that claims to take the pain out of conference calls – while still using traditional telephony

KEY FACTS

LoopUp aims to give “a better meeting experience” without user training but using traditional telecoms

LOCATION
London and San Francisco

FOUNDED 2006

EMPLOYEES 120

WEBSITE
loopup.com

RIGHT Steve Flavell (pictured) and Michael Hughes have been joint CEOs of LoopUp since founding it in 2006

When you’re interviewing the CEO of a remote meetings company, you expect absolutely nothing to go wrong with the conference call. Yet we’re ten seconds into my call with LoopUp, barely past the pleasantries, and it’s gone pear-shaped.

“Did you, by chance, use our dial-in numbers, Barry?”

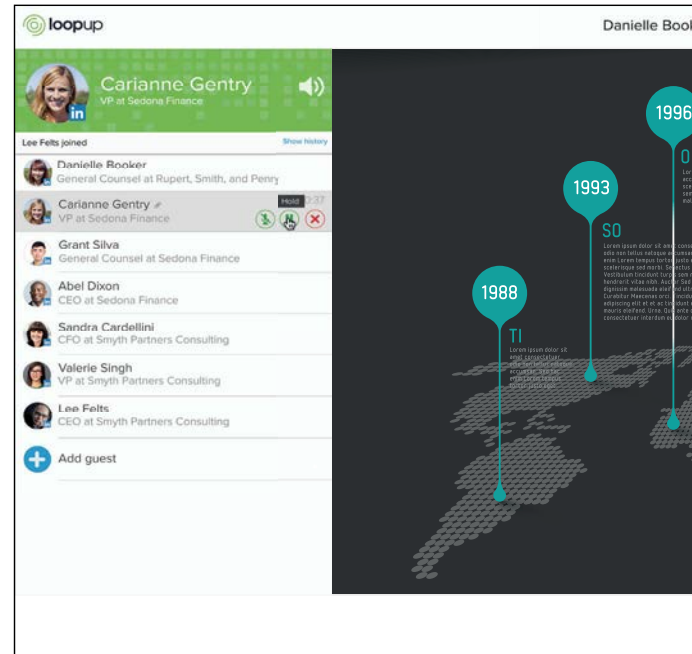
How does Steve Flavell know I’ve dialled directly into the conference, rather than enter my phone number and have LoopUp call me back, as his software urged me to do? Because when I’m talking, I’m not showing up as the active speaker on his screen – just one of the many advanced conference-call features that has seen LoopUp post 30% year-on-year growth for the past few years.

And so the old-school journalist, dialling in directly to make sure his recording of the conversation works properly, breaks the demo. Breaks the demo needlessly, at that, because the recording of calls is yet another LoopUp feature, with the administrator being emailed a link to the recording the moment the call ends. LoopUp’s CEO has the sheer misfortune of being interviewed by a teleconferencing luddite, but he soon puts me straight on why my 20th-century dial-in approach is being fast left behind.

Call chaos

Conference calls are routinely a dismal experience. Nobody’s quite sure who’s speaking unless they introduce themselves before they speak; participants on speaker phones ruin the audio for everyone; and even getting into the call in the first place can be an ordeal, requiring you to punch lengthy codes into your handset, with one fat-fingered mistake requiring you to go back to the beginning and start again. The internet alternatives (Skype, Google Hangouts and so on), are great if everyone’s on a rock-solid connection, but we’ve all been on calls where the wobbles outweigh the words you can actually hear.

Flavell and his San Francisco-based business partner, Michael Hughes,



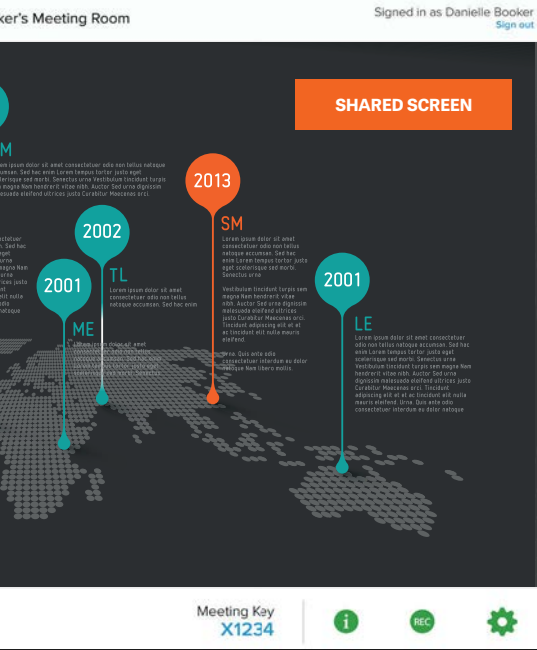
had tired of these flaws as far back as 2003, when they first decided there was money to be made in making conference calls better. By 2006, that idea had turned into LoopUp – the company the pair of them remain joint CEOs of a decade later.

“There were software-based products in the market,” Flavell says of the teleconferencing world of a decade ago, “but the 85-90% silent majority of people doing these remote meetings were still just dialling into audio-only conference calls with numbers and codes, and having to put up with a whole set of quite familiar frustrations. Things like having to ask ‘who just joined?’, or ‘who’s that speaking?’, ‘who is it with all that background noise?’. We set LoopUp up to provide a better experience for that silent majority of people who need to meet remotely in business.”

LoopUp is a software solution that still uses the traditional telephone system for its back-end. Invitees are sent a link to dial into the call, which they can open in the web browser of whichever device they may be using at the time – smartphone, tablet or PC. The web interface invites them to enter their name and telephone number, and in seconds they receive a call that automatically places them in the conference – no 12-digit codes, no saying your name after the tone, none of the usual palaver. “Once you’ve put that number in, it remembers it for next time, so joining a LoopUp meeting becomes just a couple of clicks,” said Flavell.

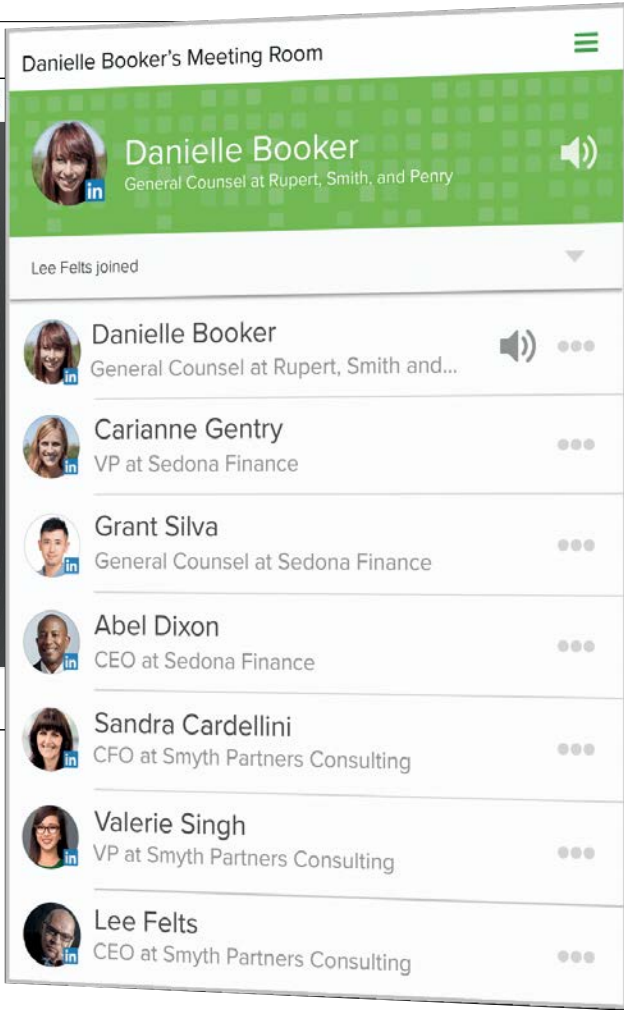
After you’ve joined the call, your browser is automatically redirected to a web page for that meeting, opening up features such as screen sharing and automatic identification of the person speaking at the time. And even if you’ve never met some of the participants, LoopUp helps you get familiar, with links to LinkedIn profiles or specific meeting profiles, where the administrator can identify people’s roles – handy on calls with several participants or external clients. (I can’t help thinking that had I been able to see the screen on our call, my profile would have read “Moron journalist who can’t follow simple onscreen instructions”).

The other big feature for LoopUp’s enterprise customers is



ABOVE After joining a meeting, you're directed to a web page, opening up tools such as screen sharing

RIGHT If you're not familiar with some of the participants of the meeting, LoopUp provides handy links to LinkedIn profiles



security: the system is ISO/IEC 27001-certified globally for information security management, meaning IT managers can tick a compliance box and not have to worry that confidential materials shared in conference calls will end up in the wrong hands.

■ Traditional telephone

Although LoopUp is operated through a software interface, the back-end still relies on the traditional telephone system rather than internet telephony. That's for one simple reason, said Flavell: reliability. Business customers don't have time to waste on dropouts or dropped calls, which is one of the reasons they're prepared to pay for a service such as LoopUp instead of relying on free

alternatives such as Skype. "For enterprise remote meetings, it can't be hit and miss – they have to work every time," said Flavell. "If you put VoIP in the product... it may be fine X times out of ten, but the times that it's not, it's just not worth it for the enterprise."

The ubiquity of traditional telephony is another huge

advantage. "You can use Skype with a colleague in a different country, if you know they're a Skype user and you know they have Skype on their machine, that's fine," said Flavell, adding the caveat: "If you're prepared to take the degree of risk that the audio quality may or may not be great every time."

However, Flavell claims it would be foolhardy for businesses to rely on free software for critical meetings with clients. "[Enterprises] can't rely on prospects, customers, partners, suppliers, external parties all having that software. You have to have something that will work more ubiquitously across internal and external situations."

■ Going public

There's no doubt Flavell has the same surety in the company's prospects as he does in the reliability of its

conference calls. Many British companies would have pulled their plans to float in the wake of the decision to leave the EU, but LoopUp remained firm, becoming the first company to list on AIM post-Brexit. It raised £40 million in the process, and at the time of writing, a gradual increase in its share price had added another 20% to the company's market cap.

Why did LoopUp take the risk of going public? "We were looking for growth equity," said Flavell. "We went public, rather than private, because in our market there's a credibility effect that's very helpful. We're selling into the enterprise... it's not a consumer product. We're competing against large companies like the BTs of the world and the Ciscos of the world. The credibility that comes with having shown we're suitable for the public market allows us to compete better in this industry."

Indeed, you get the sense that despite winning some very big corporate clients,

LoopUp wants to make itself known to a wider audience. The company approached us to appear in Profile rather than the other way round, a sure sign of a brand that's decided to get on the front foot in terms of public relations. In a field that's dominated by huge names such as GoToMeeting, Cisco's WebEx, TeamViewer, and of course companies such as Google and Skype, this relatively small British upstart is going to have to fight hard for every client. Which is perhaps why, for the first time, the company's made a free 30-day trial of its software available to potential customers.

Flavell doesn't only want to be better known by potential customers, but among other software companies too. He says a big focus for the company over the next couple of years will be ensuring that LoopUp integrates well with other collaboration software, such as Slack and Salesforce. "The winners will not just be the ones who are excellent at what they do, but are also excellent at playing well and integrating well with other excellent products that do different things," claimed Flavell. "You're almost looking for a collaboration world in the future that is like a federated set of best-in-class products that play well with one another."

"You may want to draw information into your remote meeting from Salesforce, show a Box document, collaborate on a Google Doc together. That's all fine, and the best-in-class products should allow that," he adds. It sounds like Flavell needs to organise a few LoopUp meetings with fellow CEOs... **BARRY COLLINS**

What about you?

Do you work for a British technology company that could be profiled in PC Pro? If so, get in touch: profile@pcpro.co.uk