



Live Chat & Texting: The New Frontier in Helpline Technology

Executive Summary

Technology has changed the way we communicate. Helplines existing in a phone-only world are getting left behind as the new generation increasingly relies on text and chat to connect. No longer is the phone the first recourse when we need to connect with someone. Increasingly, we prefer to type our way to human connection. Non-profit helplines that offer the alternative of live chat and texting options are making themselves more available to people in need in our progressive technological world.

This white paper breaks down the benefits of integrating live chat and SMS texting options into call center operations.

CALLOUT:

As of 2013, 91% of all people on the planet possessed a mobile phone, and 56% of Americans owned a smart phone. A cool 75% of phone owners admitted bringing their devices into the bathroom occasionally. (sources: <http://www.digitalbuzzblog.com/infographic-2013-mobile-growth-statistics/> and <http://digby.com/mobile-statistics/>)

Introduction

Traditionally, the telephone has been considered the optimal way to communicate with people who are not nearby. The phone allows two people to connect from anywhere in the world, at the touch of a few buttons, and instantly imparts an intimate, personal experience. Empathy, compassion, and confidence can all be inferred from tone and inflection of voice. For this reason, the telephone has lent itself well to helpline scenarios, where being able to create instant emotional rapport with a caller is paramount.

But a funny thing has begun to happen. Over the last decade or so, the phone has fallen out of favor with the younger generation. Suddenly, there is an entire population of clients for whom the telephone is considered an arcane technology, a clunky hassle, a last resort. This is the generation for whom the word "phone" has become an ironic way to describe a device they use for just about everything except talking.

Luckily, helpline technology has kept up with the times, and now it has become an imperative to offer live chat and SMS text functionality along with traditional telephone option so that clients can reach out in the format in which they are most comfortable communicating.

CALLOUT:

The best way to help your callers is, frankly, not to assume that they are *callers*. Some, in fact, might be better referred to as *typers*.

But it's not just about client comfort and ease of use. As helplines and 211s are quickly realizing, there are some added operational and strategic advantages to offering live chat and texting options.

Giving Your Callers More Options Meets Them Where They Are At

Every call center exists for one reason: to support its target audience. Whether your call center is a suicide prevention hotline, a resource for pregnant teens, a 211 offering local information about addiction, or any other type of hotline, chances are, your audience consists of a range of ages and personality types. Within that pool, you'll inevitably find a substantial volume of people more comfortable typing than talking on the phone. You may not even know these people exist right now, because they simply aren't calling you.

CALLOUT:

The benefits, especially with adolescent issues, have made [text options] an attractive option for hotlines dealing with specific social and emotional issues like suicide, depression and sexual abuse.

— NY Times article [“In Texting Era, Crisis Hotlines Put Help at Youths’ Fingertips”](#)

If nothing else, this is the singular reason for adopting live chat and text into your technology repertoire: it captures an audience too shy, awkward, or simply unable to talk on the phone because of their immediate circumstances. But there are other nuanced benefits to using text or live chat to communicate with clients.

The client experiences a flexible sense of privacy

The phone has an intimate flavor. Texting and chatting, on the other hand, naturally have a more aloof quality that can, ironically, put shyer clients at ease. There is an anonymity to typed conversations that enable you to capture an audience afraid to commit to the sometimes overwhelming experience of a phone call.

[“In Texting Era, Crisis Hotlines Put Help at Youths’ Fingertips,”](#) a recent *New York Times* article, noted that “Texting provides privacy that can be crucial if a person feels threatened by someone near them, counselors say. It also looks more natural if the teenager is in public.” For young people these days, the ability to carry on a private conversation from a mobile device while among family or friends or out in public is not just a *nice to have*; it's a must have.

You can respond immediately and succinctly

With the phone, a certain amount of small talk is necessary in order to build rapport. With text and live chat, however, it's appropriate to jump right into a subject with very little preliminary interaction. Typing in short-form mediums carries an expectation that communication will be truncated and to the point. Unlike the phone, it's not considered rude or abrupt to skip the small talk. For those used to communicating electronically on their laptops and mobile devices, a stripped-down conversation is the norm. This streamlines and simplifies the job of busy counselors and engages clients right away.

Conversations can take place over time

Occasionally, a caller gets cold feet and drops a conversation. With traditional phone conversations, this can be a dead end. If and when the caller decides to try again, she is essentially starting over in her attempt to reach out. With text and chat options, however, conversations are logged verbatim, and can be seamlessly picked back up by the volunteer on hand when the client is ready to resume. Text conversations can span seamlessly over time.

Giving your audience the option of live chat or SMS text ensures a fluid conversation and a stable experience in whatever format they are most comfortable with.

A Snap to Enact

Integrating live chat and texting features into your current call center is a bonus for your audience, but ensuring the behind-the-scenes integration of all of these channels is equally important. Whatever combination of channels you offer your service through; phone, email, chat or texting, a multi-channel offering like iCarol is always going to provide a better experience—not just for your clients but for everyone who works hard to make your organization run smoothly.

You can carry on with more than one “caller” at a time

Unlike a phone conversation, which insists that the volunteer be 100 percent focused on one caller at a time, in certain cases, text and live chat enable the volunteer to assist several callers at once. In the gaps while one caller is typing a response, the volunteer can assist another caller.

Seamlessly enlist support

iCarol’s Text and live chat also allow a counselor to bring in another counselor, manager or expert without a hold time or an abrupt shift in the conversation. To the caller, this transition is completely seamless, even be invisible.

Use standard greetings and other common phrases

While each conversation is unique and personal, certain standard greetings and phrases naturally come up again and again in conversations with callers. iCarol’s Live chat and SMS text options allow you to create a library of oft-used phrases to copy and paste into conversations, saving counselors valuable typing time, and also creating a consistent messaging throughout all of your conversations with clients.

Quickly text a referral

When it comes time to hand a caller a referral, live chat and texting makes this extremely easy, because referrals can be ‘pushed’ into a dialogue box from your iCarol referral database, again saving the counselor typing time and preventing typos.

Never lose a Chance to Connect

It’s not always possible to have enough counselors at peak or at awkward times of the day, or in some cases you simply don’t have the ability to set up a chat or texting service within your helpline. That doesn’t mean you can’t offer messaging as a crucial integrated service to your clients. With iCarol you can have chats be seamlessly redirected to a partner agency, and vice versa, so that your callers have the 24x7 support that they need.

Integrate smoothly with your website

Live chat and text technology is built into helpline software with two very important things in mind:

1. It must integrate smoothly into your organization's website and be easy to use, from both the client perspective and the counselor perspective.
2. It must ensure absolute security and privacy so that client information is never at risk.

Retain a written record

Conversations that take place over text or chat provide an instant verbatim written record. This is very helpful for non-profits, but it's also great for the client, who can scroll back through his text messages or take a screen capture of chat sessions in order to refer back to what a counselor told him during a conversation. This can be a pragmatic benefit, and it can also be an emotional benefit, giving the client a reference to refer back to when he is struggling in the future.

Report on all of the above

And lastly, SMS text and live chat functionality provides for a breadth of new reporting features that are well-integrated into existing reporting so that all client information, call logs, and referral reports are streamlined, regardless of which medium the client used to contact you. At the same time, you can access isolated reports of just live chat use or text activity. Reporting is versatile, convenient, and exact.

What about the future?

Technology is never static; there is always something around the corner. By preparing now with live chat or 2 way texting options, you can be sure your organization is prepared for advancements in connecting with mobile applications and social media venues.

Conclusion

With live chat and texting added to your technology repertoire, your organization suddenly has the versatility to interact with your audience more deeply and fluidly, and at the same time, to create a more efficient, smooth-running back end operation. You can meet each and every client exactly where he needs you to be—on the phone, via SMS text message, or chatting via web browser. And you can track every single conversation, verbatim, for a reliable and always secure record of client interactions. With all of these benefits, isn't it time you upgraded to live chat and texting for your organization?

Installing and integrating live chat and SMS texting functionality into your existing paradigm is easier than you might think. [Upgrade to iCarol Messaging](http://www.iCarol.com) by visiting www.iCarol.com and offer your clients the ability to interact with your counselors or volunteers via live chat or SMS text. Now, your nonprofit is a full-service, customer-focused operation with zero barriers to communication.