



Parentline Plus – Creating a ‘virtual school-gate’ community for hard-to-reach parents

Executive Summary

Parentline Plus is a national charity that works on behalf of and with parents. The charity wanted to offer their services to an additional 50,000 hard-to-reach parents of teenagers whilst reducing the cost per individual contact from c. £25 to £10.

Tribal helped the client reach an additional 86,500 parents and reduced the cost per contact to £5.77 between September 2008 and March 2009.

The solution needed to be innovative to engage and meet the needs of parents of teenagers in a way that was convenient and easy for them to use. Being a group that is counted as hard to reach by the government new ways had to be considered which parents of teenager found acceptable and that truly engaged. Working in partnership with Parentline Plus, parents and other stakeholders, Tribal through the process of consultation made this a reality with a unique online portal (www.gotateenager.org.uk).

This interactive site gives parents the opportunity to post their own experiences, advice and questions to support each other in a forum-style environment. It includes private messaging, articles, blogs and message boards to provide a virtual school gate environment.

Problem/opportunity faced by the client

Parentline Plus’s primary initiative was to deliver a new national parent-to-parent service which provides informal support, information and signposting to parents of teenagers. The vision was to replicate the social networks that parents of younger children can get outside school gates.

The objective of the service was to use a solution which best allowed parents to choose how and when they access support. Furthermore, the overall solution must help parents through the journey of bringing up teenagers by building their communication skills, self-esteem and confidence through understanding, listening and interacting. The goal was to equip them with the tools to tackle potential problems themselves.

The service also had to be cost efficient. Parentline Plus was aiming to reduce the cost per individual contact by looking at all relevant methods of communication.

Project background

Parentline Plus and Tribal understood that there was a need to create a ‘virtual school gate’ community for parent of teenagers in order for them to carry on networking and gaining support from each other as well as the school. Through consultation with parents of teenagers and working

in partnership with Parentline Plus research was carried out to determine the best way to communicate and engage with this group.

Research data from parents of teenagers was collected through consultation, focus groups and surveying callers to the Parentline Plus helpline. Key research findings were:

- data from the Parentline Plus website showed information about teenagers was the largest driver for users of the site, with 43% of postings on the message boards resulting in 44,000 page views and over 11,000 leaflets on teenage topics downloaded
- a focus group showed that parents wanted support on talking to their teenagers about risky behaviours from a website because it was immediate, private and visual
- 74% of parents to teenagers surveyed said they would seek information advisory services online.

The research findings strongly supported the requirement to develop a dedicated service for parents of teenagers, which provided a mix of an online information advisory service with access to further deeper and/or specialist support from a range of other sources e.g. telephone or face-to-face. A dedicated supplementary online service was viewed by parents as being the best way of finding support quickly without resorting to seeking one-to-one professional support which is not always necessary.

These research findings also aligned with the DCSF's Parent Know How focus on wishing to engage hard to reach parents including parents of teenagers. The DCSF was encouraging initiatives and directing funding towards services that were developing new ways to engage and communicate with hard to reach parents including this group of parents of teenagers.

Consulting activity

Further consultation with parent stakeholder focus groups and Parentline Plus frontline staff was undertaken following the evaluation of this research to weight solutions against project objectives and key evaluation criteria.

The key evaluation criteria included:

- appropriateness for target audience
- key parenting issues addressed
- Every Child Matters agenda addressed
- cost and value for money.

A weighted scoring matrix was used to define the solution and from the consultation it was established that to reach parents of teenagers, the service needed to be available both online and by mobile phone. Tribal's extensive knowledge and experience in dealing with the DCSF's Every Child Matters agenda at local and national level coupled with our technology capabilities enabled us to recommend the right solution to ensure engagement with the target audience as well as making the solution practical and sustainable to ensure longevity.

There was already a Parentline Plus website but new ways of thinking was required to address issues and engage the target audience. The portal service was innovative, new and offered additional reach because it provided social networking facilities, channels, extended parent support, signposting, easy and anytime/anywhere access, as well as a range of interactive and engaging materials.

Tribal worked with stakeholder groups involving parents, key agencies and Parentline Plus front line staff to pilot this methodology, customise the system, and make both data and language meaningful and specific to the target audience. Throughout the programme the project team sought feedback from stakeholders to contribute to an iterative process of continued refinement to ensure the solution met all client and user needs.

Through a PR and advertising campaign the gotateenager portal caught the National Press' interest with interesting and relevant content such as the teenage jargon buster. This resulted in 32,000 site visits in the first two weeks of the portal being launched.

Tribal played a key role in helping Parentline Plus achieve their objectives. Through consultation and cooperation between subject experts at Parentline Plus and the consulting, technological, design and production teams at Tribal, the project team delivered activities that are engaging, new and relevant to parents' issues. The portal service combined with existing telephone and face-to-face contact provides a unique and innovative approach to parenting support, allowing parents to choose how and when they seek help.

The innovation of the service is not only in the channels used for delivery but also in the content and style of delivery. These social network solutions engage parents' interest then build and sustain an informal support network by offering parent-to-parent support.

Success factors and challenges

The core project objective was to deliver targeted support and advice to parents of teenagers to reduce feelings of isolation, leading to happier and more positive family relationships and improved outcomes for children (reduced risky behaviours, etc). Ecotec were commissioned by the DCSF to independently evaluate the project to reach parents of teenagers. The following outcomes were established:

- 90% of parents who had visited the website had 'taken action' or 'planned to take action' in their relationship with their teenager
- 77% of parents found the site 'easy to use' or 'very easy to use'
- 74% of parents found the information on the site 'useful' or 'very useful'
- 73% of parents felt their expectations were met
- 72% of parents felt 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with their experience following a visit to the site.

Parentline Plus set a target to reach 50,000 parents of teenagers by March 2009. The final total was 86,500, with 32,000 parents reached in the first two weeks.

Parentline Plus also wanted to reduce the cost per individual contact from c. £25 to £10. Tribal reduced the cost to £5.77.

Further work with Parentline Plus following on from this project highlights the strength of the relationship developed between Parentline Plus and Tribal:

- Parentline Plus has commissioned Tribal to further enhance and develop the gotateenager site by developing additional tailored content and learning modules in a phase two extension to the contract, which has DCSF funding
- Parentline Plus has commissioned Tribal to consolidate and integrate their online strategy using the gotateenager site as a basis

- Tribal is also working with Parentline Plus (who are a consortium sub-contractor) to support the delivery of a £3.6m national contract to develop and deliver a national information service, the DCSF 'Parent Know How Directory' for parents and family service providers.

Client/consultant relationship

"We have found Tribal's personnel very capable and responsive and a good supportive working relationship has been developed throughout the process and with different teams within Tribal."
Nikola Mann, Project Manager, Parentline Plus

"Parents of primary school children enjoy a network of support and friendship that is lost when their children make the transition to secondary school. Gotateenager.org.uk plugs that gap by creating an online community for parents of teenagers. The social networking element is key and runs throughout the site, encouraging parents to interact, share tips and strategies and gain confidence to tackle issues."

Lucy Edington, Acting Chief Executive of Parentline Plus