SUCCESS STORY

Lifeline Australia
Providing Help and Resources to People in Crisis
Lifeline Australia wanted to add a live chat channel alongside its phone counseling services for people experiencing emotional crisis. After trying a rudimentary live chat solution and an internally-developed application, the organization conducted a formal search and settled on LivePerson. The service has grown quickly, with a 40 percent increase in live chat conversations from 2012 to 2013, and a similar increase projected for 2014. And it is reaching people when it matters most: 42 percent of live chat conversations deal with the topic of suicide prevention.

In the early 1960s, Rev. Dr. Sir Alan Walker, then the superintendent of Sydney’s Methodist Wesley Mission, received a phone call from a distressed man who later took his own life. Determined to do everything he could to prevent this from happening in the future, he launched a 24-hour crisis support line in 1963 to provide resources and support for people in distress. Today, Lifeline has 1,000 staff and 11,000 volunteers who operate from more than 60 locations across the country.

“Lifeline has a lot of brand value across Australia,” notes Sajid Hassan, Lifeline’s chief information officer. “The phone number has been listed in the emergency section of phone directories for 50 years. We are featured in public service announcements on television and radio, and it is well known that our services are free from mobile phones. More than 700,000 people contact Lifeline every year, and an average of 200 callers per day are in danger of committing suicide.”
The Challenges

- Provide a comfortable channel for crisis counseling
- Reach a younger demographics that is less comfortable with calling in by phone

The Solution

Engagement Model:
Live chat staffed by crisis counselors during overnight hours

Under the Hood
LiveEngage platform with Click-to-Chat

Customer Success
Deployment assistance and ongoing advice and scorecards

“Having a platform that is scalable and works well makes all the difference in the world.”

— Sajid Hassan, CIO, Lifeline

Trial and error with live chat

Adding a live chat channel alongside the well-known telephone support channel was discussed as far back as 2007. “At that time, upgrading the phone system was a much higher priority, as the organization was struggling to meet demand with existing infrastructure,” Hassan explains. “After replacing our entire telephony infrastructure in 2010, we started to embark on opening other communication mechanisms to Australians in crisis.”

Lifeline first conducted a 16-month trial with a North American live chat provider, but found the solution lacking in several ways. “Being an offshore service, it was difficult for us to have full-time support, and there was slow connectivity,” Hassan remembers. “Lifeline then decided to build an in-house system, which was unfortunately not the right decision. We did not have the right technology skills and mistakes were made in the underlying architecture of the platform.”

Deploying a better solution

Learning from these experiences, Lifeline conducted a formal market survey in 2012 to determine the best solution for the organization’s needs. “LivePerson quickly rose to the top of the list,” Hassan remembers. “It was recommended by Telstra, which provides part of our telephone infrastructure. And our testing showed the LivePerson solution had all the features we needed, and was scalable and reliable.”

LivePerson’s LiveEngage platform in October 2012, with a Click-to-Chat button displayed next to the Lifeline phone number on the website. The LivePerson Customer Success team worked with Lifeline to ensure a smooth deployment and maintains a cadence of touch points to make sure the organization gets the most out of the solution. “Every time my Customer Success manager calls, I tell him that I am very happy with the solution and it is working great for us,” Hassan says.

Building a stellar team

Lifeline started with five concurrent agents of the LiveEngage platform, but now runs 18 concurrent agents in the Brisbane, Adelaide, and Perth locations, covering all of Australia’s time zones. And while most of Lifeline’s 4,000 phone counselors are highly trained volunteers, the organization made the decision to use only paid staff for live chat services.

“Crisis counseling via live chat is a very different experience for the person providing the help,” Hassan relates. “When someone calls us on the phone and tells us that he or she just swallowed a whole bottle of sleeping pills, we can trace the call and do an intervention. With live chat, we only have the IP address, which is not very helpful in determining location. So we need some of our best counselors staffing the channel, and we need to provide them support for the distress they are experiencing as they provide the service.”
The live chat channel is now available during the especially dangerous overnight hours, from 8:00 p.m. to 4:00 a.m. A total of 60 staff counselors are currently trained to provide crisis chat services, and each location has five counselors and one supervisor on duty each night. “The supervisor logs into the LiveEngage platform, but does not conduct conversations,” Hassan explains. “Instead, he or she monitors the conversations of the five counselors on duty and provides tactical and emotional support as needed.” Because of the nature of the conversations, Lifeline has configured the LiveEngage platform so that counselors chat with no more than two people at a time.

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Providing a comfortable channel

Exit surveys sent through the LiveEngage platform clearly indicate that Lifeline’s crisis chat service reaches people who would not call the organization on the phone. “People in their teens and early 20’s almost always respond that they would not have called us,” Hassan relates. “They see a chat environment as much more secure and private.”

While live chat is a comfortable channel for starting a conversation, counselors strongly encourage visitors to speak with a counselor by phone when conversations become more serious. “If we can get a distressed person to call in and talk with someone, we can work more quickly toward a resolution,” Hassan says.

Due to the anonymity of live chat, it is impossible to quantify exactly how many live chat participants subsequently contact Lifeline by phone, but the evidence suggests that this is a common scenario. “When callers mention they were previously chatting with someone, this is noted in our Microsoft Dynamics CRM system,” Hassan explains. “And when live chat counselors recommend a phone call, this is noted in the operator survey they complete in the LiveEngage platform. This information is imported into our Microsoft SQL data warehouse through the LivePerson API interface for in-depth analysis.”

Touching many lives

Lifeline’s crisis chat service has grown quickly since it migrated to the LiveEngage platform. “We had 16,000 live chat conversations in 2012, and 27,000 in 2013,” Hassan reports. “In 2014, we are tracking to answer roughly 40,000 live chat requests.”

While the number of people helped is a key measurement for Lifeline, an even more important indicator is the number of live chat conversations that discuss the topic of suicide. “Providing referrals for people who need help with alcohol or drug problems, depression, or accommodation issues is an extremely valuable service, but our key mission is preventing suicide,” Hassan notes. “Last quarter, we had a goal of 40 percent of live chats discussing suicide, and we hit 42 percent.”

Exit surveys also show that the crisis chat program is playing an important role in Lifeline’s mission. “In 2013, 65 percent of respondents indicated that they felt much better after chatting with us, and 25 percent felt somewhat better, so the service is definitely working,” Hassan relates.

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— Sajid Hassan, CIO, Lifeline

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Planning for growth

As the popularity of the crisis chat program grows, Hassan is making plans to expand its hours of availability. “We would like to make this a 24-hour service in the next year, because a crisis can occur anytime and we want to be there,” Hassan says.

Another area of potential growth is with mobile users. “Thirty-four percent of visitors to our website are on mobile devices, and they skew toward the younger demographic that is most receptive to live chat,” Hassan notes. “We are hoping to deploy LivePerson’s mobile Click-to-Chat experience before the end of the year, so they can chat with us with a window that fits the device.”

Lifeline is also considering adding proactive chat invitations to the Web experience when counselors are available to chat, but the team would need to be very careful in crafting the targeting rules. “We know that people who visit certain pages for a long time may be trying to muster the courage to reach out,” Hassan says. “But we don’t want to be so intrusive that we drive them away from engaging.”

A partnership for service

While the crisis chat program has been available for several years, it did not achieve this kind of growth until after Lifeline deployed the LiveEngage platform. “We certainly would not be talking about expanding the program at this point if we had kept our in-house solution,” Hassan contends. “Having a platform that is scalable and works well makes all the difference in the world.”

About LivePerson

LivePerson, Inc. (NASDAQ: LPSN) offers a cloud-based platform that enables businesses to proactively connect in real-time with their customers via chat, voice, and content delivery at the right time, through the right channel, including websites, social media, and mobile devices. This “intelligent engagement” is driven by real-time behavioral analytics, producing connections based on a true understanding of business objectives and customer needs. LivePerson is headquartered in New York City with offices in San Francisco, Atlanta, Tel Aviv, London, Amsterdam, and Melbourne.

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