



2009 WINNING CASE STUDY

Innovation Consultancy

Digital Public with the Department for Children Schools & Families

Parent Know How

Transforming Outcomes for Children for the Department for Children, Schools and Families

Executive Summary

Teenaged fathers are normally seen as the problem, not the solution. From maternity ward onwards, the door is slammed in their faces. But academic research shows educational, behavioural, even health outcomes for children of teenaged parents being significantly improved if the father has a relationship with his child.

The challenge for the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) was supporting those fathers, and millions of other disadvantaged parents, with valued information on what to do, where to seek help, or how to talk to others in the same situation.

Innovation was the critical component of success. This is an audience unlikely to respond positively to another pamphlet, even less so if it is Government-branded.

So the DCSF commissioned Digital Public to bring together a programme of innovation in engaging parents, drawing on channels and approaches from SMS messaging and virtual worlds to more efficient use of helplines. New services were to be developed in collaboration with third-sector parenting help specialists, and private sector innovation introduced to improve engagement.

“Digital Public have been central to the success of Parent Know How because of the strong alignment between their approach and our vision for the programme - innovation and collaboration securely grounded in customer needs and preferences,” said Julia Gault, Deputy Director, DCSF Families Unit.

Without Digital Public’s involvement, the overriding focus on successful **engagement** of disadvantaged parents would have been lost. Digital Public brought experience of how specific channels could not just reach, but engage audiences like teenaged parents.

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Deputy Director
DCSF Families Unit

The problem/opportunity faced by the client

In 2007, the DCSF was already funding six third-sector operated telephone helplines. The department was concerned that it was not accessing maximum value for money, and in any case demand was exceeding the limited capacity which the DCSF could fund.

Recognising also that telephone helplines were not the right channel for large numbers of parents (such as fathers), and that innovation was needed to improve capacity and engagement, DCSF embarked upon a programme of service transformation.

The challenge was to provide flexible services that would meet the needs of all families - whatever their needs or circumstances, including lone parent families and those from disadvantaged communities. In particular, there was a real need to find effective ways of engaging fathers and providing improved support for them.

Project Background

Over the previous five years, the DCSF had increased grant-funding to a series of third-sector operated telephone helplines, from general advice line ParentlinePlus to mental health support line Young Minds.

These were providing the capacity to help around 90,000 parents per year, at an average cost of £32 per parent helped. Whilst providing a service valued by its users, the DCSF recognised that to accelerate the improved outcomes for children which greater support to parents would deliver, a step-change in capacity was needed at the same time as a reduced unit cost.

The programme objectives for Parent Know How were therefore set as:

- To provide support to 1 million parents a year by 2010-11
- To reach a total of 2.5 million parents over a three-year period (2010-11)
- To reduce the cost per parent helped

Consulting Activity

Innovation Fund

Digital Public developed an Innovation Fund approach to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of the third-sector specialists in parenting support and information. Designed to improve use of digital media in particular, the Innovation Fund was intended to boost capacity (by enabling helplines to direct some callers to online information for example, thereby freeing up capacity for others whose needs could only be met on the phone) as well as engaging with target audiences, many of whom were not calling the helplines (fathers for example are far less likely to use the telephone for support than to look online, or use mobile services).

Digital Public devised and implemented: a comprehensive programme of events and engagement including a major industry event, hosted by ministers; as well as working with consumer electronics industry trade body Intellect to devise an innovative procurement approach. We developed forums to exchange knowledge and best practice, essentially devising a market-place for innovation in the sector. All the activity was

focused on Parent Know How funding being the catalyst for private sector companies to work with third sector specialists to trigger innovation in the field.

The Innovation Fund gives parents access to support through 11 new services - harnessing the reach and engagement of digital media where appropriate, using channels such as social networking, SMS and instant messaging to deliver improved information to parents. These services are designed particularly to reach those who might not seek help from telephone or print information. Examples include:

- Live Talk – online Instant Messaging service for parents, particularly fathers, to access relationship support services provided by Relate. (www.relateforparents.org.uk)
- Dads' Space 121 – an online space to help fathers stay in contact with their children. (www.dads-space.com)
- www.onespace.org.uk - Facilitated social networking / online groups provided by Single Parent Action Network
- Contact a Family Online - support for parents /carers of children with disabilities including a counselling service in virtual world social networking site Second Life

Virtual Magazine

When asked to develop options for producing a Government-funded parenting magazine, Digital Public proposed an innovative, radically different, delivery model - a Virtual Magazine with its own editorial board to syndicate content through national and local press. This approach of using existing magazines, rather than creating a new one from scratch, enabled the Department to target specific groups of parents while avoiding print and distribution costs.

Specially commissioned research identified key publications for the particular segments of parents and families targeted. Digital Public procured and supplier managed a PR agency to design and place content in relevant publications for target audiences.

The approach has since been identified by the Office of the Third Sector (part of the Cabinet Office) as an exemplar of successful public-, private- and third-sector partnership in action.

The Virtual Magazine operates as a service, offering information and advice to parents on specific topics, designed to suit audience lifestyles and reading habits, without appearing 'preachy' or condescending.

The Virtual Magazine works on a campaign basis. One example was *The Big Kick* - a series of mass-participation nationwide football events for fathers to take part in with their children, timed to coincide with the final of Euro 2008. The event used editorial coverage in print and online media to develop local engagement encourage fathers and their children to play outside together on 29 June, helping to achieve the Department's goal of engaging more fathers. Media coverage signposted relevant Innovation Fund partners for further support and advice.

iParent

DCSF asked Digital Public to consider how to engage in particular younger parents with a service offering which they could relate to and feel was their own. In response, the Digital Public team developed the iParent (interactive Parent Resource Network) concept.

iParent aims to improve parental information and support by offering a range of individual online “widgets” – i.e. customized, collaborative and contextual applications that work on multiple devices including computers, mobile phones, GPS devices and interactive television. The applications would draw on live data and be personalised to the user’s interests or needs – for example sending regular health tips, suggestions for football training and detail of local football training sessions to the young father of an overweight and asthmatic five-year-old.

As part of the proof-of-concept stage, Digital Public developed a working prototype mobile web application for a mobile phone (see Fig 2) and conducted user testing among a sample of parents. The user testing allowed Digital Public to map demand for the service and indicated priority areas of interests and how these mapped to DCSF strategic objectives. DCSF has now asked Digital Public to incorporate the iParent work into the design and launch of a national pilot of an online Parent Held Record - the first step towards the full iParent vision.

To develop this service, Digital Public consultants mapped the technology sector and conducted research into parental needs and channel preferences. In particular, we sought to understand the mood, mode and context drivers which would affect usage – recognising that even the right content delivered through the right channel would fail if the content arrived without context, or when the mood and mode of the user was wrong (for example when concentrating on work).

Following client agreement, the team conducted feasibility and scoping studies, market analysis, stakeholder mapping and developed a prototype mobile phone application as part of the proof-of-concept phase to develop the service design and build the business case. The team also developed interactive scenarios to illustrate user journeys, and compiled a visual business case, submitted to the client in September 2008.

The Parent Know How project team comprised a flexible team of up to 15 Digital Public consultants. The team worked collaboratively with the client to meet the Department’s strategic objectives, offering expert guidance on options that had not previously been considered. Client input ranged from the ministerial level to Director level and below. Digital Public also engaged with stakeholders outside DCSF’s Families Unit, working with the Communications Directorate, liaising with other policy teams, and contributing to cross-government initiatives such as the Department for Health’s Change4Life campaign.

Success Factors and Challenges

At its inception (in 2007), the project was set the following targets to be achieved by March 2011 (the end of the current Comprehensive Spending Review period):

To date, over 11 million people have been reached by the programme - more than ten times the original target. And while a positive impact on parenting behaviour is harder to directly associate with the programme in such a short space of time, feedback from the third-sector organisations is already indicating greater numbers of more informed participants in web chats, accessing online and other information.

At the same time, the cost per interaction has been brought down strongly.

By September 2008:

- The Virtual Magazine approach had reached over 11 million people through existing online and print outlets

- The Big Kick campaign was featured in 41 major regional publications, reaching an audience of 3.4 million
- Initial qualitative evaluation conducted by independent researcher Ecotec shows that Virtual Magazine articles appear to be impacting positively on parental behaviour
- The Innovation Fund has succeeded in supporting over 45,000 **target** parents to date (i.e. disadvantaged parents in specific segments). This is 180% of the target set to be achieved by December 2008.
- Third sector organisations funded by the DCSF have reported increases in traffic to their online services of 30% to 70%

The lessons learned focus in particular on the importance of engaging stakeholders from the outset in a programme of innovation. When Digital Public started work on the project, third sector helplines were highly resistant to use of digital media, feeling it would distance them from their customers. By now, third sector organisations are embracing a range of innovative channels, thanks to a combination of stakeholder communications, knowledge- and data-sharing and partnerships.

The client/consultant relationship

Digital Public works in close collaboration with the client – its flexible approach fostering a good relationship with DCSF and winning respect and trust for accurate, evidence-based advice. Effective communication at all levels has been the key to success.

Digital Public's digital communications and technology expertise have been central to delivering actionable recommendations which were innovative but realistic.

DCSF last month selected Digital Public (through competitive tender) to continue to provide programme management for Parent Know How for the next three years, which testifies to the value they place on both the quality of service provided and the nature of this client/consultant relationship:

“Digital Public’s creative partnership with us is characterised by innovating within a structured framework; harnessing the expertise of all stakeholders; and generating solutions which push the boundaries, while finding delivery approaches which effectively manage risk”

Julia Gault, Deputy Director, Families Unit, DCSF

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