

Sue Fidler Ltd **e-consultancy for charities**

Using Instant Messenger for a help desk.

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Many charities manage telephone help desks and many more probably wish they could. The issue for the voluntary sector is normally one of resources.

Email is clearly a good alternative as responses can be condensed by answering many emails in one 'offline' session. But email doesn't feel very personal, one always suspects canned answers, and the once a day response, while practicable, means the user doesn't get rapid feedback.

A newer alternative is to use a built in instant message service via your website – often know as "live chat". Enterprise ASP versions are available for £10 a month or can be installed on your web server.

The user clicks 'chat to our help desk' and opens the messenger without the need for any downloads or special software, and can write an immediate instant message to the support desk. The communication is more rapid than email, frequently more informal, and feels like real person to person communication. It also has the benefit of anonymity, even beyond that of a phone call.

Of course in the office you can still have a FAQ crib sheet to copy and paste answers to questions, in fact most of the enterprise software comes with this feature built in. You can also store and audit the chat, record who is doing what, how many 'callers' you get per session and so on.

More importantly one person can handle multiple 'callers' at the same time as users take time to read and respond. Unlike MSN's Instant Messenger (and others like it) live chat software condenses all the 'callers' on to one screen and flashes an alert when there is a new caller or message, allowing the member of staff to continue work when nobody calls.

You can still offer this service for limited times to suit your resources and audience, and even have a single call taker dealing with phone, email and messenger at the same time on the same desk. If all your staff are busy the system will just display a message to that effect.

So for a help-desk for beneficiaries or supporters, in the UK or overseas, consider adding 'live chat' to your web site. It is free for your site visitors anywhere in the world and offers personal, anonymous, secure and instant communications at a very low cost.