

Targeting the Middle of the Marketing Funnel to Build Trust in 988

The 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline rolled out nationwide in July 2022. A social marketing campaign was developed to promote use of the Lifeline for a regional 988 partnership (the Partnership) that includes 4 municipalities and nearly 2 million residents.

Formative research methods included a review of secondary research; 60-minute interviews with key informants (n=13); a 25-minute online survey (n=76) with community partners, as well as 30-minute followup interviews (n=16); and 75-minute interviews (n=60) and a 15-minute online survey (n=708) with residents 18+ in the four municipalities, targeting a representative mix of ages and ethnicities and weighting for lived experience with mental health concerns.

The research revealed key barriers to calling including: stigma around mental health, uncertainty and fear about what the call experience might be like, feeling like problems weren't serious enough to merit a call, and concerns about confidentiality. The core benefit to calling was the relief they might feel, as well as getting professional help figuring out what to do next. Research participants also flagged language they found off-putting or that increased stigma around calling, which included the words "crisis," "struggle" and even, for many, "mental health."

In 2022, the social marketing campaign launched with an innovative approach to suicide prevention, using bright colors and hopeful (but not too happy) images that portray the relief residents want to feel after calling. The Partnership developed the CALL 988 brand, a website, and an online partner toolkit, and launched an omnichannel paid media campaign (see creative samples [here](#)). High-level strategies for the campaign included: 1) ramping up outreach slowly, to ensure calls continued to be answered quickly to provide a positive call experience, 2) decreasing stigma by normalizing help-seeking; and 3) developing audience-specific creative for priority audiences, including LGBTQ+ residents, older men including veterans, and youth.

Because of residents' deep hesitancy around calling and lingering stigma around mental health, the campaign adopted a marketing funnel approach (*awareness, consideration, conversion, loyalty*). The bottom of the funnel – *conversion* (calling) and *loyalty* (calling again or recommending) is where many crisis lines focus. Emergency callers are a priority audience for CALL 988 as well, and always-on search engine marketing as well as targeted placements are used to reach those who need immediate help. But the Partnership also identified a separate "pre-emergency" middle of the funnel audience – *consideration* (knowing 988 is meant for them and exploring its resources). Rather than "call the helpline," the target behavior for this audience was "explore helpful resources." Ads direct these audiences to landing pages with coping tips that normalize help seeking and build trust in CALL 988 as a helpful resource. Landing pages and ads are customized for and served to specific priority audiences. Videos of call center operators were created to answer questions about what the call experience would be like.

The result has been high levels of engagement. A winter holiday themed ad campaign drove 27 million impressions and 14,000 web sessions. During a spring ad campaign this year, clicks to call increased by 200% compared to the previous period and visits to the website increased by over 430%. Direct website traffic jumped after a March-madness themed campaign targeting men, and men replied to social ads with comments such as "this is a great line for veterans, just press #1" and "I had thought that line was reserved for those wishing to end their life. ... It's nice that such a thing exists." An animated ad customized to LGBTQ+ residents had the highest video completion rate. Recently, a survey testing middle-of-the funnel creative with youth 13 to 24 found it increased willingness to call among 75% of youth with suicidal thinking. The Partnership hopes to begin tracking call volume this year to more closely track ad performance.