

April, 2020

Fountain House Telephonic Infrastructure

BACKGROUND

Since the temporary closure of the physical clubhouse, Fountain House social practitioners have been reaching out to all members in order to assess their digital literacy skills and access to technology. Fountain House estimates that more than 50% of its membership lacks the technology and/or skillset to actively participate in its newly developed virtual clubhouse platforms (*Facebook, Slack, Zoom*). Three main challenges have emerged: 1) a lack of wi-fi access or computer hardware, 2) low confidence levels when working with computers or technology, 3) an inability or unwillingness to use technology.

SOLUTIONS

- 1) For members who don't have access to wi-fi or computer hardware, Fountain House was able to purchase and deliver smartphones and tablets so that they could participate in virtual clubhouse platforms.
- 2) For members with low digital literacy skills, we created a tech support team (reachable by phone/email) where they could speak with someone and/or receive tutorial videos made by tech savvy members and staff. If need be, the tech support team could also get remote access to their device.
- 3) For members with no tech skills, we gave them three additional options for meaningful connection:
 - Participate in events and meetings using a phone integration software allowing access to digital meetings using standard telephonic devices
 - Become one of the virtual operators
 - Do hands on work for the community

Participate using phone integration software

For standard telephonic access, Fountain House used *Sonetel* and extended audio by *Zoom* to allow members to use their regular phones (cell or landlines) to patch into zoom calls easily without use of room ids and passwords. After verbally identifying virtual meetings of interest, a member's phone rings and connects them when the meeting begins. The software allows members to hit the # key to signal they would like to add something to the meeting which in turn gives the meeting host the option to unmute them. If members are using a cell phone, they can get files via text using a word document-to-text software splitter. This allows members who want to participate in the (unit, working group or decision making) meetings to participate as long as they have access to any kind of phone.

Become a virtual operator

Many non tech savvy members enjoy participating in the reception area of the clubhouse. Fountain House created a digital/telephonic virtual switchboard for the clubhouse using *Sonetel*. Members can volunteer to be operators by taking calls on their own cell phone or landline from

a general number. Someone can call and ask about the daily/weekly schedule of events and meetings, agree on automatic “call me” features and ask questions to a live person. The system allows flexibility to utilize a number of operators without having to divulge their private numbers and without them needing digital skills or equipment. Tech support can then call in to these operators several times a day to get any messages and relay them through the virtual clubhouse platforms to the appropriate recipient. Operators can also perform reach-out calls twice a day to our COVID positive members, assessing their symptoms and needs. In essence, the switchboard operators become essential in connecting our telephonic members with the digital community.

Doing hands-on work

The last intervention involves members that have no digital skills or interest in speaking on the phone. For this group, we created a number of “hands-on” tasks that were needed by the community. These tasks include mailing out the newsletter, making face masks for the membership and caring for seedlings (hydroponically) that we will use in the spring planting at our farm, etc. Though we bucket these as “hands on,” not all tasks are physical. We are also utilizing software like Transcribe (speech to text) so analog members can call in and speak their stories for the weekly newsletter or copy-edit other member’ stories. Pickup and delivery of materials are made possible by using the *Jack Rabbits* delivery system, which also deliver our meals, bank withdrawals and mail. While on their routes they are delivering mask supplies, seedling kits, materials for mailings, supplies for birthday card construction, etc.

These innovative interventions are crucial for maintaining connection with our non-tech savvy members. By utilizing a number of software solutions, delivering hardware and materials, we avoid creating two separate communities and find meaningful ways for ALL members to contribute to the virtual clubhouse.

Software we are using for the telephonic infrastructure:

Sonetel.com

<https://transcribe.wreally.com/>

slack.com

zoom.com (specifically expanded audio)