



Plain Numbers

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Plain Numbers in practice: your questions answered

Plain Numbers in practice webinar
19th Nov 2024



StepChange
Debt Charity



Your Most Important Questions Answered

Thank you to all those who attended our Plain Numbers in practice webinar.

Ben, Director of Partnerships and Services at Plain Numbers, was joined by Plain Numbers Practitioners: Caroline, the Customer Communications Manager at Thames Water; and from StepChange, Dave, a UX Designer, and Michael, a Communications Specialist.

The audience submitted many thoughtful questions, so we've compiled a round-up of the Q&As, including responses to those we didn't have time to address during the webinar.

1. **Training reach:** Is there a benefit for non-comms/marketing staff to take the training?
2. **Engaging leaders:** How did you engage upper management with Plain Numbers?
3. **Practitioner placement:** Where do Thames Water practitioners sit, and what types of documentation have been addressed beyond customer billing?
4. **Regulatory push back:** How do you handle compliance challenges when simplifying communications?
5. **Working with other suppliers:** How does Plain Numbers complement other external communication support?
6. **Types of comms:** Are there any limits on the types of communications Plain Numbers works with?
7. **Partnership flexibility:** Is there a quicker option than the 3-year partnership, or tips to promote its benefits?

In terms of the training and skills you offer for organisations, would you say there's also a benefit for non-comms/marketing staff to take the training?

Ben: Absolutely. It's important that the people responsible for making changes fully understand the process and its goals. Many individuals involved in sign-off phases—who influence communications—can benefit from gaining the skills needed to assess materials from a Plain Numbers perspective. This ensures consistency and alignment with the organisation's goals.

We offer different levels of training to our partners to cater to various needs. Practitioners undertake the full training program, equipping them with comprehensive skills.

In addition, we run a Champions Program, designed to build awareness of numeracy as a potential vulnerability. Champions learn to identify issues through a Plain Numbers lens and guide these concerns to internal practitioners. This approach helps foster a community within the organisation that maximizes the value of our partnership.

You mentioned that you ran a session as part of the StepChange away day/gathering, with the CEO in attendance. How easy did you find it to engage upper management and leaders with the benefits of Plain Numbers?

Dave at StepChange: We involved upper management from the very start, and the Chief Executive was already very enthusiastic about the initiative. During the away day, I walked through the communications work we had done, and their engagement was very positive.

Michael at StepChange: Initially, when I heard about Plain Numbers, my first thought was, "Oh no, another layer to get through for approvals." But it turned out to be much more beneficial than I expected. Plain Numbers provides an objective, tried-and-tested perspective, which is incredibly valuable. It gives you the confidence to say to stakeholders, "This isn't just our opinion—here's a neutral perspective we can rely on."

Although it may add an additional step in the process, that step simplifies and strengthens many others. It's a tool that not only improves communication but also makes the overall process smoother and more credible.

Which area of Thames Water do practitioners sit? What range of documentation have you been able to apply Plain Numbers to? Is it just customer-facing billing content, or does it go wider than this? It would be helpful to understand the business case for investing in this, as my budget for the Vulnerability area is limited.

Caroline at Thames Water: We currently have 16 practitioners, predominantly within teams that are part of the wider customer communication group. These include our customer communication managers, web and content team, the creative hub where our copywriters sit, and our brand and marketing teams. We intentionally targeted teams that frequently communicate with customers and have ownership and accountability for much of the content we produce.

To extend awareness and usage, we also hosted an internal Lunch and Learn session—Ben joined us for this as another key partner in the initiative. This has started conversations with other areas of the business about how we can support their teams. Now that we've established a foundational skill set, we're exploring opportunities to broaden its application further.

Ben: The best place to position Plain Numbers Practitioners is in areas where you want to see measurable impact. By training the people who have the authority to make changes, you ensure the initiative delivers meaningful results.

In terms of securing budget, we've seen partners take various approaches. While central marketing or learning and development budgets are common sources, others have tapped into consumer duty budgets or, in some cases, vulnerability budgets. It's about aligning the benefits of Plain Numbers with the priorities of your organisation.

We really work to simplify our comms but sometimes get pushback from compliance. Do you find working around regulations hard to make your approach work?

Ben - This is a question we hear a lot, across various industries and regulators, and for good reason. Regulators often set constraints that restrict certain ways of communicating. Some of these restrictions are real and difficult to navigate, but others are more flexible than they initially appear when you closely examine what's actually required.

Even with these constraints, it's important to know that improvements are still possible. Everything we did in our initial trials was done within regulatory requirements. Yes, some aspects can be frustrating, but that doesn't mean progress isn't achievable. Think of the size of your customer base—by applying these principles, you can still double understanding. Even if perfection is the goal, don't let it become the enemy of the good.

We use another supplier to help us with our comms, particularly for the wording. How would Plain Numbers fit alongside other external support?

Ben - That's a really timely question. Nearly all our partners work with multiple approaches to improve customer understanding and often rely on external support for different aspects of their communications.

What Plain Numbers brings to the table is a unique focus on the numbers themselves and how they interact with the rest of the communication—something often overlooked in other processes.

Our approach is centred on skills transfer, equipping your internal teams with the additional expertise they need to enhance communications in this specific way. For example, if you're working with an external organisation to rewrite your terms and conditions, a Plain Numbers practitioner embedded in the process can identify issues or opportunities that others might miss.

Rather than seeing these as competing solutions, think of them as complementary - multiple strings to your bow, each adding value in a different way.

Are there any limits on which types of comms Plain Numbers works on?

Ben – No, alongside more traditional communications like bank statements, insurance product options and utility bills, we've also worked across multimedia videos, workplace presentations, and call centre scripts, to name just a few.

A communication does not have to be number heavy for us to work on it, some only have one important number. But if understanding that one number relies heavily on understanding the context it's written in, then it's incredibly beneficial to apply the approach.

You talked about a 3-year relationship to get to know the partner, is there an option of a quick fire or some hints and tips to promote the benefit of this?

Ben - At the heart of our model is our mission to embed real, lasting change that benefits both our partners and their customers. Experience shows this takes time; combining training and ongoing support to create meaningful impact.

Our standard model operates over a 3-year agreement, with annual payments based on a jointly agreed plan for training and certification.

At the end of each 12-month term we review progress, gather feedback and adjust the plan to meet future training and support needs. This subsequent renewal ensures the partnership stays aligned with the areas where it can have the greatest impact.

We begin with training, giving those who work on customer communications the skills they need to make real improvements in their day-to-day work. This training is supported by unlimited, ongoing guidance from the Plain Numbers team to ensure the skills are effectively applied.

This model avoids the classic issue of "training fatigue" because we stay closely engaged with teams, helping them build confidence and continuously apply their new skills.

Plain Numbers in practice

If you would like to discuss Plain Numbers further contact Mark at mark@plainnumbers.org.uk

If you missed the session please email the team for a recording - enquiries@plainnumbers.org.uk.

www.plainnumbers.org.uk

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