

Debt in Focus Implementation Guide

Introduction

Debt in Focus was created by a Filene Research Institute i³ team consisting of Chad Graves, Ent Federal Credit Union (Colorado Springs, CO); Jean Theis, Motorola Employees Credit Union (Schaumburg, IL); Kathryn Koepf Davis, Xceed Financial Credit Union (El Segundo, CA); Nan Morrow, Centra Credit Union (Columbus, IN); Tammy Gallegos, America's First Federal Credit Union (Ogden, UT); and Tansley Stearns, Connex Credit Union (New Haven, CT). These innovators realized that to help consumers take better care of their financial lives, they needed to find a way to help break down the barriers that often prevent people from seeking outside help. Traditional, face-to-face financial assessments present three particularly steep obstacles to the general public:

- 1) Discussions about personal finances are embarrassing and uncomfortable;
- 2) Intimidating industry jargon is both ever-present and confusing; and
- 3) Financial advisor schedules are typically as convenient as a fever blister.

The i³ team's solution addressed these concerns head-on by creating an anonymous, online financial assessment tool written in easy-to-understand language that is accessible around the clock from anywhere with an internet connection.

The Filene Research Institute beta tested this program with 288 credit unions across North America from the middle of 2009 until March 2010. Thanks in large part to the insightful feedback of these participants; we have developed this implementation guide to help your credit union make the most out of its Debt in Focus license. This guide is what we would like to call a "living document," meaning that we are continually learning new tactics to maximize the program's impact. Please feel free to share any success stories you have at the Debt in Focus support site located at <http://debtinfofocus.ning.com>.

Location, Location, Location – Advertising Via Your Web Services

Debt in focus is a web-based tool, so placing links in prominent locations on your credit union's online website is essential. When we look at traffic patterns for the program's beta testers, position and design of a Debt in Focus link/banner/button on a credit union's homepage was the single most predictive factor for usage. The higher "above the fold" and the better designed the link is, the more clicks you get. As overly-simplified as that sounds, the results speak for themselves. When Cynthia Campbell, AVP/Manager – Financial Empowerment Program at Tinker Federal Credit Union (Oklahoma City, OK) moved her visually appealing Debt in Focus link to a [prominent, top-right position](#) of TinkerFCU.org in February 2010, clickthroughs increased 700% over the previous month.

Your homepage is one of the most important places to put a Debt in Focus mention, but not the only place. Oregonians FCU's (Eugene, OR) Chad Warneke saw a tremendous boost in Debt in Focus traffic when he placed an ad within the credit union's online banking system. This makes sense. A majority of your website's traffic is probably current members who are trying to access their accounts online. They know exactly where to go on your site to log in to online banking and bypass everything on the homepage. If your online banking system allows you to send secure messages, post a "Message of the Day," or allows you to place web banners, take advantage of it. Be mindful, however, that Debt in Focus is billed as an anonymous financial assessment tool. If the link is placed inside a secure login to online banking, members probably won't believe that the service is actually anonymous. This doesn't mean that such communications are bad. It simply means that you will not attract the people who are the most embarrassed about disclosing income, debt, and expenses information.

Other areas within your online channels you should consider placing a link, banner, and/or announcement about Debt in Focus are:

- 1) The financial education section of your website;
- 2) Within your bill pay service site;
- 3) On electronic statements;

4) Any microsites you maintain

Keep in mind that writing for the web is much different than writing for offline publications. You need to grab people's attention quickly, and be compelling enough so they read or click to learn more. The secret is usually in the headline. Words like "Free" and "Click here," believe it or not, increase the likelihood of a clickthrough by 20-30%. Couple a great headline with an attention-getting layout, image, or graphic, and you will give your online marketing a fighting chance.

Make sure that you are concise with your communications, and make the most out of each word you use. Studies have shown that people only read about 20% of the words on any given page. If users are simply skimming your information (and they are), effective use of informative keywords and powerful talking points are essential. To learn more about writing for the web, please visit this superb resource at useit.com: <http://www.useit.com/papers/webwriting/>

Social Networks

The rise of social networks as dominant players in online traffic presents several opportunities for you to find an audience for Debt in Focus. If you have already built up a solid following on Facebook, Twitter, your blog, or any other social networking site, try posting a link, banner, and/or ad for the program for those people to access. As recently as March 2010, Facebook is the most visited site on the Internet, surpassing Google.com in the number of homepage views. What does that mean? The people you are trying to serve are spending a ton of time on social networks, and you need to leverage this channel.¹

Tapping into the networks of your existing social media contacts is one way to expand your marketing to new audiences, but make sure you are also looking for ways to connect with different markets. Pay-per-click (CPC) ads in Facebook are very effective tools to leverage to find new connections.² For example, placing a Debt in Focus ad on Facebook to target people in Winston-Salem, North Carolina between the ages of 22 and 45 would generate on average 16 clicks per day at \$0.63/each. At this rate, you could impact 158 people in your market for the same cost (\$250) that financial institutions typically pay to attract one new customer/member.

¹ For Facebook statistics, visit <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics>

² For more information on Facebook advertising, visit: <http://www.facebook.com/advertising/>

Another option is Pay-per-impression (CPM) advertising. This type of advertising charges you based on how many times your ad is displayed. Unlike CPC plans, you have no guarantee that people are actually clicking your link. You are paying for the opportunity to be seen. For the same \$10 that we spent in the above scenario to get 16 clicks/day, a CPM plan would expose your ad to 35,000 people who meet your criteria. The key question is: will more than 16 of those 35,000 impressions lead to a clickthrough?

Only by monitoring traffic information and testing for yourself will you be able to decide which plan is right for your credit union. Most marketing professionals use the rule of thumb that CPM is the route to go when using branding or awareness advertisements, and CPC is the way to go when you are looking to drive immediate behavior. While this is a fair rule, compelling ads have higher clickthrough rates (CTR) than dull ads. If you post targeted, creative ads you may very well find that using a CPM plan is more cost effective.

Offline Marketing

America First Federal Credit Union (Ogden, UT) uses Debt in Focus as a prerequisite to enter into their financial counseling service. This tactic serves two very important functions:

- 1) Members often find that the answers they are looking for from the credit union's one-on-one counseling service are covered in Debt in Focus, helping the credit union save valuable counseling queue time for only the neediest of members; and
- 2) The perspective offered by Debt in Focus assessments helps streamline the counseling function because meetings can start with a clearer understanding of a member's current financial situation, and a more targeted set of questions/considerations.

The 2,318 unique Debt in Focus users America First generated in a 30-day span last March without spending one dime in paid advertising proves that integrating the program in your offline operations can drive amazing results.

Centra Credit Union (Columbus, IN) used offline channels to promote this online program as well. Centra drove traffic to Debt in Focus with the effective use of their member newsletter. Based on a

month-to-month comparison of their Debt in Focus traffic, an article in [CENTRASpectives](#) was good for a 55% increase in unique users.

Finding ways to leverage Debt in Focus in your collections, lending, and member service functions is just as important from a ROI perspective than implementing the program strictly with a marketing and community outreach perspective. Golden opportunities for Debt in Focus deployment/cross selling include: loan turn-downs, inbound member service calls, NSF or overdraft instances on a member's account, delinquent accounts, requests for collections "workout" plans, and the closing of any new loan, among others.

Direct mail, statement stuffers, table tents for SEG breakrooms, "take one" publications, posters, and other traditional marketing materials are also great ways to promote Debt in Focus. Several campaigns have already been uploaded to the Debt in Focus support site (<http://debtinfocus.ning.com>) that are just waiting for your customization and implementation. Use these exact designs, use them for inspiration, or create your own creative campaign.

Partnerships

Many community groups, including Consumer Credit Counseling Services, local Housing Authorities, religious organizations, and social service agencies, could use a program like Debt in Focus to fulfill their own missions. If you are speaking with these groups, bring a stack of brochures, cards, or other marketing material to communicate what Debt in Focus is all about. Even better, ask if you can place a link to Debt in Focus on their websites.

Don't forget about your SEGs! 44.5% of employers offer financial literacy education to their employees. Talk to your SEGs about placing a Debt in Focus link on their intranets. Write a story for their company newsletters about the program. Try to get Debt in Focus included in employee benefits materials. Tighten your relationship with your SEGs by helping them take better care of their employees.

Public and Community Relations

Keep a close eye on your Debt in Focus statistics. Press, your representatives in government, and leaders in your community will no doubt be impressed when you can say, "We helped X consumers

create a workable budget, evaluate their current debt load, and mapped out action steps to move them toward living more responsible financial lives.” Journalists, politicians, and the public react very positively to this approach...especially when you tell them that it’s a free service. Work with your credit union league/association to maximize your public relations efforts and their associated earned media and political action implications. A sample press release is available at the Debt in Focus Network site (<http://debtinfofocus.ning.com>)

Closing

The Filene Research Institute is dedicated to helping you make the most out of your Debt in Focus license. Please contact Matt Davis at matt@filene.org or 608-231-8550 with any questions, suggestions, or comments. Together, we can improve consumer behavior. Let’s make it happen.