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**A New Way to Keep a Support Group Connected During
the Holidays**

An Unusual New Group-Communication Tool Provides an Alternative to the Internet—at Low Cost or No Cost—in an Area of Vital Importance in Health Care

*"A Cross Between a Telephone Conference Call and an Internet
Message Board"*

Fairfax, VA - - October 19, 2002 - - Support-group goers often need their support group most during the holidays, when life can become more stressful than ever—especially as war looms and the chance of terrorism continues.

Yet it is during the holidays that support-group meetings are most likely to be cancelled—perhaps because many group members will be out of town or preoccupied with family; or because the group's facilitator will be taking time off; or because the regular meeting space will not be available (because buildings or offices will be closed).

But now there's a new way for members of any support group to stay connected throughout the holidays. It was developed by John Craig, MSW—a Fairfax, Virginia, voice-communications consultant—with the help of research faculty at NYU, Columbia University, and UNC-Chapel Hill. It was tested successfully at Cancer Care, Inc.—one of the nation's top cancer agencies.

The new approach involves communication by telephone instead of through the Internet. Thus, even support-group members who are not on-line can participate: no one gets left out.

In addition, because the new approach is based on an exchange of voice messages instead of email messages, the emotional expressiveness of the human

voice is fully conveyed—and emotion is of major importance in support-group interactions.

The only technology this new approach requires (besides telephones) is an ordinary voice mailbox—one which can be rented in minutes from any voicemail company in the local yellow pages, for just a few cents a day. Group members use this single voice mailbox in a new and unusual way: as a “voice bulletin board” or “voice message board” for the entire group. Members post and retrieve messages on this voice bulletin board in organized rounds of interaction, according to an easy-to-remember, preset schedule.

In this way, they create a group dialogue through the voice mailbox—just as users of the Internet often create a group dialogue through an Internet message board.

For example, during the holidays the members of a support group that cannot not meet in person could each call the voice mailbox every day, during the day, and record a two- or three-minute message—a message in which they would give an update as to how they were doing and how things were going. Then, every day during the evening, each would call in and listen to all messages left in the mailbox that day by all group members. The next morning, all messages would be deleted, and the cycle repeated.

These simple but powerful group “check-ins” could be conducted every other day instead of every day, or they could be conducted twice a week, or once a week—or at whatever frequency the group desires.

Craig, who holds a master's degree in clinical and psychiatric social work from New York University, calls these voice-based group interactions “Voice RoundTables.” He has written a free set of instructions describing how anyone can set them up and conduct them. The process is relatively quick and easy: a Voice RoundTable can be set up and launched in about an hour. The free instructions can be downloaded at www.VoiceRoundTable.com.

The instructions also explain how the members of a support group could persuade a local church, school, or health agency to let them “borrow” a voice mailbox on the organization's telephone system, at no charge, to use as a forum for a support-group dialogue. In this way, the group could conduct its Voice RoundTable “meetings” at no cost whatsoever.

Voice RoundTables allow cell-phone users to tap into their support-group interaction from virtually anywhere they go—giving Voice RoundTables another advantage over Internet groups.

Craig formerly held a director-level position at Audiopoint, Inc., a voice-technology startup in Fairfax. Audiopoint was the first firm in the U.S. to launch a nationwide consumer “voice portal” to the Internet (www.audiopoint.net).

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