

My Last Letter

The following is a transcript of an interview with Damian Hawkins, Managing Partner of My Last Letter, which was conducted soon after the service launched online.

Q. So Damian, what is My Last Letter?

A. My Last Letter is an online service, which allows people's messages of comfort and love to be sent to their family and friends after life. These can be emails with attachments, hard copies we send out in the post and video files.

Q. How did you conceive the idea?

It was after the 7/7 bombings in London. My partner was working in the City at the time. I heard the news and tried to reach her. But the mobile phone networks were down.

At the time I was working in Berkshire so I had this agonising trip home fearing the worst and not knowing what had happened.

Thankfully she wasn't hurt, but I thought what if the words we'd shared that morning had been our last...

That thought took root and was nourished by news pieces about people dying unexpectedly... ordinary everyday people like you and me who woke up one morning, went about their business as usual and then something terrible happened... some 'freak' accident or event...

And then you start thinking about other people like the passengers on the 9/11 planes... and the emergency services crews at ground zero... all facing death and desperate to get messages to their families.

None of those people knew that day would be their last. But when realisation struck they all reacted with the same desire: to communicate to their close ones that last 'I love you'.

I wondered why, with death being so unpredictable, there was no established service in place. And then, what that service would be and how it would work

Several months of research and development later, My Last Letter was born.

Q. What makes the service you offer unique?

A. My Last Letter is unique because we pro-actively verify our customers' well-being, their messages can be personal to each of their recipients, we send out the messages and we monitor all mail to ensure it reaches its intended destination.

What's more, our customers can access and edit the contents of their account on demand and the service is also fast, inexpensive and extremely easy to use.

Q. And how does it work?

A. We set up private online accounts for our customers, which are essentially their own data vaults. From there they can write their messages, upload attachments, link them to their contacts and store them. When the time comes we send the messages out.

Q. So how do you know when people have died?

My Last Letter uses a programme we designed and built in-house, which mirrors our customers' subscription cycles and actively monitors account activity.

Certain criteria trigger a countdown process which is when we verify our customers' well-being by using the contact details they provide when they subscribe to the service, such as email addresses and home and mobile telephone numbers.

We also advise our customers to provide us with the details of two other people who would be able to tell us whether they're alive or not.

Our systems take into account holidays, changes of address or people spending extended periods of time overseas, say for work.

Obviously everything's been tried and tested because we appreciate how important it is that our customers' messages aren't sent out prematurely. We believe our methods are as robust and effective as they can be, without being intrusive or insensitive.

Q. Rather than use your service, why don't people tell their loved ones how they feel when they're alive?

A. My Last Letter isn't a substitute for someone telling whoever's close to them, how they feel. In an ideal world, we'd tell that special somebody how much they mean to us all the time.

But everyday life tends to get in the way. You become distracted by other commitments like work and all the while time marches on.

It's not that you don't want to tell people what they mean to you, or shouldn't while you're alive, but you might not one morning without realising that could be the last opportunity you get. It's too easy to believe there'll always be time to say what's important, but before you know it years have passed.

And there's always that worry that your last words could be said in anger. I mean how many times have you watched a TV show or film where someone dies and when their wife or kid hears the news they say something like 'the last time we spoke we argued...' And then they beat themselves up over it.

The flipside is the person who's died could well remember that argument on their way out. And they probably wish they hadn't wasted their last chance that way as well.

So like I said our service isn't a substitute, but an addition or insurance against an unexpected demise. My Last Letter means you'll always have that last chance to tell your loved ones how you really feel.

Plus memories fade. I can tell my partner I love her everyday, and I do, but how can I do that when I'm gone...

For me that's what My Last Letter is all about. It gives our customers' family and friends something real they can look at again and again, whether it's an email or letter. And that way their memory will live on.

Q. So who do you envisage using the service?

A. Anyone and everyone. Initially we felt the service might be more relevant to people in dangerous occupations... members of the armed forces, police officers, fire fighters... but now we believe My Last Letter has universal appeal.

The fact we offer the service from £2 a month also means it's far more accessible to a far greater number of people who might not be able to afford a lawyer or solicitor to act as their afterlife postman.

Q. And what do you see as the most popular uses of My Last Letter?

A. Primarily we believe most people will use My Last Letter to send final messages to their loved ones, to communicate important financial information and location details of vital paperwork like wills and policies... and perhaps so their children and grandchildren can get to know who they were a bit better before they became 'mum' and 'dad'.

To be honest though, there's probably a 101 different uses people can think of for the service. Ultimately My Last Letter means our customers needn't take their secrets to the grave with them.

Q. The service has been described by some as morbid. What would you say in response to that?

A. The very nature of the service means there will always be people who say that about us. It's unavoidable.

But if you take a wider view, you can see that what we're offering is actually far from morbid. We're giving people an extra chance to preserve themselves in the memory of their loved ones... protection that their final words needn't be the last thing they say... and an opportunity for their family to get to know them better.

From a practical point of view we're offering people an independent and inexpensive way to communicate vital financial or legal information or data passwords for computers and PDA's. Information which only they know about.

So if you wanted, you could argue My Last Letter is more about celebrating someone's life, their love for other human beings and a way to help those still alive settle the affairs of the departed more easily.

After all it's the living who receive the messages, who remember our customers and who benefit from the information insurance we provide.