

Gather round

THE SOUND

LIFELINE ENERGY'S SOLAR-POWERED WIND-UP RADIOS ARE SIMPLE AND PRACTICAL PRODUCTS THAT ADDRESS SOME PRETTY COMPLEX SOCIAL PROBLEMS

WORDS JOANNE CAREW @LITTLE CAREW

KRISTINE PEARSON HAILS FROM SUNNY CALIFORNIA, AND AS A YOUNG PERSON, SHE WAS A FAN OF NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, WHICH HELPED HER FORM A CLEAR PICTURE OF THE WORLD IN HER HEAD.

Today, she has visited dozens of countries as the head of a non-profit organisation that uses old-school, ruggedised FM radios to change the lives in some of the most challenging social environments on the globe.

What's your background?

I actually trained as a dress designer, and I quickly started making wedding dresses for my friends as a teenager. Only recently have I realised how important these design skills are to the work I do today. When you make a dress for somebody, they tell you what they want, and you create it based on their specifications. I used this same approach during the design process for the electronics we distribute today.

How did you get started?

In 1998, my husband started a wind-up radio company called Freeplay. I ended up running its charitable foundation.

I went to Mozambique and spoke to the people on the ground. I asked them what they listen to on the radio, how often they buy batteries and that sort of thing. They looked at me as though I was from another planet, because they had no batteries and there was no radio programming in their language. And this was how my interest in radio really began.

MAKING WAVES

Over time, the Lifeline radio has evolved into several different models, all powered by built-in solar panels and a winder.



Lifelayer

The original shoebox-sized radio, designed for bigger listening groups..

Gemini

Compact, built-in LED night light, 2 x USB, MicroSD slot, MP3 player

Polaris Plus

Handheld, LED torch, USB, microSD slot, MP3 player, ideal for disaster recovery

See page 10 for a full review of Lifeline Energy radio products

KRISTINE PEARSON
FOUNDER AND CEO
OF LIFELINE ENERGY





How did you develop your products?

About 17 years ago, I received a letter from a charity in Rwanda, which explained that our wind-up radios were really making a difference to child-headed households. It was just few years after the genocide there, and there were so many children who had lost their parents. The children didn't know who they could trust, but they seemed to trust the voices coming from their radios.

Unfortunately, the radios would break quite easily, for example, if someone accidentally used the winder the wrong way. I quickly realised that we needed to make the product more user friendly, able to handle heat and dust, and also withstand any accidental mishandling. And I wanted to add solar power.

In many classrooms in Africa, there are more than 100 students per class. The Lifeplayer can be used for some learners while the teacher works with others.

What makes your radio an effective tool?

Our business model is based on my experiences visiting users around the continent. Where our radio could serve groups of people, it built a sense of community, whether it was groups of children accessing educational content, farming communities looking for weather information or people communicating important information during natural disasters. Our radios proved to be very cost-effective.



How does your radio compare with more advanced technologies?

Everyone feels passionate about the technologies they are working on, but sometimes it is not well suited to the scenario they have in mind, or it doesn't scale up well to reach a critical number of people.

At tech conferences, the speakers are all talking about how their smartphone apps are transforming lives. I'm not so sure. I believe that there is place for many different types of technologies.

Of course, every technology has limitations. In the case of radio, if you miss a programme, it's lost forever. That's why we've added microSD memory cards into our radios so that new content can be loaded on to each device. I used to be intimidated by this more advanced tech, but I've moved past that.

How is your product affecting people's lives?

At Lifeline Energy, we asked ourselves where we can be of the most help and remain relevant over time, where our approach will make sense.

People can't make informed decisions without access to information. It all comes down to what people are most comfortable with. From our experience, that's audio. **T**

LISTEN UP

600 000+
LIFELINE ENERGY
RADIOS WORLDWIDE

20
million+
LISTENERS

25
AFRICAN COUNTRIES
DISTRIBUTED
TO VIA NGOS,
GOVERNMENTS,
UNITED NATIONS,
RELIEF AGENCIES

30+
PEOPLE PER
LISTENER GROUP
FOR LARGER RADIOS

10+
PEOPLE PER GROUP
FOR SMALLER
RADIOS AND
EMERGENCY
PRODUCTS

FOCUS AREAS
INCLUDE EDUCATION,
AGRICULTURE,
ENVIRONMENT,
AND HEALTH

USED FOR
EMERGENCY
RESPONSE DURING
NATURAL DISASTERS
IN HAITI, JAPAN,
INDONESIA, AND
THE PHILIPPINES

CATCHING WAVES

RADIO IS STILL THE MEDIUM OF THE MASSES

THE GOAL FOR LIFELINE ENERGY RADIOS IS NOT COMMERCIAL SUCCESS, PROFIT MARGINS OR UNIT SALES. Its products are not sold commercially. Instead, they are designed to address critical social and humanitarian issues, from education and small-scale farming to public health, among others. As a result, the emphasis of its products is on durability, ease of operation and achieving practical outcomes.

The Gemini radio was developed to fill a different social niche than the classic Lifeplayer (big-group listening, classrooms) and the Polaris Plus (crisis communications). It gets loud enough to fill a large room, but was designed for small-group listening.

It displays many of the rugged characteristics of the Lifeline Energy range: the sturdy plastic panels, long-lasting LED bulbs and flush-mounted control knobs that are hard to break off.

The Gemini can be charged by mains power, but in the field it's more likely to charge its built-in lithium-ion battery using the top-mounted solar panel, or the fold-out crank handle for a quick burst.

It has two LED lights: a directional torch light, and an ambient light strip built into the handle, which is ideal for domestic lighting after sundown. The array of ports include USB for charging phones from the built-in battery, a headphone socket and a MicroSD memory slot, and they're covered with a soft rubber seal. **T**

Lifeline Energy products are not sold to consumers. They are bought and distributed by governments, donors and aid agencies for use in humanitarian and social development projects.

Specifications
188 x 98 x 68 mm,
FM/AM/SW radio
bands, 2 000 mAh
rechargeable lithium-
ion battery, 450 g,
USB port, MicroSD slot

The Gemini is currently being field-tested in Peru, South America.



Lifeline Energy compiles educational and social content in multiple languages, available on a MicroSD card supplied with some radios, and played with the built-in MP3 player. There is also a voice-recording function.

PHOTOGRAPHY: GARETH VAN NELSON/HMImages.co.za



LISTEN UP

Prime

The original three-band radio pioneered the use of broadcasting for social upliftment and crisis communications.



Polaris Plus

This hand-sized model has a three-band radio, torch and solar panel in a tough body shell, and is often distributed for crisis communication.



Lifeplayer

This evolution of the Prime, for big-group listening, now includes a solar panel for charging and MicroSD card slot with MP3 player.



See page 6 for more info on Lifeline Energy radio products.