Emergency Notification System for Your Business? Really!

It is not very often that a telecommunications application makes its way into the mainstream media. Most of the time, telecommunications services and applications simply run in the background, empowering real time communications. While always reliable, they are never described as sexy or a "killer app" and rarely warrant the attention of major media sources.

All of that changes when there is a sudden, unexpected tragedy.

Columbine. 9/11. Katrina. Virginia Tech.

In the aftermath of such tragedies, it becomes immediately clear that there are numerous shortcomings in the way we communicate in regards to the warning, notification, and response of a disaster situation. As the blame game begins, processes are brought into question and solutions sought to ensure that the next event is not as tragic as the last. How could we have notified parents of students that a shooting occurred at school? How would we check the status of our offices and employees in the aftermath of a terrorist attack? How can we better warn residents of evacuation plans for an impending hurricane strike? How do we notify thousands of students about a dangerous situation on campus?

The volume of the buzz increases with each event, but it still leaves most organizations wondering what to do. Universities and schools have been pressured by students, parents, and even congress to utilize this technology. But for the rest of us, the direction and impetus for moving forward with an emergency notification solution is often a murky subject.

Emergency notification is simply a process for quickly sending a message to a group of people. In the past, this was usually distributed using an overhead paging system. It could even be as simple as a giant horn or siren alerting those in earshot of an emergency situation.

Recently, emergency notification has evolved into a much more specialized and far reaching application. With the proliferation of wireless devices, along with a more mobile workforce, systems are now available to automate the distribution of an emergency message via a multitude of vehicles simultaneously. The systems can reach users at work, at home, or on their cell, via voice messages, text message, email, pager, fax, overhead paging, wallboards, with the list growing every day.

These emergency notification systems are available in two forms. There are proprietary servers that connect to existing telephone circuits or use stand-alone lines at your site. Or a business may choose to outsource the application from companies that specialize in these services. No matter which service option is selected there are two key features

present in many emergency notification systems that aide in communicating with crew or team members.

1) Quota based notifications – Once you have identified how many responders you need, the system can start contacting team members to identify who can respond. By using a quota based notification you can ensure that only the appropriate number of responders will be contacted. When the quota is reached the system will stop.
2) Custom Queries – Another feature of some systems is the ability to query the responder as to their availability. It is one thing to know that a responder received a notification, but it is even better to know they can respond in the timeframe required. This feature allows you to poll each individual as needed to ascertain their ability to respond.

If you follow the media attention, you would conclude that **only** schools and universities have a need for this type of technology. While this need is highlighted with every campus shooting, this could not be further from the truth.

One of the amazing things about the emerging mass notification technology is it can truly be a life saving application. There are not many investments in technology that can make this claim. Whether it is a medical facility using it to communicate to a trauma team, a school or university sending out an alert, or a water municipality communicating unsafe drinking water conditions, this is an application that can really make a difference in saving and protecting lives. It will be interesting to see how our expectations grow as the technology evolves and penetrates into both private and public institutions.

While people are learning more about how emergency notification can assist is some of the catastrophic events mentioned above, the most untapped power of this application is addressing business communication inefficiencies. All businesses struggle with issues concerning responsiveness to their customers. Not only does it slow down their business processes, it can add to unnecessary overtime, increased expense, and customer frustration. Emergency notification systems really are exciting technology for all businesses. In many cases, it can increase productivity, lower costs, and increase customer satisfaction. The ROI analysis can result in hard dollar savings, which can pay for this solution in a matter of months.

Most organizations struggle with urgent communication to their employees and customers. Call lists, call trees, and email cannot always be effectively used to communicate during an emergency. Many times you do not have hours to send out word of an emergency - you may only have minutes.

It is also impossible to accurately track the success of the message delivery. Aside from e-mail, most organizations are not equipped to send out mass communications to their

employees or customers. The question is what obligation do you have to communicate to all of your employees or customers in the event of an emergency?

As an example most service organizations spend a lot of their service response time simply locating and communicating with a crew to solve a problem or outage.  This can add precious minutes to the time to resolution and can result in inadequate performance and poor customer satisfaction.

And what about your organization?  Every organization has what I call "corporate emergencies."  There has been some event that requires an emergency meeting of the board or executive committee.  These high level folks could be anywhere in the world and the task of locating each member and joining them in a conference bridge can be daunting, especially after-hours or on weekends.

A few emergency notification providers have conference bridge integration as part of their service offering.  Not only can the system track down executives and board members wherever they are, it can authenticate them and transfer them into a conference bridge.  Imagine setting up that emergency call in minutes rather than hours.

Anyone interested in pursuing a project such as described here must first build a team to drive the project.  It is crucial to engage all segments of the business that will use or manage this service.  *This is not an IT or security project.*  It is business-wide, interdisciplinary project that should include team members from Security, HR, IT, Operations, Telecom, Facilities, Administration, Risk Management, Legal – anyone that has a stake in how this system is used and operated.

Some additional questions that need attention would be whether to outsource, how to integrate, and how to leverage the features of this powerful tool.  Once the team has indentified and documented the system objectives, the task then turns to investigating the marketplace and finding the right provider to implement the most appropriate solution.

Yes, it is true that the buzz in the industry does follow catastrophic events, such as 911 and the tragedies in our schools and college campuses. However, this is not an industry fad and is going to have a huge impact on how public and private organizations communicate to better serve their employees and customers.  How could your organization take advantage of this emerging technology?