Calling All Campuses: Getting Started with Mass Notification

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One of the hottest topics on school campuses, from daycare to doctorate, is the implementation of an effective mass notification system to distribute time-sensitive information related to health, safety, and convenience issues such as amended operating hours. The days of phone trees to home phone numbers are long gone. And of course, the era of static posting of a time-sensitive "alert" on a web site is a never-was, although the latter has been a reality for some institutions in the absence of any other system.

In a world of growing expectation for mass notification capability on the part of those at least partially charged with our safety, a closed-loop, private system is becoming the standard. This paper describes how to accomplish it.

The Case for a Private System

Let's start with this premise: To properly execute a mass notification process, you must own the tools AND the data. Your constituents' reliance on disparate, unconnected web sites promoting "Input your contact information HERE for closings information for Institution XYZ" is ultimately a disservice to your institution and to the people who hope to receive the information. Some of these services, which range from alerts companies to television stations, are genuinely well-meaning. All have economic incentives behind their activities. That isn't necessarily bad, but in such an environment there is no way for the institution to know who is being reached. Worse yet, the user who inputs his or her information into, say, a TV station's portal may mistakenly believe that he is covered by his action in terms of receiving notifications, when in reality he may never receive anything. And, if there is an official outlet for time-sensitive notification from the institution, the individual may never find it because he or she is not looking. Therefore, the proliferation of such "public" systems usually causes more confusion than actual benefit.

Given this, the key is to get something in place WHILE people are actively seeking those portals. And of course that time is now.

Select the Communication Modes

Many institutions begin the process by assessing what contact information they already have. But this is not the first step, because regardless of what you have in hand, you are going to go get the information when the system is in place. While the implementation of a good system should be straightforward, it makes no sense to do it multiple times, each time constrained by whatever contact information-gathering process is in place. Get the most capable system you can envision and afford NOW, and worry about getting the contact data into it later. In any case, most good systems have tools to facilitate this data collection.

Text messaging in mass notification is *de rigueur* these days. Most public portals, as described above, facilitate this mode in particular. If you don't text, you don't have a

system. Of course, e-mail and traditional voice messaging are popular, and these modes extend reach and accessibility. E-mail is generally needed just to run the system. Many initiation and update processes are web-based, and it is convenient to present clickable links for these via e-mail. In addition, there are practical limitations in length and format of text and voice messages that do not exist in e-mail.

Some administrators initially express concern about text messaging because of possible fees associated with that mode. On the whole, there is limited legitimacy to this concern as the reality is that would-be recipients value notification so much that, across the U.S., users are presently scrambling to submit their text numbers somewhere – anywhere - whether it's a TV station, an upstart notification company with no contract with their institution, or an existing portal that actually CHARGES the recipient to register to receive important safety and closings information. Few recipients would deny that the value of such information is greater than a few pennies. Administrators worried about text messaging have not been talking to their institutional constituents!

What ultimately renders moot this cost concern is the fact that all properly designed systems are opt-in. It is bad practice, and a violation of federal statutes, to send certain unsolicited messages, whether they are text *or voice*, to wireless devices. And the fact that an automated system is generally used to deliver such messages may constitute further violation of law.

So what do you do, given today's wireless world (where some users don't even own a land-line phone), where your constituents want the message, but you can't just unilaterally start blasting away to them? Besides using e-mail, which you surely will, it's simple – just get the recipient's permission! Supplying a site for the user to input -- and maintain -- his contact data mitigates concerns about cost and legality. Most mass notification offerings include a portal especially for this purpose, and implementation is a snap.

If you will use your system to send messages about a variety of non-emergency topics, such as a reminder about the big pep rally or the existence of fish sticks on the menu, you must be able to allow the user to segregate their permissions in terms of what types of notifications they will accept. You need maximum reach for safety, security, and other time-sensitive information, and it's important that users not opt out of the program completely just because they don't want non-essential messages cluttering their message boxes and voicemails.

In this vein, it is often a better design to use another system for routine communications, or confine routine communication to e-mail. Make a real "alert" an exceptional event. The old journalism saw "If you emphasize everything, you emphasize nothing" applies equally to mass notification process design and execution.

<u>Functionality Considerations</u>

A notification is a commodity. What sets mass notification systems apart are functionality in data-gathering and user administration, ease of message launches, and reporting. In fact, these features are primarily what you are paying for. Compare various systems to determine what is best for you.

At a minimum you need to view the state of your database at various levels to understand the participation and the completeness of the information. Search capability is useful, of course, to quickly access particular records of interest.

Disposition reporting is good to have, to confirm who received your notification. Depending on the architecture of the solution, not all systems include this feature, and some applications may not warrant it. For example, a government system that alerts residents of weather issues may not require disposition reporting. Or, if a school uses a system solely to alert parents and students about school activities, that application may not require disposition reporting.

The Make vs. Buy Decision

With the proper resources, it is possible to cobble together a simple e-mail and text messaging system internally. But consider the functionality issues described above, especially as they apply to reporting. In addition, voice messaging is desirable, and applying voice messaging capability within a home-grown system is not a simple task.

Besides this, there are at least three other important reasons to look to companies that specialize in mass notification applications:

1) These companies have infrastructures specifically designed to offer a secure, redundant environment for your data.
2) There is PR value in using a "name" company as the backbone of your system.
3) Using an external provider generally means continual upgrades in reliability and functionality at little or no additional cost to the institution, because these companies compete with each other and, of course, have their own pride in their offerings.

System Selection Dos and Don'ts

- DO spend time looking at the potential supplier's system. They are NOT all the same. Although the end result might be some sort of message, getting it out quickly and selectively is important. In order for you to evaluate how the system works, you need to see it and ask a lot of questions. Because this is (or should be) a key information gathering and maintenance application, it is better to get it right the first time

- DON'T get snowed under by numbers especially as it relates to the "speed" of message sending. Some companies attempt to mislead, or at least impress, prospective customers by reciting massive throughput numbers. The fact is that you are SHARING these resources with other institutions unless you are paying a significant amount of money (many thousands per month). So actual speed depends in large part on utilization of your supplier's system. On traditional telephone, a system with 500 lines might be slower than a system with 200. And as it applies to text messaging, most every system such as AMGAlerts is "fast", but all any of our systems do is deliver messages to the respective carriers for delivery. It is akin to putting a bundle of letters in a mailbox – maybe the mailbox is feet from your desk. But the postal service still has to process the mail, put it in queue, and deliver it. Granted, the entire process is generally very fast, but do not choose a system based only on gaudy numbers about how quickly the letter goes into the mailbox when potential bottlenecks lie with the postal service itself

- DO test your system, even in a limited capacity, so that you are satisfied that it is set up correctly and works to your satisfaction. Because as stated above, numbers are borderline meaningless, there is no other way to set expectations about how it will perform

- DO promote your system. Many institutions suffer from poor participation simply because the constituents don't know a system exists!

- DON'T use the system for extremely routine messages if it can be helped. If you do use it, try to use e-mail only. "Spamming" via text or voice can ultimately render your system ineffective in a real emergency

- DO get opt-in for the system. Otherwise all of your messages, by very definition, will be "unsolicited", and that can be a turnoff to the recipents

Setting up the System

Before the initiative can be formally rolled out, give adequate thought to setup. Users generally will be categorized or tagged so that notifications may be filtered. You might have categories of "Parent", "Student", "Faculty", etc., and then possibly some other descriptive names.

Then consider the various scenarios that would trigger an alert. Do you have multiple locations? Then perhaps you need the ability to launch a notification based on location. In a K-12 environment, you will want to tag any parent's record with the name of the student for reference. The required setup for this is simple to do and to flesh out prior to rollout. That is important because there is no good reason to request additional contact data later because you forgot to ask your users for something important as part of the rollout.

Promotion

Yes, the goal of implementing a mass notification system IS to make the world a better place. But not everyone is taking such initiative, so get credit for it! There is generally no reason not to introduce your system with fanfare, on your web site and in newsletters. Use your web site as a launch pad for the information gathering process, so that clicking a link will get your users to an information-gathering portal for your system. Then, seamless integration of PR is a no-brainer.

Information Gathering

We recommend supplying a web portal for input of contact data. Mass notification companies generally include these as part of their programs, so it is easy to roll them out. This way, users affirmatively opt in just by supplying the information. Be sure to provide a privacy policy from both your institution and your mass notification supplier. Also include information about the types of messages that the user will receive.

Once the user accesses the portal, they will generally generate or be issued a login or user key that can be used so that they may keep the database up to date. This is a primary benefit of using a good mass notification system: If the process and system design is correct, the data is self-maintaining. You may want to issue the occasional

reminder, but on the whole, this is much less cumbersome than the information gathering processes used in the past, which involved filling out paper forms with contact information.

Some smaller institutions opt for manual data input, or an upload from an existing database. This is a quick way to get something in place, but ultimately, opening a web portal allows better communications because the contact data will be kept more current by the users themselves.

Administrative Permissions

Establishing more than one administrator provides backup in an emergency situation. Some systems have multiple permissions levels, allowing some administrators to work on the user database but no ability to launch notifications. Depending on your structure and the amount of data maintenance you anticipate, this is beneficial, because you want actual launching ability to be somewhat restrictive.

Maintaining the Data

Simple examination of the data should tell you whether a high percentage of your target users are in the system. Depending on the mode used to enter the data – direct from the users or manually via the institution -- it is a good idea to do some sleuthing to discover why the gaps exist. That often involves a little direct contact with the users. Some simply may not wish to participate, although that is infrequent. Most often, it is simply because the word needs to be put out again. The fact that the system is available should be promoted constantly, in various forms of communication.

Optimizing Speed

If you want your message to go out as quickly as possible, follow these tips:

- Compose and save your message ahead of time, assuming that this is practical and the system allows it. Then all you need to do is pull it up and send it, modifying it as needed

- Make sure that whoever is launching the message is familiar with the system

- Use text messaging as opposed to voice whenever possible. This especially applies to voice messages to home phones, which is the absolute worst way of reaching people. Unfortunately the “legacy” status of this latter method keeps it on the map

- Keep voice messages as short as possible. How many 20-second messages can go put via voice versus 60-second? About three times as many! That is significant when you are sending to lots of recipients

Summing it Up

While there are certainly issues to consider on the front end when selecting and setting up a mass notification system, the “time-to-improvement” cycle is quite short. Most systems may be put in place in a day or two and initial data can start flowing in soon afterwards. Some of the promotion, and much of the data entry by your users, will take place over a longer time. In the meantime your institution is miles ahead in terms of its capability in this area, and is improving each day.