



Best Practices in Using a Notification System

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Situation

It's a fact of life that can't be ignored—crises and interruptions will continue to happen. And although methodologies and standards for business continuity and IT crisis management continue to improve, every crisis brings common challenges that surface time after time. One common challenge in time of crisis is that of effective and efficient communication. After virtually every crisis or event, post-incident evaluation reveals communication as one of the top challenges.

Communication is not just important in time of crisis, but is vital to every aspect of business operations. Whether alerting employees about IT incidents (for response and escalation or just general information on outages) or communicating with suppliers, key customers and other stakeholders, strong and effective communication is needed to keep business running smoothly.

A good notification system can deliver a message to thousands at once, alerting people with important information quickly and giving them a way to respond when appropriate.

Need

When a crisis happens, business leaders need a way to provide information to a wide variety of stakeholders. To do this, many organizations rely on mass notification systems for message delivery, whether to meet the challenges of IT incident reporting, supply chain alerting, employee communications or even getting an important message to guests, visitors, contractors or the surrounding community. A good notification system can deliver a message to a small group or many thousands at once, alerting people with important information quickly and giving them a way to respond when appropriate.

Challenge

Businesses are becoming increasingly global, with more mobile employees than ever before. This complicates things when an important message needs to be delivered to hundreds or thousands of people using a range of communication devices. Simply doing business in other states, countries and continents increases the risk of interruption from severe weather, political unrest or even terrorist attack, making communication all the more important. Couple that with the pressure and upheaval that come with a crisis, and it's not always easy to share information the way you should.

Solution

Automated mass notification systems have been around for well over a decade, and today's systems are more sophisticated than ever. However, there's more to having a system than the implementation. If you already have a notification system in place, this paper will show you ways to use your existing system more effectively. If you don't have a notification system, this paper will show you why you may need one and how to choose the right one. You'll also discover many tips and best practices for preparing, delivering and following up on crisis communication.

Result

The popularity of social media like Twitter and Facebook have demonstrated just how fast information can spread. To control your message, you need to get information out as fast or faster than anyone else. By being prepared and using the tools you have effectively, you'll stand the best chance of surviving a crisis with your people and resources safe and protected and your brand and reputation intact.

Regardless of how you use notification in your organization, this paper will offer suggestions on how to more effectively use your system and improve your communications.

TRENDS IN COMMUNICATION

It's what you do every day—communicate. Whether you like it or not, to survive in today's business environment you have to develop communication skills and know how to maintain open channels of communication. That includes the traditional person-to-person communications we're all familiar with, and also means new modalities as well, each with its own requirements and limitations. Communication modes may be as familiar as phones, SMS, paging and email; or to less common technologies, like Twitter, Facebook, two-way radio and others.

The primary factors driving these new modes of communication are speed to get information out and the ability to reach an increasingly mobile audience. Sharing information quickly has become critical, largely because of today's instant availability of information through television, Internet and social media. Social media provides anyone who wishes with information at lightning speed, allowing them to hear or broadcast any item of news, no matter how small, often long before business leaders have finished gathering, evaluating and preparing information.

Fast access to information can be a boon in times of disaster or threat. It can also mean that information is shared before you and your team has had the luxury to prepare plans and take action. And speed is not the only key to effective communication. Clear, concise messaging, delivered to a targeted group of recipients, taking into account that they are often not at a desk at the time you most need to reach them is even more important.

Tools to increase insight velocity

One of the most powerful tools for increasing the speed of information sharing is an automated notification system. These systems have been around for many years and have become a business standard for communicating. Whether you're trying to get a message to staff, employees, contractors, vendors, customers, or any other key groups of individuals, automated notification is a crucial means for achieving insight velocity. An automated notification system speeds important message delivery to its users, allowing recipients to quickly receive the information they need to make appropriate decisions, particularly in times of crisis.

One of the most powerful tools for increasing the speed of information sharing is an automated notification system.

Of course, merely having a notification solution in place is not enough. Along with the system you must adopt smart processes and practices to ensure a better chance of mitigation of any event.

COMMON USES OF NOTIFICATION

Notification solutions can solve communication challenges at virtually every level of an organization. Following are common use cases: (any kind of company)

- Building closures
- Community alerts
- Company closures
- Customer service

- Cybersecurity issues
- Employee accountability
- Employee emergency notification
- Health and safety alerts
- IT incident management
- Physical security issues
- Power outages
- Road closures
- Student/parent alerts
- Supply chain management
- Weather alerts

There are also many uses for this type of closed-loop communication throughout the day-to-day business environment. Other uses include:

- Notification to customers for shipments
- Employee informational notifications (overtime availability, benefits programs, executive messaging, etc.)
- Notification to customers on delays or changes to schedules
- Sales and marketing communications
- Product recalls

The true value of a notification solution is the ability to address any and all communication needs across an organization. Finding uses for the tool beyond what it was originally implemented for is key to achieving a solid return on investment.

There's resounding evidence that the use of a good notification solution can help in addressing many common communication challenges.

HOW TO BEST USE A NOTIFICATION SYSTEM

There will always be interruptions to business operations, so it's smart to learn from each one and find ways to improve communications for future events.

Let's start with common problem areas that come up as issues during a typical event. While some may seem obvious, these come up so regularly in lists of lessons learned from the management of actual events that we've included them here. Use this as a guide in building a stronger communication plan.

Common problems in crisis communication include:

- Inaccurate or incomplete information
- Too much or too little information
- Failure of common communication channels
- Confusion about the authority and process for communication
- Failure to provide information in a timely manner
- Inappropriate or confusing messaging
- Using inappropriate channels for delivery of the message
- No prepared and pre-approved messages on hand at time of crisis

There's resounding evidence that the use of a good notification solution can help in addressing many common communication challenges. Simply having the tool available is only the first step; let's dig more deeply into the purpose and practice of notification.

THE PURPOSE OF NOTIFICATION

Regardless of your choice of a notification solution, all actual notifications fall into three broad categories—informational ones, those requiring confirmation and those required to gather information by response. Each type calls for a different approach in message construction.

Informational notification

These are messages that are sent in order to share information. Sometimes the information may be important, other times it's more a matter of formality. Often the responsibility lands on the sender who is charged with disseminating the information, rather than the recipient. With informational notifications, the sender does not need an audit trail to confirm every recipient received or read the message. Therefore, there's typically no response or validation required. Often with these messages there is not a critical timeframe in which the recipients need to receive the message, and less critical device paths, like email, one-way phone or one-way text message may safely be used for delivery.

Notification requiring confirmation

Other messages, while not extremely time-sensitive or critical, need to be structured to allow the sender an audit trail that verifies each recipient received the message. These notifications require an option for the sender to request a response or affirmation from the recipient. The message may or not be urgent, and device paths can be based on the type of information, how critical the message is and the intended time of receipt. These are categorized as two-way messages with a response required.

Notification for gathering information

In other cases, the sender would like to capture information, or get answers, from the recipient. The questions might be related to their ability to report to work, or to provide information regarding employee safety, etc. The response may identify the location of recipients and that they are safe or in need assistance. Response may also indicate they are able to help others, they will join a conference call, they've turned in important paperwork or just about any other

information. These notifications may or may not be urgent, but they do require a response, and one that might be more than a simple yes or no. These messages may also need to capture alternate phone numbers, time estimates to report to work, recorded voice responses and freeform text entries.

ANATOMY OF A NOTIFICATION

All notifications are made up of similar elements. These elements combine to create the basic personality of the notification. This personality, or purpose, will drive which devices should be targeted, the timing for delivery and whether or not there is a need to escalate the message to alternative recipients. Ask yourself if the notification is simply informational or if it requires a response and call to action.

Structuring every notification with key elements will ensure messages are identifiable by recipients and will encourage consistent interactions and responses.

Core elements

As a best practice, develop the core elements of every notification to be consistent across multiple use cases, whether for employee emergency notification, IT alerting or general informational emails. Consider these elements when creating messages and templates:

- **To:** Who will receive the message?
 - Are your intended recipients in a particular region, at a certain level within the company, in a particular department, etc.? Will your message require different languages for different recipients?

- **From:** Which group, function or authority is sending the notification?
 - In general, it's more important to identify the sender as an authorized function rather than a name of person. You can customize this based on the type of message sent and the business group accountable for the communication. For example: IT Service Outage Group, Emergency Communication Team, etc. Identify your sender immediately so that recipients know to pay attention. For example: *"This message is from the operations team ..."*
- **Introduction:** The first information heard or read in a message should quickly identify the purpose of the notification:
 - *"This is a test notification ..."*
 - *"This is a critical system outage alert from ..."*
- **Content:** The actual message you are trying to communicate to the recipient.
 - Information should always be concise and specific; say what you want to say, to whom, and what you want in return (more on this below)
- **Call to action:** What response do you want from the recipient?
 - Every notification needs to have direction for the recipient, whether that be, *"press a key to join a call," "shelter in place,"* or simply, *"press one to indicate you've received this message."*

Structuring every notification with key elements will ensure messages are identifiable by recipients and will encourage consistent interactions and responses.

Guidelines for content

The content of a notification is one of the most critical components. To help those who will be authorized to create and send notification messages, the process must begin by defining what your organization considers to be a proper message structure and form. The definition should include:

Basic construct of the message. As an example:

- **Section 1:** Identifies the notification purpose
 - *"This is a test." "This is an update on the status of the recent office closure." "This is a CRITICAL alert."*
- **Section 2:** Provides short and succinct information. As a general guideline, establish a suggested length for message, based on device. As an example:
 - Phone messages should be limited to approximately 30 seconds of informational content.
 - SMS messages should be limited to approximately 180 characters or fewer (including response options and introductory content)
 - Email messages should use standard HTML banners established by use case for quick differentiation and recognition by the recipients.
- **Section 3:** Response options
 - What information or type of response do you need from the recipients of the message? A simple Yes or No? A time of arrival? A free-form voice message? A free-form text message?

USING YOUR SYSTEM EFFECTIVELY

Just applying these basics will improve the efficiency of your notification solution. Read on for tips on getting a better and more useful response to messages.

When an organization first introduces an automated notification system, typically the adoption or response rate of the recipients does not meet expectations.

How to improve response rates

Although the personality of the notification influences the delivery and acceptance of the message, that doesn't guarantee you'll get the response you need. The term response rate refers to how many targeted recipients successfully receive a notification and then respond appropriately. When an organization first introduces an automated notification system, typically the adoption or response rate of the recipients does not meet expectations. Here are ways to improve response rates and consequently increase the success of your notification solution.

Construct all messages the same way

By following a similar construction for all messages, you'll make the job easier for yourself and reduce the chance of forgetting a critical piece of the message, like the call to action. At the same time, you'll train your recipients and reinforce in them how to listen or read and respond to your message. Aim for consistency in the following areas:

- Always confirm your recipients
- Always confirm recipient responses
- Use a similar introductory message
- Follow an outline for each notification that includes:

- What the situation is
- What is needed from the recipients
- When recipients should expect further information

This is where templates come in handy. You can prepare a variety of these ahead of time, each addressing a common issue (outage, system update, etc.), then simply modify as a situation arises.

Identify notifications by purpose and by source

You'll get the best response if you use a consistent subject line or introduction for all communications. Your subject should be clear and concise; state the issue and the action required. For instance: *"Critical outage today at 17:00, response required."*

Make it clear who is the author of the notification. It's usually better to identify that person by function, rather than name. A message from the CIO is bound to get more attention than the name John Smith, particularly as not all recipients are likely to recognize the name John Smith.

If you use an ANI (automatic number identifier) for a consistent caller ID no matter where the message is coming from, use it consistently. Users will see the number and know that they are expected to pay attention to the notification and to respond.

Use a structure that allows recipients to quickly identify the general message content and its call to action. For instance, an employee might be set to receive IT incident alerts that require accepting responsibility for taking action, and at the same time, might also receive general employee alerts regarding severe weather or health and safety issues. This might also extend into other uses such as general HR benefit information, etc. In these cases, the criticality of the message varies and it's important that the recipient not overlook the message because they misinterpreted the content.

Notifications for multiple use cases should be easily identifiable.

Some ways to do this include:

- Use the title of the notification with standard content by use case
- Use alternative identifiers for those who are sending the message (setting up standard aliases for each use case)
- Use HTML banners or first-line content in the email format of messages targeting email devices

Coordinate messaging during broad events

In the case of large regional events where there is a need for coordination, it's easy to over-communicate and confuse or desensitize your recipients. Too many similar messages can overwhelm, particularly when they come from a variety of sources. Plan ahead who will take responsibility for launching the various types of notifications your organization may be faced with. By coordinating and defining the correct authorities for each situation, you'll make your message more understandable and draw better responses.

Consider who will prepare and launch notifications for various departments or business units. If the issue is strictly a human resources concern, the message should come from the HR department. If it's an emergency, the security team or a designated executive may act as the locus of communications.

Make the same consideration when deciding who should receive the results or responses to the notification. This may be an entirely different individual or group than those who initiated the alert in the first place. Timely distribution of information gathered from the responses can allow those needing the information to take action quickly. Automated distribution of reporting from any given notification is something

that should be defined and implemented as part of the notification solution.

Use a notification solution that allows you to customize the notification to meet your requirements and your culture.

Balance consistency with customization

Use a notification solution that allows you to customize the notification to meet your requirements and your culture. Every enterprise uses notification for its own reasons. For some, it's just in case of emergency, whereas others use notification as a multi-purpose communication tool that may be adapted by various departments, business units, etc., as a tool for information sharing. This requires both consistency and differentiation of messages to be successful.

Always follow the same pattern when constructing notifications, even though your messages may be very different. Use consistent introductions; if you decide to verify a recipient's identity before delivering the message, then always verify your recipients. And use consistent directions. If the direction in one team is to *"press one to hear your message,"* or *"press two to join a conference bridge,"* a better response is garnered if those directions are consistent throughout the organization.

When to provide a response option

In many cases, a response will not be necessary; information has been delivered and the sender has no need to know whether the recipient either read the email or SMS message, or listened to the full content of the message. Although a response may not be necessary, the random use of response options (requiring them on some notifications but not others) can be confusing. As a best practice, *always* ask for a response, even if it's just to acknowledge receipt of the message.

There are several reasons for this, one being the value of establishing a consistent pattern. If recipients are trained to always reply, then when that reply is critical they will be more likely to automatically do so. Another reason is that if you state at the beginning of your message that a response is required, recipients are more likely to listen to or read your entire message.

There is a balance that must occur when determining who should be given notification authority.

Guidelines on granting authority

Choose various individuals and groups who are permitted to send notifications to ensure your organization does not rely on a single group or individual for all notifications. It makes sense to set guidelines as to which individuals should be responsible for delivering each type of notification during a crisis. If this is not defined, one or more critical mistakes can occur, including:

1. Too many notifications addressing the same information sent to the same individuals. (This is especially challenging when recipients have limited access to infrastructure such as cell phone service, email access, etc.)
2. Inconsistent messaging to the same individuals
3. Indecision and even failure to prepare and launch notifications
4. Delays in coordination and preparation of notifications

Determine how many initiators you need

While not having enough initiators can cause delays and other inefficiencies, having too many can bring other challenges. There is a balance that must occur when determining who should be given notification authority. There is no magic number, but here are some guidelines in choosing the correct number:

- Most important, limit those authorized to send notifications to *everyone* (meaning all employees, or all potential recipients within your notification solution).
- Establish just the right number of initiators for your specific organization. Too few, and you may find you don't have someone available when needed, too many and you run the risk of overlapping notifications, over communicating and providing recipients with inconsistent information.
- To help choose that right number, consider the various locations of your enterprise and determine whether there should be an initiator at each location, or whether a regional initiator would work better. Take into consideration each business function and who should be an initiator for specific use notifications. When the appropriate initiator with the proper authority launches an alert, you're more likely to avoid mixed messages. Preparing templates, training your users and providing guides will all help in this effort.

Train your team

A key element in getting the response rate you need and want is training. Keeping in mind that most listeners want to know what's in it for them, you'll be most effective when you focus on your recipients needs, whether that is safety, convenience or something else.

If you explain the purpose and value of notification to your recipients before you send the first message, they will respond more favorably.

What to cover in training:

- Why a notification solution is being implemented
- What the value is to the recipients
- How to recognize a notification from the system
 - Is there a standard phone number that will be displayed for calls?
- How to retrieve messages
- How to respond, and what happens if you do it wrong and must change your response
- How to join a conference bridge if requested

Keeping in mind that most listeners want to know what's in it for them, you'll be most effective when you focus on your recipients needs, whether that is safety, convenience or something else.

Who to train in using the notification technology

It's important to train the initiators that will be creating and launching notifications. Initiators need to thoroughly understand what policies and requirements you've defined to ensure consistency.

In addition to initiators, train those who will receive the notifications (recipients). Sure, notification systems are simple and in today's environments people are becoming more accustomed to automated calls, emails and texts. Yet without proper training, your recipients may not understand the importance of the alert and might not be consistent in their response.

Test. Test. Test again.

Having and using a notification system is a good way to reduce risk. Testing the system is the key to getting a reliable response in a time of crisis.

When testing, don't always target the same devices (i.e., cell phones, work phones, work emails, etc.). Crises don't usually happen at convenient times, so run tests at unexpected times, and target devices that are not typically tested, such as home phones, personal cell phones, etc. Encourage participation by showing people the importance of their response.

Establish a testing schedule

Test your notification system on a regular schedule. Testing will ensure that your teams are familiar with the notification process, that they recognize the source of the notification and are familiar with how to receive and respond to the notification.

Should tests be announced or unannounced?

When initially implementing and adopting a notification system, you'll get the best response rates by announcing notification tests. This is a great way to raise awareness while simultaneously training recipients.

Start by announcing that a training exercise will happen on a particular day. This sets expectations for recipients, encouraging them to practice answering and following through to see how the system works. Don't give specific time, but do tell them to be aware and that a response is expected. Again, remind them why you adopted the system—for their safety, convenience and assistance.

When you announce the test, remember to tell people:

- Why the notification system is needed
- When the test notification will be initiated

- What is a general description of the notification: title, general message content, how you want them to respond, what devices will be targeted for the notification, etc.
- What is expected from recipients in terms of receiving and responding to the message
- How success will be measured

Vary tests so recipients get the message in different ways and become more comfortable with the system. This has the added benefit of testing your contact data and finding out what is no longer valid. Try tests across different devices, changing dates and times so your users become familiar and comfortable with all. The better response rate you get, the better the validation of your contact data and your training.

Once your users are comfortable, establish a regular pattern of unannounced tests, perhaps once or twice a quarter (or more frequently for critical areas). Always specify: *this is a test*. That way, when it's not a test and you need to get an important message out, your people will be prepared to react appropriately.

Tips to improve participation and commitment

By recording and sharing response rates with your team, you can show the value of the system.

Run campaigns on your notification program

When testing, develop campaigns to make both recipients and initiators engage in the process. A campaign can be light-hearted competition that also acts as an unofficial training tool. Sharing reports with other teams can drive greater response and improvement can be tracked over time.

Report and measure

Reporting and measuring is critical to both campaigns and the long-term success of your notification solution. Watch for specific patterns of participation; some people may never answer, or only before or after a certain time. Lack of response may indicate users are unavailable or that they don't feel comfortable with the system. With good reporting, you can target those users and provide counseling and training to make them more comfortable with the system.

Lack of response may indicate users are unavailable or that they don't feel comfortable with the system.

Use your notification system

By using your notification system regularly, you'll actually train both initiators and recipients. Response rates will improve, particularly as you explore other uses and deliver messages to a wider variety of devices. In the process, you'll discover ways to make your system more efficient and valuable.

Should your system be reserved for a single purpose?

While a notification solution may initially be purchased to address a single use or for a single department, you'll get more value from the solution if you use the system more widely.

Benefits of using one solution for many uses include:

- Costs can be lower with a single solution versus multiple solutions in place

- Consistency of message delivery and familiarity with the characteristics and use of the notification solution will drive better response and acceptance
- A single solution can be used for data integration with records of source for accurate and current contact information
- A single vendor relationship is easier to manage
- A broader feature set will be available for future expansion or other use cases that might not be available from a single-solution vendor
- Quick and easy email launches for pre-recorded messages
- Personal assistance through a vendor support team
- Use of an API for integrating notification management and initiation into other applications within your environment

To accomplish this, the chosen notification solution must have functionality that ensures flexibility and segregation while at the same time providing consistency across the organization.

What types of initiation are needed?

Emergencies rarely happen when convenient. If one happens when you're sitting at your desk, logged into the system, you can quickly prepare and launch a notification. But often you won't be at the most convenient location and must find other means by which to get the notification underway. Make it a priority to have multiple methods for launching notifications. As a best practice, look for these options:

- Ability to use any Internet-based device to log into the system
- A mobile application optimized for use on a smart phone or tablet
- An IVR or interactive voice response system that allows you to call into a toll-free number, pass security validation, then select and launch notifications (and preferably, allow you to adjust the message as the notification is launched)

How to determine target devices

If you're wondering about the best devices to target, the answer is, those most likely to get the response you want. This means targeting more than just a single device, because circumstances might mean that delivery route is unavailable. Targeting home phones during business hours won't be as effective as targeting office phones and cell phones. If your people are more likely to respond to SMS, then use SMS. If your system allows for it, let your recipients prioritize their own device preferences. For instance, some users may opt to have home phones off at night but still allow for cell calls and SMS. Some may opt for SMS during business hours in order to avoid meeting interruptions, etc.

A best practice is to use as many modes as you can to reach your recipients. If your choice of devices is limited or you can't let recipients set their own priorities, be sure that limitation is included in your training so recipients know to pay attention to the main device used.

Challenges and limitations of SMS notification

With the proliferation of smart phones, it's easy to think of recipients as always being a simple text message (SMS) away. During widespread regional events, phone service is often impacted but SMS can still go through. While SMS can be an excellent way to deliver a message to many at once, it does have limitations.

In considering the use of SMS as a primary means of communication, consider the following:

- SMS is often limited to approximately 180 characters, reducing message content for a meaningful communication
- Wireless carriers control the length of the SMS message and how messages are delivered if they exceed the character limitation
- Wireless carriers control the distribution of SMS messages to their contracted devices (users). Each individual carrier sets the rules for identification of spam or high-volume messaging and can block delivery or response at their discretion
- A single message, sent through multiple carriers, might ultimately be presented to users in different fashions, times, etc.
- Rules and regulations can vary by country and by carrier
- While establishing short codes and long codes may help address these challenges, they are not always as reliable in an emergency

Don't get caught in spam filters

With today's barrage of junk email, valid messages often get tagged by SPAM filters, making it hard to reliably deliver important information by email. Along with the previous recommendations, make sure your emails are white-labeled so recipients will recognize the valid domain of your company. This tells your recipients the message is not SPAM and the content can be trusted for processing.

COMMUNICATING IN A CRISIS

Your notification system is only a tool. It's been said, *"Giving someone a spread sheet program does not make them an accountant."* In the same vein, giving someone a notification system doesn't mean they are now a good communicator. Knowing how to develop and implement a larger communication plan is much more complex than implementing a notification system.

As you work towards a comprehensive communication strategy, don't forget these key points:

1. **Choose a spokesperson** – Have one well-trained spokesperson prepared to deliver the message with alternates standing by.
2. **Define your authority** – Know in advance who can authorize the release of messages in various scenarios.
3. **Train your leaders** – Conduct media training with anyone who may speak for your company in time of crisis.
4. **Develop key messages** – Weave the core values of your organization through every message to reassure teams and keep messaging on target.
5. **Establish protocols** – Know what warrants alerting at each level of your organization so you don't have to decide in the heat of the moment.
6. **Know your stakeholders** – Regularly update contact data so you know you have current and complete information for all.
7. **Communicate with insiders** – Make it a priority to share information with employees first.
8. **Prepare messages before a crisis** – Draft messages ahead of time and consider how messages will be interpreted.

9. **Familiarize your team with use** – Use notification for more than business continuity crises; try it in business operations, day-to-day IT incident management, employee reminders and other internal and external communication.
10. **Engage in social media** – Publically posted information can hurt your company if not managed before, during and after any crisis. Plan now on how you'll deal with inappropriate rumors or information that may pop up on social media sites.

SUMMARY

There's clear evidence that the use of a notification system provides tremendous value in addressing communication challenges, especially in times of crisis. However, simply having the notification tool available is only the first step in the process. No matter how basic or sophisticated the solution, it's the way it is used that counts. By following best practices in using your system and applying modern methods of effective communication, your organization stands the best possible chance of surviving a business crisis with your brand and reputation intact.

Wishing you the greatest success in your communication program and use of a notification solution!

About OnSolve

OnSolve is the market leader in real-time, mass notification and collaboration solutions used by the world's largest brands and thousands of government agencies to deliver critical information in any situation. Mass notification and collaboration is an essential element of emergency response and business continuity planning, keeping teams on track and coordinating during critical events. The OnSolve suite of critical communication tools is a key component of the business continuity, emergency response, IT alerting, employee safety and security programs of every organization we serve. Visit us on the Web at onsolve.com.

ADDENDUM

What to Look For in a Notification System

When you start to look at notification systems it's easy to become overwhelmed. Some are billed for a particular industry (public safety, healthcare, etc.), whereas others are noted for a specific function (IT or corporate alerting, etc.). Let's take a quick overview of basic features that every system should have below.

The most basic system will allow you to:

- Tailor your messages to specific recipient devices
- Launch mass notifications to any number of people by various ways, like Web, email or from a phone touch-tone phone
- Create messages quickly, whether using your own templates or when creating unique messages
- Customize voice notifications in your own voice
- Allow your recipients to respond by voice, text or menu choice
- Deliver text-to-speech notifications in at least two languages
- Initiate one-key conference calls
- Choose between hosted, SaaS or hybrid solution

More sophisticated notification products have features like these:

- Geographically target notifications around the world
- International retrieval numbers
- Multi-use features and capabilities, allowing the product to support emergency alerting, IT alerting and business operations under the same platform
- Multiple launch options, including phone, mobile app, GUI, email
- An organizational hierarchy allowing the segmentation of access and functionality by individual users
- Tools for controlling access and security by granting permissions to authorized users
- Strong, full-feature API
- Easy integration with popular business continuity platforms or other applications
- Easy integration for IT systems (such as IT Service Management)
- Tools to automate contact data uploads from both Flat File, LDAP and third-party data systems

What to Look For in a Notification Vendor

There is an overwhelming array of notification vendors to choose from, so to narrow your search it may helpful to read industry reports or comparisons. The questions below can help you make a wise decision, as will some of the downloadable RFP (request for proposal) documents provided by various notification vendors.

Questions to ask a potential vendor:

- How long has the vendor been in business?
- Is the vendor fiscally sound?
- Is the application the vendor's IP, or are they a reseller?
- Does their customer base represent companies of similar size and requirements?
- Is the vendor committed to the notification market?
- Does the vendor provide support 24 x 7?
- Do they have references?
- Are their products designed to be scalable?
- Is the technology tied to any third-party products? If so, is the third party viable?
- How fault tolerant is their infrastructure? How many data centers are in their operation?
- Are there any single points of failure within the vendor's infrastructure?
- What is the historical uptime of the vendor's enterprise?