Hello IS ANYONE OUT THERE?

Techniques for improving notification response rates

When you send out an urgent notification, do you sometimes feel like the tree in the forest when no one is around? If there's no response, it's hard to know if your message was received, if direction is being followed or if your people are in danger. In short, it puts your organization at risk. Fortunately, by wisely using a variety of initiatives and techniques, you can measurably improve response rates to urgent notifications.

The purpose of notification

Regardless of your choice of a notification solution, all notifications have certain elements in common. And although each message is unique, both in content and criticality, most fall into one of three basic categories. Each category calls for a different approach.

- ### Informational notifications

    These are notifications 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 (and/or read) the message. Therefore, there's no response or validation required. Often with these messages there is not a critical timeframe in which the recipients need to receive the message. Less critical device paths, like email, one-way phone or one-way text message, may safely be used to deliver this type of notification.

- ### Notifications requiring confirmation of delivery

    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 response options that allow the sender to request a response or affirmation from the recipient. The message may or not be urgent, and device paths can be determined by the information itself, how critical the message is and the intended time of receipt. These are categorized as two-way messages with a response required.

- ### Notifications that need to gather 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 provide information regarding employee safety, etc. The response may identify the location of recipients, indicate that they are safe or need assistance, whether they are able to help others, if they can join a conference call, that they've turned in important paperwork or just about any other information. These notifications may

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

The urgency or criticality of the message and the need for a timely response will drive your choice of device paths.

A note about device type

If you're wondering about the best device to target with your notification, the answer is the devices that are 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, a great solution is to let your contacts prioritize device use themselves. For instance, some users may opt to have home phones off at night but 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 modalities 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.

Anatomy of a notification

As mentioned, all notifications are made of similar elements. These elements combine to create the basic *personality* of the notification. Every notification has a personality, or purpose, that will drive which devices should be targeted, the timing for delivery across those devices and whether or not there is a need to escalate your message to alternative recipients. Recognize this, and ask yourself if the notification is simply informational, or if it requires a call to action and a clear response.

Best practices dictate that your company or organization develop the core elements of notifications to be consistent across multiple use cases, whether for employee emergency notification, IT alerting or general informational emails. This list provides you with elements to consider 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

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a name of person. You can customize this based on the type of message that is 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 MIR3 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 notification 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.

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."*

Should the notification require a response?

In many cases, a response will not be necessary; information has been delivered and the sender has no need to know that the recipient either read the email or SMS message, or listened to the full message content. However, the best practice is to *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 becomes more critical they will be more like 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.

Clearly the personality of the notification has an influence in the effectiveness of the delivery and acceptance of any notification solution. Simply sending a message might not be sufficient. In the notification industry, we use the term response rate to measure how many targeted recipients successfully received a notification and responded 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 ten ways to improve response rates, and consequently increase the success of your notification solution.

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Ten ways to improve response rates

1 ▶ Construct messages with consistency

By following a consistent construction with all messages, you'll make the job easier for yourself (less chance of forgetting a critical piece of the message, like call to action). At the same time, you'll train your recipients and reinforce how to listen or read and respond to your message. This might mean consistency in the following areas:

- Always confirm your recipients

- Always confirm recipient responses

- Use a similar introductory message

- Follow an outline for the content of each notification that includes:
    - What the situation is
    - What is needed from the recipients

- State when recipients should expect further information

This is where templates come in very 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.

2 ▶ Make notifications readily identifiable 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) to keep caller ID consistent 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.

3 ▶ 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 overwhelm recipients, particularly when they come from a variety of sources. Plan ahead who will take responsibility for launching the various types of notifications you organization may be faced with.

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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. A simple example is if a situation requires responders to take action, then they will need access to all reporting in order to take that action quickly.

4 ▶ Wrap the notification with consistent content

Use a notification solution that allows you to customize notifications to meet your requirements and your culture. Every enterprise issues notifications for unique 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 elect to use an option to validate a recipient before delivering the message, then always validate 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.

5 ▶ Don't enable too many initiators

It's important to establish just the right number of initiators for your 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.

When choosing 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-case notifications. When the right person with the right 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.

6 ▶ Train your team

A key element in getting the response you need and want is training. Keeping in mind that most listeners want to know what is in the message for them, you'll be most effective when you focus

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on their 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 re-record

- How to join a conference bridge if requested

7 ▶ Announce tests in early stages

Testing your solution is important and is a part of training. Don't hesitate to announce tests in early stages of adoption of the notification solution. At first, it's a good idea to announce that a training exercise will be happening 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 times, 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.

Vary tests so recipients will 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 multiple devices, changing dates, times and device targets so that your users become familiar and comfortable with all. The better response you get, the better the validation of data.

When you feel users are comfortable, establish a regular pattern of unannounced tests, say once or twice a month. Always specify this is a test, and that way when it's not a test and you need to get an important message out, your recipients will be prepared to react appropriately.

8 ▶ Run campaigns on your notification program

When testing, it's great to develop campaigns to make both recipients and initiators engage in the process. Often a light-hearted competition between executives or department to kick up response rates works great as an unofficial training mechanism. Within reason, share the results of the

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campaigns to encourage improvements. Find a way to recognize or reward those who drive the best results to the notification campaign. Measure these campaigns over time for recognition of noted improvements.

9 ▸ Report and measure

Reporting and measuring is critical to both your campaigns and the long-term success of your notification solution. Sharing reports with other teams can drive greater response, and if you keep the results you can track improvement over time.

Watch for specific patterns of participation; some people may never answer, or only before or after a certain time. This may be because they are unavailable or may indicate they don't feel comfortable with the system. These are important issues to address, and with good reporting, you can target those users and provide counseling and training to bring them up to an acceptable level.

	First Interaction RR%	Second Interaction RR%	Third Interaction RR%
No training, first three calling campaigns			
New system + no advanced notice	3 – 7%	12 – 15%	18 – 27%
New system + advanced notice	5 – 10%	15 – 20%	23 – 33%
With training, first three calling campaigns			
New system + no advanced notice	25 – 30%	33 – 44%	48 – 56%
New system + advanced notice	29 – 37%	45 – 57%	60 – 71%

This table shows the dramatic increase in response when recipients have been trained and prepared for notifications.

10 ▸ Use your notification system

By using your notification system regularly, rather than desensitizing your recipients, you'll be instilling a valuable pattern. Rates of response will continue to grow, particularly as you broaden the variety of use cases for notification and expand the modes (phone, SMS, etc.) you use to reach your people. Over time, useful patterns in response will emerge that will make your system more efficient and more valuable to your enterprise.

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In summary

This paper shows not only how to increase response to notification, but shows you a myriad of ways to get more out of your system. By using it as a guide, you will not only see response rates rise, but you will see both recipients and initiators becoming more proficient in using the system, which will in turn, enhance the benefits to your organization. Go forward and notify!

This paper is based on the webinar, *Hello? Is Anyone Out There? Techniques for improving notification response rates*, presented by Ann Pickren, MBTI, crisis communication expert and COO at MIR3. For more white papers, briefs and other helpful resources, visit: www.mir3.com/resources.

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