



# The Bellingham Business Journal

## PIER Systems born out of local tragedy

*Crisis Management just a click, a call or an email away*

By Lance Henderson, The Bellingham Business Journal

Some described the explosion like an earthquake. Others never heard the explosion but could only gasp at an enormous smoke plume that could be seen for miles around Bellingham.

On June 10, 1999, the Olympic pipeline ruptured and spewed more than 276,000 gallons of gasoline into Whatcom Creek. The gas sparked and created a giant fireball that scorched the forest. Three people were killed. To date, it is arguably the worst disaster to hit Whatcom County in recent memory.

Back then, Gerald Baron worked as a communications contractor for a joint venture between Texaco and Shell called Equilon Enterprises, which was the managing partner for the Olympic pipeline.

Baron had the daunting task of relaying information internally and coordinating with multiple public and private agencies in a joint effort to ensure the disaster was contained and the press and public were informed.

But he began to see some large pitfalls within his communication and coordination attempts, which left him to ponder the company's capacity to effectively communicate and manage itself during a crisis.

"We just saw that there were better ways of solving the communication problem that would really facilitate what needed to be done," Baron said.

So from the ashes of this horrible tragedy rose PIER Systems Inc. (Public Information and Emergency Response), an innovative and comprehensive communications management package that allows companies to place all vital communication tools into one Web-based platform.

PIER Systems was formed in Bellingham in August 2000 and has since become one of the most widely adopted communication management technologies in the country. Baron, founder and CEO of PIER Systems, originally named the company PIER Systems but in 2003 the company changed its name to Audience Central. In 2007, Baron changed the name back to PIER Systems simply to prevent confusion.

PIER clients have the ability to coordinate with multiple agencies; manage all media activity such as inquiries and requests; handle



Western Washington University's John Lawson worked for Tulane University in New Orleans during Hurricane Katrina and was instrumental in implementing PIER as one part of Western's emergency management plan.

internal and external communications via multiple modes such as e-mail, text messaging and phones; and remotely host backup and emergency Web sites.

Baron said two key questions have guided the development of PIER: What kind of urgent and critical information do companies and agencies need to share? And how can they work together, assuming they have no technology available to them other than being able to get on the Internet?

### Working with purpose

On the Gulf Coast, hurricanes are just another part of life.

This is a fact that John Lawson, Western Washington University's chief information officer and vice provost for information technology, can tell you with all too much certainty.

In late August 2005, Lawson was chief information officer at Tulane University in New Orleans. On Aug. 23, Katrina formed as a tropical storm over the Bahamas. It surged over southern Florida as a moderate Category 1 hurricane before entering the Gulf of Mexico and growing to be one of the most powerful and deadly Category 5 hurricanes in history. The storm ultimately caused an estimated \$81.2 billion in property damage and killed more than 1,800 people.

## System developed out of Olympic pipeline explosion

Tulane had planned for hurricanes. The school had an emergency Web site hosted in Atlanta, and the University of Texas at Dallas had agreed to host the school's domain name service so just in case the school's servers went down, students, families and faculty could still find Tulane's site on the Internet.

"The administrative atmosphere was calm, but it was calmness based on planning," Lawson said. "But believe me, when Katrina entered the Gulf and became such a large, powerful storm, we did things calmly but there was purpose and action — we moved quickly."

Right after the hurricane hit, Lawson was in communication with the university president, who had remained at the college's uptown campus.

"The reports were relatively positive," Lawson said. "We had had some wind damage but we had come through pretty well. But of course, later that afternoon was when the levees broke. By that evening we had water flooding our uptown campus."

The hurricane hit Monday, and by Saturday the university's executive team was all together in Houston. With a crippled communications infrastructure, university officials needed to find a way to keep students, faculty and concerned families informed about the status of the university during the emergency.

"We started with almost blog-like entries on our emergency Web site," Lawson said. "Then as we continued to recover, we kept adding things such as streaming audio and other database applications so students and faculty could check in and leave their contact information with us."

Lawson said he had never really considered an emergency contingency plan where the university lost virtually all modes of communication, but it is absolutely something he thinks about today. How does a university maintain communication in a disaster? How do you get vital communications out to the public, the press and all those concerned parents?

These are the questions that led Lawson to PIER.

"PIER could have helped in almost all of the facets that we were doing in terms of press communications, emergency sites, employee registration, and student inquiries," Lawson said. "It could have helped a lot."

### Universal applications

Shortly after PIER Systems was founded in 2000, Baron used his

existing connections in the oil industry to provide crisis and day-to-day communication solutions to Shell and BP.

Baron said PIER was a natural fit with the oil industry because unlike any other industry, oil companies were already used to employing an incident command system and working as a team with government agencies.

Following the Exxon Valdez oil spill in Prince William Sound in Alaska, the Oil Pollution Act of 1990 required oil companies to work with government agencies on an annual drill. Part of this drill includes coordinating emergency communication efforts. PIER was initially created to meet the needs of an oil company's incident command system.

But Baron said PIER wasn't designed just for oil companies — it could be used by a variety of different companies, institutions and municipalities.

"We didn't necessarily have them in mind, but there was no reason they couldn't use the system," Baron said.

Paul Cocke, Western Washington University's director of university communications, has had his department working with PIER for about six months to send out the office's daily press releases.

"We wanted to be so familiar with it, by using it on a daily basis, that when a real emergency comes along it's not like, 'Where's the manual? How do I use this thing?'" Cocke said.

But Western's Office of University Communications has already had to use PIER to send out mass messages about recent issues such as the Western student that died of MRSA, the recent student that claimed there was an intruder on campus, and a follow-up message to the same people that she had recanted and the intruder story was false.

"The nice thing about it is that you can do it so quickly," Cocke said. "Then people can make decisions on whether or not something is worth paying attention to."

Lawson said depending on the emergency, the speed at which you need to get the word out varies. In the case of pandemic flu, Lawson said, mass e-mails are sufficient because the threat is less urgent. Whereas if it's something more urgent like a shooter on campus, then that's when the university needs to start thinking about text messaging and the need to reach people in a few minutes.

After the tragedy at Virginia Tech, Lawson said, there was a push to get a system that was capable of sending mass text message

alerts quickly. However, Lawson admits there are multiple “points of delay” with mass text messaging, such as the time to compose the outgoing message, how quickly the system can distribute that message to cell phone companies, how fast those companies can get those messages out, and finally whether the person will choose to check that text message right away.

“That was one of the reasons that we looked so closely at PIER, because it offered us multiple methods of notification plus a lot more,” Lawson said. “It’s just a very robust solution.”

Tanya Rowe, communications director for the Bellingham School District, said the district has been using PIER for several years for its Web site but recently began to use it as a way to communicate with its many families.

Rowe said the district, which covers 97 square miles, and has more than 10,000 students at 21 schools, sends out a weekly newsletter, “e-blasts” or quick online announcements, news releases and emergency communications via telephone for incidents like snow closures and health risks.

The district has already had to utilize PIER’s emergency notification via telephone capacity when it received a late blast of ice that affected morning bus routes.

“Normally, weather closures are made before 6 a.m., but [in this case] the ice hit later, around 7:30 a.m.,” Rowe said. “So we had to move to snow bus routes and we needed to reach our families, because we had people standing at regular stops.”

But even with the system in place, the district still ran into some trouble.

“We asked that parents register three emergency numbers, and when we sent out the message, we ended up calling all three numbers,” Rowe said. “That was a learning experience for us.”

Both Cocke and Rowe agreed that a system such as PIER can be an effective tool in case of an emergency – but only if there is full participation by their intended audience. Students at the university and parents of children in the Bellingham School District need to register their information with their respective institution, or else the system is not as effective as it could be.

“It’s great that we can send out a massive cell phone alert, but if it’s not reaching them because people haven’t entered their stuff, what’s the point?” Cocke said.



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