

Notification Is Not Communication:

Why Building and Maintaining Trust Requires Far More Than Mere Notification



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There are almost 9000 workers in the headquarters building and the decision has just been made to evacuate now. A shooter, with at least two known victims is on the 19th floor and his intentions are unknown. The response team is at work—from multiple locations because they are working in a virtual Emergency Operation Center environment. Prepared templates of notices are quickly reviewed and updated with the appropriate information, then with a few clicks of the button in the online control center, the messages go out: thirty second telephone messages, SMS (Short Message Service) text messages, emails, RSS feeds to internal information websites and to social media sites used by an increasing number of employees. A crisis “dark site” prepared specifically for this purpose is launched with a click of a button and immediately contains the evacuation message—with additional details posted to the site as they become available. The news helicopters start arriving above the building as the earliest evacuees congregate at pre-determined outside locations. But, their news editors have already received an alert and have been told that additional information would be provided as soon as it is available. At the same time, inquiries start coming in from nervous evacuees—using their PDAs and cell phones to contact the response team even as they leave the building. Questions are quickly answered by the communication team that includes crisis management experts all operating off the same communication management platform. And when the initial reports are aired live from the news helicopters overhead, the communication team is ready to respond to the deluge of frantic requests for more information.

Over the past few years, the technology solutions to enable mass notification to audiences through individual telephone calls have proliferated. While “reverse 911” systems from such companies as CAN® (Community Alert Network) and Dialogic® have been around for some time, a new breed of low-cost, web-enabled services that include text-to-voice conversion, multiple languages and SMS text message have emerged more recently.

The Virginia Tech tragedy of April 2007 stimulated a rush of interest in emergency notification. The circumstances of this event placed a high priority on individual mass notification of students and campus community members relating to the danger that was present on this campus. As a result of wide-spread news coverage about the available technologies, university leaders as well as elected officials, corporate managers and emergency management professionals are far more aware of the range of technologies currently available to individually call a large number of people with a voice or text message.

PIER Systems incorporated telecom-based notification as part of its integrated communication management platform in 2001. The ability to quickly

draft a message, review and approve and then distribute by means of large-scale telephone call out to pre-determined contact lists was seen as an essential element of a Public Information Emergency Response system. In late 2006, we also added the capability of sending text messages, furthering enhancing the multi-mode distribution of urgent and critical messages.

While PIER is committed to telecom notifications, we are increasingly concerned that those making decisions about notification technologies do not understand the difference between notification and communication. Those making that mistake will conclude that a mass notification solution solves the problem of communication in a large-scale incident. The distinctions are so great that it is likely that some of those purchasing notification technology, without sufficient consideration of the broader communication issues, will find that the notification solution exacerbates their reputation and trust challenges rather than solving them. This paper is aimed at clearly delineating the difference between notification and communication to enable the full understanding necessary to making appropriate communication technology decisions.

Topics Addressed in this Paper

- 1) Notification Categories—why all emergency notification systems are not equal and why it is important to evaluate their history and use prior to purchase
- 2) The Limitations of Telephone-based Notifications—why callout rates can be very deceptive and may not lead to the completed calls you might expect
- 3) The Siren Syndrome—why notification without communication can potentially cause additional harm
- 4) Building and Maintaining Trust—the ultimate measure of communication and why it will be this measure that matters most
- 5) Managing the Communication Cycle—how communication leaders meet the demands of today’s instant news-driven audiences
- 6) Constant Change—why today’s solutions are already outmoded
- 7) PIER’s Strategy—maintaining focus on the ideas, strategies, skills and technologies needed to build and maintain trust

Notification Technology Categories

First, it is helpful to understand the differences between various notification technologies. Not all systems are alike. The development and application history of the systems have largely determined the feature set and application priorities embedded in that system.

Notification Categories

Reverse 911 (using externally generated phone numbers)

These were the earliest notification systems and are still widely deployed for both mass notification and resource callout purposes. By using phone numbers provided by telephone companies these systems are typically used for very wide-spread notifications on a geographic basis. Users access these systems via phone and/or web and can control the geographic distribution of the calls.

Mass notification (using internal databases)

Unlike reverse 911, with mass notification systems, clients build, maintain and control the audience phone numbers using either internal servers or external servers accessed by a web application. Frequently, as with PIER's mass notification capability, APIs (Application Programming Interface) are offered that enable automated entry into these systems from existing database applications so that the contacts are maintained in a single place without duplicate entry or maintenance. The challenges of gathering phone numbers has increased with the interest in SMS/text messaging since this service is available on cell phones. Organizations wishing to use SMS/text messaging as part of an emergency mass notification process must develop the methods to collect, maintain and upload these numbers into the notification platform.

Multi-mode distribution

While there are many systems available that provide mass notifications via phone calls, a much smaller number offer telephone distribution as part of a mix of distribution channels. PIER, for example, provides text-to-voice telephone messages, SMS/text messages, email, fax, multiple website posting, and RSS feeds (to other websites including social media sites). Other potential notification options include desktop alerts, digital signs, public address systems,

etc. A key distinction between notification systems and communication management systems is multi-mode distribution from a single control platform.

Resource Callout

While some telephone notification systems are designed for mass notification, others are designed specifically for resource callout. If an emergency or crisis happens, the designated response team can be notified by pages, telephone, and text message. These systems are also used for more routine resource response management to help focus dispersed resources where they are most needed. As with mass notification, a key difference is whether the system provides telephone distribution alone or offers telephone and text message capability as part of multi-mode distribution.

Collaborative work support

An increasing number of notification systems provide for two-way communication. This begins to take them out of the pure notification world into that of communication. Systems that enable confirmation of messages, feedback loops, short response messages, conference bridging—immediate establishment of a telephone conference call—or controls on the numbers of calls being sent based on responses received can facilitate teamwork and enhance interactions.

Commercial automated calling

Automated dialing and message delivery have become part of our commercial and political life. While there are legislative controls on some telemarketing applications, the use of automated calling systems for appointment confirmation, service information, reminders, etc. have been rapidly expanding. Some of those entering the emergency notification business are commercial service providers adapting their callout systems to stakeholder notification purposes.

Limitations of Telephone-based Notifications

Purchasers of emergency notification solutions naturally focus on callout capacity. They want to know how many calls the system can make in a specific amount of time. PIER, for example, currently offers callout rates of 100,000 per hour for text-to-voice messages and 200,000 per hour for SMS/text messages. This is probably in the mid-range of notification suppliers with some offering less and others offering greater callout rates. But, does this mean that 100,000 people will receive a phone call in the first hour, or 200,000 will receive a text message? No, not likely. The problem is not with the callout rates but the rate at which existing telephone system infrastructure can accept calls.

If the calls go to people within a company or students on a campus, those individuals are served by private telephone equipment. Even a large company or a large campus has a limited number of lines and the ability to process in-coming calls. For a building or campus of 25,000 it would be normal to have the ability to handle only a fraction of that number of incoming calls at one time. Most callout systems have the ability to call the same number multiple times until the message has been delivered and you may be able to select the number of attempts before aborting the effort. So, it may be possible to deliver 25,000 thirty second messages over a much longer period than an hour with multiple attempts. But that assumes one other factor—that no one else is trying to use the same phone system. In fact, in an emergency situation where health or safety may be at risk, the first thing most people will do is try to reach their family or friends—usually by telephone. That means that the first of those 25,000 receiving the emergency notification will likely immediately pick up their land line or cell phone and begin calling family members and friends. This immediate and natural

reaction will mean that the 25,000 calls will likely not be delivered until well after the situation has become old news through the mainstream media.

The situation is somewhat better for SMS/text messaging, but only in degree. Text messaging (limited to 160 characters) uses cellular technology to deliver text messages to cell phones using a different platform than that used to deliver voice messages. Also, text messages are far more efficient from a data standpoint meaning that the same network can deliver far more text messages than voice messages. However, even with much higher capacity, the combination of explosive use of the cellular system for both voice and text messaging in a wide-spread event means that the ability of text messages to be received would likely be impacted during the very events when they would be most needed. Individuals notified of a serious issue by text message would again immediately try to use their cell phones and, finding the networks busy, would in many cases turn to text messaging to reach others and inform them of the situation.

This is not to suggest, of course, that telephone-based emergency notification is without value. The purpose here is to create realistic expectations about its ability to instantly inform mass audiences about immediate public health and safety issues. The ability to push hundreds of thousands or even millions of telephone messages does not mean that communication has occurred. If the object of the exercise is merely to say, “We tried,” then it will be effective. But if protecting the public and informing key stakeholders in a way that generates or protects trust is important, then the focus needs to be on communication, not mere notification.

The Siren Syndrome—How Simple Notification Can Cause Harm

Sirens were a common sight in small towns across America a generation ago. Used to callout the local volunteer fire department or installed as part of the Cold War era air raid systems, sirens create a universal demand for additional information. Sirens say one thing very well: “something is happening that may affect your life or well being.” They are excellent attention-getters. But they convey little to no useful information.

The rush to install emergency notification systems on today’s university campuses in the wake of the April 2007 tragedy at Virginia Tech in some ways signals a return to the siren mentality. Telephone messages must be kept extremely short in order to help meet the limitations of phone systems to receive messages—under 30 seconds if possible. And SMS/text messages are limited to 160 characters. Of course, the information conveyed can be vital: Evacuate the

facility, shelter in place, secure all doors, etc. As critical as these messages may be, like the siren, each of these messages will trigger an incredibly urgent and insatiable demand for additional information.

As in the introductory scenario, if a building security manager sends a message to all 9000 employees in the building that a threat exists in a certain part of the building and everyone should evacuate, a huge hunger for additional information has been instantly created. And, that hunger will not be limited to those marching in an orderly fashion to a pre-determined evacuation area. On their way out, they will be phoning and texting to all those on their immediate list to both alert them to the limited information they have and seek additional information. Their instructions to those not involved may be to tune in to the local radio or television news channels to see if they can find out something, or to ask them to check the company website or news websites for information about the event. If they have email and web-enabled PDAs, chances are they will be emailing information and questions as well as seeking additional website information even as they march outside.

Who will meet this intense demand? And how will that demand be met? Furthermore, how long will the demand continue? Experience has shown that while news stories carried on broadcast channels and via news websites quickly move off topic, the intense demand for information from those most involved in an incident continues for days, weeks and months

It is the mission of PIER Systems, Inc. to provide our clients with the knowledge and technology needed to build and maintain trust at a personal and organizational level. Trust depends on two things: doing the right things and communicating effectively about those actions.

It is critically important to understand that it is the audience or the stakeholders who are the ultimate judges of whether or not the organization is doing the right things and communicating well. "Perception is reality," is a common statement in the

later. The notification only starts the process of needing to continually serve up a fresh batch of information on a non-stop basis until the intense hunger has been satiated.

The result of failing to communicate or failing to meet the extremely high information demands of today's audiences and stakeholders can be severe. In all cases, it results in a loss of trust. In some cases, and there are notable and infamous examples, it can result in the loss of the enterprise and/or the careers of those leading the organization. In today's instant news world, the punishment for leaders who disappoint in their communication is frequently swift and final in terms of career. Even the president of Virginia Tech, in the days following the great tragedy, was accused of failing to adequately notify the campus community of the threat underway and was asked on a national television news program by a leading reporter if he would resign.

Given the limitations of mass telephone-notification, that initial siren message may be critical and may even help in saving lives. For that reason it must be considered in all emergency management plans. But, the message will not likely get to all who need to receive it. And the necessarily short message will create an intense hunger for additional information that must be met on the terms expected by the audience at the risk of loss of trust. Failing to understand what happens when the siren is sounded is to put the reputation of the institution and the careers of its leaders at risk.

public relations and communication business and it is very true. With this in mind, there are two ways to disappoint: by failing to meet the expectations of right and appropriate actions and failing to communicate that the right and appropriate actions have been taken. An effective response to a major incident poorly communicated still results in disappointment and loss of trust; a poor response effectively communicated has the same effect.

Building trust begins with an appreciation for the role that the perceptions of individuals play in the

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future of the organization. That is why crisis communication plans, community relations, issue communication plans—indeed, marketing plans—all begin with a clear description of the people and groups whose opinions about the organization matter most for the future well-being of the organization. In a major event, such as a hurricane, crazed shooter, or industrial accident, it is the opinion of key individuals as well as broader stakeholder groups about the character, values and leadership qualities of the organization's key leaders that will determine the confidence the organization will enjoy in the future. This evaluation of the character and competence of the leadership determines the long term impact of a major crisis on share value as clearly demonstrated in a study of major crises by Oxford University in the mid-1990s (for a copy of this important study, please contact your PIER Systems representative).

Emergency notification can play an important role in building trust. When it is deployed in a way to save lives, minimize risk, mitigate damages or in other ways protect the public, employees and others who may be impacted by the event, it can be seen as an essential part of "doing the right thing." However, if the notifications are not received in a timely manner due to easily predictable circumstances, such as the limitations of receiving telecommunications equipment, the mere fact of trying will not be sufficient.

This is why the only way to meet expectations and "do the right thing" in terms of notification is to try

to reach those affected in as many different ways as possible. In reaching a campus community, it is now widely known that students use social media sites with far greater frequency than email. This simply means that any attempt to communicate broadly with students that does not include some way of interacting with Facebook and/or Myspace pages is inadequate. The widespread use of text messaging by young people (and increasingly by the rest of us as well) demonstrates that all emergency notification plans must include a process for developing and maintaining current cell phone numbers for all those who need to be notified.

But, as we have seen, emergency notification alone cannot build trust. The expectations of doing the right things and communicating well about them go far beyond the initial notification. The "siren" that is the initial message must be accompanied by a continual stream of updated information available in all the ways that today's audiences choose to receive that information. The real challenge that today's leaders face is not just how they can quickly notify a large group of individuals, but how they then can continue to keep them well informed with timely, accurate information and how they can respond to the expectations that today's audiences have for direct interaction.

For that, we have to look at how communication leaders meet the daunting expectations of today's audiences in our instant news world.

Managing the Communication Cycle

Driven by the dramatic changes in public information caused by the "information age" and the Internet, communicators today must meet three imperatives that define audience expectations: the demand for speed, for direct communication and for honesty and transparency. The days of providing information to stakeholders through the media using press releases timed to meet the "news cycles" are long gone. Instead, news is an every moment, global, always-on business with audiences increasingly demanding to get relevant information not from the media, but directly from the people and organizations whose

activities impact their lives. Furthermore, with over 70 million bloggers who detest spin and see cover-up as the ultimate transgression, anything less than full disclosure and honest acceptance of responsibility is viewed with distrust and disdain. There is but one option left in this new public information environment—be prepared all the time to provide a continual stream of relevant, accurate and honest information to any and all who desire it.

It is helpful to analyze the communication management process through seven key steps and understand how PIER, as a full spectrum communication management platform, helps communicators meet the demands:

1) Notifications

In this case, notification refers to letting those who need to respond to an immediate situation know that an event has occurred that requires their immediate involvement. Team members can be notified through pagers, emails, telephone, text messages, desktop alerts, etc. For fast response—including fast communication response—it is essential that those involved know what they need to do or where they need to go for additional information. These initial notifications include and usually start with 911 calls or official notifications to regulatory agencies if the situation requires it.

This notification fits under the “resource callout” category identified above and is distinct from the emergency mass notification process which is identified under “information distribution” below.

Within PIER, users set up contact lists for immediate notifications and can quickly pull up a variety of templated callout messages to use to notify the team and provide instructions. The multi-modal distribution system means that users can simultaneously send the callout message via phone, text, email, fax, or pager. A secure website can also simultaneously be used to distribute confidential information to a response team with access passwords.

2) Information Gathering

Before appropriate response actions can be taken, and before messages can be sent to internal and external audiences, as much information about the situation must be gathered. This can be very challenging—particularly if the process relies on telephones, cell phones or other methods which can become unavailable in a wide-spread event. The

Internet has proven to be the most resilient communication platform during numerous large-scale events so it is important to provide a common, secure method of communicating real time information with dispersed team members on an Internet platform to facilitate information gathering.

On PIER, information gathering is facilitated by using highly secure internal documents to keep real-time information about unfolding events. A secure conference room, or Instant Messaging center, also allows all password secured users to converse in real time. An internal Message Center provides additional internal messaging capability with direct link to external email. Documents, files, photos and other materials can easily be shared among all users working within the virtual control center.

3) Message Drafting, Editing and Approval

“Raw” information, of course, is not ready for distribution. Because the communication team has access to the situation reports being provided by those involved in the incident and the response, they can immediately begin drafting emergency notification messages, media releases, fact sheets, employee messages, executive leadership updates, etc. A highly effective use of PIER involves preparing a wide range of message templates in advance anticipating the kind of messages that would need to be sent with great urgency. Then it is a matter for the team—regardless of their location or the time—to pull up the template, alter it according to the relevant facts and get needed approvals. With PIER, a distributed team can work together as if they are in the same room because all tools, data, background information and more are stored within the web-based control center.

Approvals are critically important because they provide accountability for the distribution of critical information. PIER is National Incident Management System (NIMS) compliant and was created based on Incident Command System and Joint Information System protocols—

assuring appropriate release of information only with Incident Commander approvals. It is critical that this process be streamlined to avoid creating delays that cause disappointment. PIER provides assurance of control over information release while designed specifically to facilitate the approval process. This information approval process is also critical for emergency notifications. The same highly efficient but rigorous approval process that is built into PIER must be put in place if notification-only solutions are adopted.

4) Multi-mode distribution

Once information has been approved for release, it needs to be distributed. As mentioned earlier, today's audiences require multiple modes of distribution and these modes are continually changing. PIER distributes the information that is approved in essentially a single process including through phone, SMS/text, email, fax, a website or multiple connected websites, and to unconnected websites or social media sites like Facebook through RSS feeds. When speed is of the essence, the ability to manage multiple modes is critical. If independent and separately controlled systems are employed, the number of people involved is automatically multiplied as is the time needed to manage the distribution and the potential for errors.

A multi-mode platform means that the degree of detail can be tailored based on the mode used. For example, an SMS/text message about a crime event has a limited character length. But, an email message allows for considerably more detail and a website, which can be updated directly by the communication team on a continually, can and should provide much greater information detail. As we have seen, making such information available simultaneously is also critically important. Those getting the "siren" message on a cell phone will likely be using their PDAs to search the website instantly or directing those they call (if they get through) to find out more on the web or via email and call them back with additional details. All that is likely to be happening while they are still leaving the building.

5) Inquiry/interactive management

Communication is a two-way interchange. Just as today's audiences and stakeholders expect and demand fast and direct information, they also expect and demand personal attention and response. Public relations professionals fixed in the mindset of media relations tend to dismiss this as unrealistic, particularly in a large-scale event. How can the potentially hundreds or even thousands of questions and comments coming in from individuals be managed? The truth is individuals raising questions or comments must receive fast and efficient responses or they too will be disappointed and will likely quickly lose trust. If they are high value stakeholders, no excuse about "we were too busy responding to the media" will be acceptable. PIER enables a dispersed team to operate as one to quickly and efficiently respond to inquiries coming in from the media, key stakeholders, or anyone. The external websites managed by PIER facilitate the inquiries which can also be logged from phone calls or external email. Numerous high profile events have proven that it is completely realistic to expect a small communication team—even one very dispersed geographically—to work together to manage a flood of personal interchanges.

6) Monitoring

Communication involves listening as well as speaking. Monitoring the external environment is a critical task of communicators. Today, this includes not only print and broadcast media, but also blogs, social media sites and all online media. It should also involve active listening within key stakeholder groups and networks. PIER provides complete media monitoring as well as blogs and online media. Print and broadcast clips are quickly and easily captured within PIER—even allowing you to select the exact portion of the broadcast clip you wish to keep. These are stored in a clipbook on PIER allowing users to connect back to the releases and inquiries that generated the news stories. In addition, PIER provides a complete set of survey tools enabling users to quickly create, post and distribute custom surveys to aid in monitoring the external environment.

7) Information Gathering

The information gained from the monitoring process, plus new information about the event and the response, is combined to start the communication cycle over again. Rumor control is a key part of the communicator's job and effective monitoring along with review of inquiries allow communicators and organization leaders to spot rumors and quickly correct misinformation. New information is then processed for distribution and the cycle of review, editing, approval, and distribution begins again.

When all the activity begins to wind down, the communicators and leaders will want to start to "de-brief," discuss what was learned and make plans for the future. PIER keeps complete and detailed record of all communication activities automatically, recording each action of each user and providing detailed reports that can help evaluate quality of response, verify that specific activities took place, and provide the basis for improvements in the future.

Constant Change

As this white paper was being written, Apple's new iPhone™ was being released. This device increases the ability of its users to gain immediate access to web-based information. Now when that student receives a notice about an immediate danger on campus, he or she will start looking at websites, his/her Facebook page, emails, and whatever else is new in Internet-based communication even as he or she is walking out the building to safety. Such is the instant news world: ever more information access ever faster. As a new grandparent, one of your authors received updates about the progress of the delivery of new grandchild through "Twitter," a service that allows users to post messages via Instant Message services or cell phones directly to websites, email, and blogs. Instant information and constant information all the time is the expectation of today's audiences—particularly the younger ones. Each one of these changes represents increased expectations and demands. Organization leaders and communicators must understand and adjust to each of these or face the consequences of disappointing stakeholders whose perception of the organization is critical to its future.

The pace of this change virtually assures that large, complex organizations are getting around to solving yesterday's problems today. Only when a large-scale event overwhelms them do the leaders become aware that the world had changed without them noticing.

While the introduction of the iPhone and Twitter signal changes in demands and expectations they also provide new opportunities. Through these new cell phone/Internet devices, all the functions of a web-based application such as PIER can be managed. That means that the ability to take full control of enterprise-level communication is pocket scaled and available in the palm of a hand. The ability to keep key stakeholders and an organization's team informed and involved in rapidly changing events is possible through every common ordinary cell phone. These rapid changes represent both risk and opportunity—in the same way large-scale events represents potentially organization-defeating risks and unprecedented opportunities to build trust and respect.

PIER Strategy

As we have since our founding in 2000, it is our job to help organizations cope with the changes in the information environment by providing them with the ideas, the strategies, the training and the technologies needed to meet accelerating information demands. It is this clear focus and vision that has enabled us to become the leader in web-based communication management technologies.

Our approach to emergency notification is an important indication of that focus. There are those who insist that notification is the solution and is the way to both protect public safety and the reputation of the organization. We do not.

Only effective communication can do that and communication goes far beyond notification. Notification through telecom-based technology is vitally important and is central to a communication plan and platform. But it does not and cannot do

the entire job of providing the rich and detailed information that today's audiences and stakeholders demand, in the multiple modes they require, and with the level of personal interaction that they expect. Only a full spectrum communication management solution can deliver what is expected with the kind of efficiency and universal access needed.

Because our commitment is to multi-mode and interactive communication accessible on a single, simple web-based platform, we encourage the use of full-featured notification systems as part of an overall communication management plan. PIER Systems will work with supportive vendors to integrate their systems and advanced features into the PIER platform in addition to providing a fully operational telecom notification capability embedded within PIER. Contact your PIER representative for additional information about existing integrations with notification partners and to discuss the integration potential for notification systems of your choice.

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