Effective and Integrated Mass Notification at the Push of a Button

The advantages of having a mass notification system with a single point of activation

By Greg Smith | August 01, 2017

Colleges and universities have a tremendous responsibility to safeguard students, faculty, and staff members who live, study, and work on their campuses. It is a daunting task for safety personnel when the thousands of people who are on campus every day, at all times of day and night, are taken into consideration. Also, many campuses have several unsecured entry points that can be accessed by anyone at any time.

Fortunately, schools are up to the challenge and typically have several security measures in place. These measures can include a badge-only entry for certain buildings, employing a full-time police force, and using a mass emergency notification system in the event of a crisis such as an active shooter or severe weather event.

A mass notification system can be comprised of various forms of communication including email, text messages and phone calls, pop-up messages on computer screens and digital signage, and large outdoor speakers. However, with varying forms of notification methods comes the challenge of activating all of them quickly and effectively. Components of a system might not be integrated with each other, which could require safety personnel to perform multiple activations.

Many universities like Gordon College in Wenham, MA face this issue. "During a crisis, you don't have time to go down a checklist of all the systems you need to activate," said Chris Jones, Associate Vice President for Technology and Operations for Gordon College. "The list to activate all our systems was daunting, even without the pressure of an emergency."

Mass Notification and the Internet of Things: Integration

Whether a school like Gordon College already has an emergency notification system in place and is looking to expand or is considering longer-term future additions, considering the system's ability to integrate is essential. If a school already has one or more products or systems in place, it's crucial that the new system works well with those components, not only for cost effectiveness but to ensure a cohesive system overall.

With so much of today's technology relying more and more on the Internet of Things, it does not make sense for schools—or any organization—to invest in a system that can't connect and integrate with various systems and technologies. That is why schools need to implement a mass notification system that can easily—and seamlessly—integrate with third-party systems.

One of the strengths of the Alertus System is its ability to easily integrate with other systems to automatically send incident-specific notifications across desktop and laptop computers, VoIP phones, digital signage, and more.

"In looking at Alertus, it was the way to unify everything together," added Jones. "We now have it set that with basically "one click," it can activate all the systems. Being able to setup pre-scripted alerts to fire off with one button press or one click during a crisis can really help save lives during an emergency."

Alertus has a robust set of APIs supporting logical integration with third-party systems. The use of APIs facilitates third-party system activation of the Alertus System, and, similarly, Alertus enjoys strong partner relationships with other notification service providers, which enables the Alertus System to activate these partner systems.

The Alertus System also has built-in capabilities to generate or consume various data feeds, including Syndication and CAP feeds. These capabilities enable smart, cross-platform integration, which is typically informed by customer-defined business rules. Similarly, the Alertus System can cause integrated systems to activate in prescribed manners, or vice-versa.

Panic Buttons: One Touch Activation

A key benefit to having an integrated notification system is the ability to have a single point of activation. When an emergency situation arises, security personnel can lose valuable time--which can cost lives—because they have to deploy multiple forms of notifications.

A popular solution for one-step activation in the event of a major crisis is the use of panic buttons (also called hold-up buttons, duress buttons, or panic alarm buttons). Since campuses can face different types of threats, they have to consider the best panic button option to fit their needs. In extreme emergencies such as an active shooter situation, the classic red button is still the go-to option because of the immediate need to call for help while simultaneously notifying thousands of people at once of the threat.

But schools and organizations often face scenarios where discretion is paramount to keep a potentially dangerous situation under control. In these situations, a covert call for help

from pushing a small, discreet panic button, or a few inconspicuous clicks of a mouse could potentially minimize any escalation from an agitated or suspicious individual who isn't posing an immediate threat. Panic button capabilities can also be included in smartphone apps to allow personnel to trigger localized alert notifications regardless of their location.

Panic buttons can be hardwired directly into a system, connected via USB port, and some models have wireless capabilities.

Pressing a panic button will activate notification alerts through other, integrated products— including the Alert Beacon, Alertus Desktop Notification, LED marquees, text-to-speech interface for public address and giant outdoor speaker systems, fire alarm interface, VoIP phone alerting, and digital signage and cable television override. Alerts can be customizable depending on a school's needs and can be configured using custom event triggers.

California State University San Marcos

In 2014, California State University San Marcos handled a potential active shooter event when they received a call that there was a person on campus with a weapon. As campus police started searching for the person, school officials made the decision to put the campus on lockdown.

One push of the discreet panic button located in the campus dispatch center and all of the school's emergency alert devices activated. The speakers fired off and started relaying the alert message, the doors locked down, the desktop notification and phones went off, the digital signage displayed the alert, and the system began sending custom messages out via phone call, text, and email.

"When we installed our new emergency notification system we wanted a system that could be easily deployed in case of emergency," said Robert Williams, Emergency Manager at California State University San Marcos. "One of the functions of that was to install an emergency alert button for active shooter situations."

Throughout the event, multiple alerts were deployed to keep everyone informed of the situation. The initial alert put the campus on lockdown and instructed everyone to shelter in place. Shortly after, the second alert went out to inform everyone that law enforcement was on campus and also provided a description of the subject. A few minutes later another alert went out to keep the lock down in place, and that law enforcement was entering the last known area where the subject was seen. Within the next 20 minutes, the all-clear notification went out. [The potential gunman was an employee of the university and was carrying a long umbrella that someone mistook for a rifle.]

"It was extremely beneficial to have so many options for getting information out to our campus community," added Williams. "Depending on where people were during the lockdown, they were able to receive the alerts through digital signage and desktop notifications. Some people could hear the phone notifications, and most were getting the information via their cell phones (call, text, and email).

Using a panic button to activate an integrated system greatly improved the school's response efficiency. With the previous system they had to go into the alerting software, type up the message and send it, then, separately go into their text distribution program, type up the message and send it. With the different steps, it took approximately three-to-four minutes of work just to send the message out versus simply pushing a panic button. In an active shooter situation the difference between people getting notified in a matter of 20 seconds or less versus four minutes is vital when, according to statistics, most active shooter incidents are over in 12 minutes.

Remaining Vigilant

With advances in emergency mass notification technology, campus security personnel have the tools to better protect their campuses. But while they must remain vigilant, having an integrated emergency mass notification system with a single point of activation will give them an advantage should they face a major emergency event.

About the Author

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