1. Is a mass notification system (MNS) optional for organizations, or are there requirements that a system be in place?
Mass notification technology and policies are mandatory, not optional. Both the National Fire Alarm & Signaling Code (NFPA 72 – 2010/2013 editions) as well as The Occupational Safety & Health Administration (Part 1910) require and enforce mass notification capabilities. Some states have enacted their own laws regarding emergency alerts as well. For colleges and universities specifically, there are also increasing requirements under the Higher Education Opportunity Act and the Jeanne Clery Act. Colleges and universities must comply with the laws and standards in place.

2. What is the current thinking about types of MNS?
Organizations employ a variety of methods for alerting people about emergencies. Mass notification systems range from very basic to comprehensive with a corresponding degree of success in reaching their intended audience. Public safety analysts and risk managers advise that an MNS should be capable of reaching everyone, everywhere, at any time. Alerts should also reach all intended recipients simultaneously, regardless of the method in which the communication is disseminated. Moreover, the messages should be able to be seen and heard.

3. What are the challenges to reaching everyone, everywhere, at any time?
At any given time, people in a campus environment might be working, eating at a cafeteria or restaurant, walking, driving, socializing, or participating in a meeting. Some individuals will be hearing impaired or visually impaired. It might be late at night when most resident students are sleeping, or at a time when there has been a widespread power outage. To ensure that everyone receives notification of an emergency at the same time, the means for delivering the warning has to be multi-faceted and multi-modal. Landline phones, loudspeakers, cell phones, electronic signs, computer screens, strobe lights, and outdoor sirens all have a place in a multi-modal system.
4. Is a web-based MNS sufficient?
Communications that are sent to cell phones, social media sites, websites, Blackberries, iPhones, and other web-based destinations are effective at reaching a large percentage of students, faculty, visitors and staff, but not all of the individuals who need to be contacted. Experience over the past three to four years has taught us that these communications are part of the solution, but cannot be relied upon as the primary means of emergency communication. Web-based systems can reach people IF all personal communications devices are turned on, IF there is no power failure, IF everyone is monitoring their devices (and are not asleep, in the shower, or in a loud environment at the time), IF everyone is in a position to actively tune in to the written alert, and IF the owner has registered the PDA with the campus information network.

The latest National Fire Protection Association (NFPA) standards state that web-based messaging is not enough and that audible alerting methods must be part of the MNS.

5. What are the benefits of a multi-modal system compared to one that relies on a single method of alerting?
The main reason to utilize multiple mass notification capabilities is to ensure that in the event of a crisis, everyone can see or hear the emergency alert, regardless of the time of day, their location, or what they are doing at the time. A major benefit is knowing that all available notification methods have been employed to keep people safe and that the organization’s alert and notification system reflects this commitment.

Another benefit is that when two-way communications are incorporated into the MNS, emergency responders can more easily locate those who need help and provide assistance quickly to the right people at the right place. A combination web and premise-based system will ensure coverage across an entire campus. MNS enhancements can be scheduled for implementation in phases and hold the promise of cost savings from improved business workflow. It is hard to put a price on or assign a value to peace of mind, but most would agree that whatever it is, it is worth it.

6. What about the system that is already in place?
We do not intend to replace it and start from scratch. With the right technology, it will not be necessary to install a totally new system. Advanced technology provides the ability to integrate new capabilities into the legacy system and to activate all communications modalities simultaneously with a single button. Conversely, the new technology should be able to segment and layer messaging to particular groups or locations, depending upon whether everyone needs to be alerted, or just a portion of the audience, based on the type of incident and its impact. The additional benefit of an integrated, layered system is that it can streamline everyday public information releases and information management, making the current system that much more versatile and efficient.

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