

Deploying Visual Message Boards for Mass Notification

*Best practices and common pitfalls of emergency
notification system deployment*



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Emergency notification experts agree that colleges and universities are best served by multiple mass notification channels, or message delivery end-points. This layered approach prevents a single point of failure if one component of the technology solution experiences difficulty in activation or message dispatch.

The most holistic mass notification strategies include visual communications components. Many colleges, such as Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University in Blacksburg, Virginia, have satisfied this requirement by installing LED digital signage solutions throughout classrooms and common areas on campus.

However, deciding to implement a visual mass notification system is only the first step. Once the lengthy process of budget approval and vendor bidding is complete, focus must shift to appropriate system deployment – including installation, testing and maintenance. Even the best notification system on the market loses its effectiveness if deployed incorrectly or inefficiently.

Message Board Deployment Best Practices

Since every campus is different, implementation of an emergency notification system should be tailored to individual requirements and challenges. Reputable mass notification vendors and product manufacturers should evaluate your campus layout and assess your unique situation prior to the purchase of any device. This will ensure optimal system deployment and seamless integration with your existing mass notification solution(s). Be cautious of manufacturers or integrators that are unwilling to engage in meetings with stakeholders or partner with the institution for a proof of concept.

To ensure successful deployment of emergency notification message boards on a college campus, follow these steps:

1. Determine the critical path for your technology solution.

Ensure that the crisis team has well defined goals, and determine what constitutes success regarding a mass notification solution. Consider the needs and preferences of internal stakeholders as well as compliance with legal requirements, such as the recently amended Clery Act.

The 2008 amendment to the Clery Act¹ mandates immediate response to emergency situations on college campuses. According to the amendment, acceptable responses must include a comprehensive mass notification system that communicates information and instructions to often widely dispersed audiences. Penalties for non-compliance with the Clery Act include a \$27,500 fine or loss of the university federal financial aid.

1 Higher Education Opportunity Act, U.S. Department of Education, <http://www.ed.gov/HEOA>, 2008

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In addition to researching legal requirements, emergency management planners should consider notification system implementations at other colleges and universities. For example, Virginia Tech was faced with a common problem among higher education institutions of all sizes – how to communicate an emergency message across a campus community as quickly and efficiently as possible. Virginia Tech’s existing emergency response plan included email and SMS/text message modes of communication, but there were critical “soft spots” in the plan when it came to instant notification. Utilizing their current communications mix, officials had limited methods to reach students and faculty in captive spaces, such as classrooms and hallways.

With existing communications assets unable to fill the gaps in their emergency notification strategy, Virginia Tech embarked on a process to thoroughly research alternative modes of communication. Officials concluded that other communication modes, such as PA systems, would be costly and unreliable in instantly reaching the campus community. The decision to purchase and deploy Inova Solutions’ OnAlert LED displays for instant emergency notification was clear.

2. Conduct a needs assessment before determining the scope of your visual message board procurement.

Every campus has “high risk” areas which can represent an array of challenges to successful mass notification deployment, ranging from poor cell phone reception to old buildings with few exits. Experts can help you identify these areas and make recommendations for the most effective solution.

For phase one implementation, officials should focus on high traffic areas and muster points on campus. Large classrooms, student centers, residence halls and dining facilities should be among the first considered for visual message boards.

3. Ensure that visual alerting devices are tested and supported for use with existing technologies.

Most colleges and universities have an existing mass notification solution already in place. Visual message boards should be tested on the existing IT infrastructure to ensure success under stress tests.

Seamless integration is a critical component of effective visual messaging. In an emergency, safety and security personnel need to have the highest degree of control via the fewest

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steps possible to administer messages. Make sure that the visual message boards are scalable and are designed to interact with existing technologies as opposed to requiring distinct and separate means of administration.

Take care to avoid single points of failure. Layers or tiers added to the mass notification technology mix should have their own interfaces or ways to access command and control functions, should other components of the system fail to operate as planned.

4. Establish protocols for messages.

Define how to communicate in a crisis and establish rules for message composition. Visual displays with “predefined” messages facilitate quick mobilization and administration. A prioritization method will help the institution respond to various types of emergencies from inclement weather to violent acts or other threats.

Roles and redundancy should be well defined. Trends show IT and public safety personnel often act as the primary owners and administrators of visual message boards. However, subsets of message boards may be established for non-emergency use by facilities such as athletics, transit, and other departments across campus.

5. Re-evaluate the implementation after the phase one deployment is in place for continued performance improvement.

After the first round of message board deployment, consider what else can be done to improve communications. Invite your solutions provider back for a security and safety audit and consider any area of the campus underserved by the initial implementation.

Conclusion

Many colleges and universities recognize that instant, multi-modal communication to students and faculty during an emergency situation will keep their campus community as safe as possible. However, few emergency management personnel know how to deploy a multi-modal notification system in the most effective way.

Visual message boards from Inova Solutions are designed for easy deployment and integration with other means of emergency notification. A phased deployment, as outlined in this paper, will ensure a seamless and successful mass notification system implementation.

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About Inova Solutions

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