



EVERY CONTACT POINT COUNTS

WHY MULTI-MODALITY IS ESSENTIAL TO EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION

In the hours following the attacks on the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, placing a call into or out of New York City was nearly impossible. As carrier networks became overloaded, communication was stalled. Consequently, many organizations, families, and public officials were unable to connect with each other, adding stress and confusion to an already tragic day.

During the New York City blackout in 2003, many businesses that were within the locked-down power grid went without internet service for almost half a day. In most of these cases, both the primary and secondary email servers were within the same grid, leading to IT system failures throughout the northeast. E-mail communication was severely disrupted.

In the first moments of a crisis, timely communication can save lives, resources, and reputation. Unfortunately, it is often during these very moments that critical lines of communication are cut off, and that making contact becomes more difficult than ever.

The flexibility inherent in multi-modal communication increases the chance that important and time-sensitive messages will reach people quickly during an emergency. If a mail server is down, or a network is overwhelmed, alternate points of contact are critical. While many organizations have an emergency notification system in place as a part of their business continuity plan, they often fail to recognize the importance of maintaining multiple points of contact with each of their employees.

When organizations collect contact information from their employees, they must consider the various emergency situations that they might find themselves in. If an incident occurs after office hours, having home contact information is critical. And if employees are routinely out in the field, organizations must be able to quickly reach them through e-mail, voice, or text communication.

Send Word Now's alerts can be sent via voice over wired and wireless phones, e-mail, and text, BlackBerry® PIN, pager, or fax. Each mode of communication has its own value:



Voice over wireless phone networks - Placing a phone call is often the fastest way to supply someone with crucial and detailed information. And wireless communication is often the most immediate, as cellular and satellite phones are portable and can be taken almost everywhere. However, a communication strategy based solely on wireless phone contact is not sufficient. Carrier networks can become overloaded during crisis situations, mobile phone batteries can die out, and coverage areas do not always extend to a crisis zone.



Voice over landline phones - Landline phones offer a second mode of voice communication during a crisis, and can be particularly useful when cellular carrier networks are overloaded. On September 11, 2001, placing a call over a landline connection was one of the only options during the hours immediately after the Twin Towers fell. Unfortunately, while landline connections remain more reliable than cellular networks, the message recipient must be near that phone in order to receive the call. Further, many individuals rely solely on their cellular phones and do not have a landline at their disposal during emergencies.



E-mail - E-mail messages are very practical during emergencies, as they support more comprehensive messages than other modalities, as well as the ability to send critical attachments, such as evacuation maps or roll-call lists. With Send Word Now's AlertLinks, these documents can be sent as links, saving email servers the time it takes to send large messages. However, while e-mail provides a quick and effective mode of communication, it does rely on an internet connection and a functioning server, and should not be the exclusive mode for communicating with an individual.



Text via SMS - SMS (Short Message Service) over SMPP (Short Message Peer-to-Peer) is an Internet protocol that defines the sending and receiving of text messages through digital cell phones, pagers and handheld wireless devices (like the BlackBerry smartphone). SMS supports messages of up to 160 characters in length, and is well suited to content that conveys basic information. If recipients are carrying cellular phones, but do not have access to email, they can be reached most quickly via SMS. These messages are carried in much smaller packets than voice data and are sent much more quickly. Send Word Now works with aggregators that provide priority traffic to carriers, in order to ensure the quick and efficient delivery of your messages, and our Concatenated SMS (cSMS) feature enables multiple individual SMS message segments to be combined into one seamless SMS message. However, this mode of contact does rely on a functioning SMS-capable device and the stability of the carrier network - it should not be an exclusive means of communication during an emergency.



Text via SMTP - Text messages can also be sent over SMTP (Simple Mail Transfer Protocol), an Internet standard for electronic mail (e-mail) transmission across Internet Protocol (IP) networks. Handheld phones typically use standard mail protocols like SMTP for email messaging on the device. While text messages sent via SMTP gateways are susceptible to the same failures as SMS, this option offers Send Word Now users a broader range of two-way communication during emergencies.



Text via BlackBerry PIN - The BlackBerry PIN acts as a "serial number" for BlackBerry smartphones, and is accessible through the independent RIM network. PIN messages are sent directly to the BlackBerry device, rather than through the phone carrier or an internet connection, effectively acting as an independent third mode of contact for BlackBerry users. If an email server is down and voice networks are clogged, the RIM server may still transmit messages.



Text via Pager (WCTP) - In the IT and health services industries, among others, contact through pagers is often an efficient way to get word out quickly, to reach employees who are on-call, and to manage shift changes. Paging devices offer an additional mode of communication, but cannot alone offer the depth of content that is provided by voice over phone or e-mail.



Fax - While some modalities limit the amount of characters in a message, fax messages allow users to send long messages to convey information that can supplement shorter, more immediate initial alerts. Additionally, sending a message via fax provides another layer of redundancy, to ensure that recipients are kept informed, no matter what.



In all cases, organizations can increase their chances of timely delivery by using multiple points of contact for each recipient. Further, in emergency situations, multi-modality is critical on both ends of the communication chain, and administrators should consider their own access to Send Word Now when it comes to sending messages. With Send Word Now's multi-modal message triggering options, instant communication has never been easier. To launch an alert, users can log on to Send Word Now's website, call Send Word Now customer support, use the unique BlackBerry triggering client, or send a QuickSend email.

Of course, while the use of multiple contact points can ensure faster delivery of your messages, these contact points do not need to be used all at once. In order to prevent recipients from being overloaded, organizations can take advantage of Send Word Now's voice cascade feature, which selects only one voice contact point to message to at a time. In this way, multi-modality ensures communication, while delayed messaging features prevent individuals from becoming overloaded with alerts.

Real-life crises have demonstrated that at least one communication modality will usually work during any given event – even during a blackout or a severe storm. However, until a crisis strikes, it's impossible to know which communication paths will be available. Make sure that your organization is prepared in advance by populating your Send Word Now account with all possible data for your contacts, keeping in mind that redundancy can save lives. And to make this process easier, organizations can confirm and update their data in just minutes using Send Word Now's unique Recipient Self-Update feature. With minimal effort, you can manage multiple points of contact and maintain the ability to seamlessly shift from one modality to another during an event. This flexibility will improve your communication efforts and can ultimately reduce both liability and potential harm to employees and customers.