Mass Notification Buyer's Guide

Finding the Right Solution to **Detect Threats, Notify Everyone, and Manage Incidents**

Table of Contents

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Executive Summary
Finding a complete solution

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Why You Need Mass Notification

REACHING EVERYONE

"How do you reach everyone during an emergency?"

It's a deceptively simple question and one you can probably answer. Maybe your organization uses alarms, phone trees, or email chains. You might use mass SMS text messaging, panic buttons, or overhead paging. But even if you're using one of these methods or some combination of them, you still might be missing people with critical messages that impact their safety.

And that just covers sending out a single message. It doesn't account for how you know when something goes wrong, or what happens when after that message goes out.

COMPLETE NOTIFICATION

While you might be looking for a tool to get your messages out, a complete mass notification system helps you do three things: detect threats, notify everyone, and manage incidents. When a crisis occurs every second counts. Leaders can't afford to waste a second, so the more they can do to automate processes and prebuild messages the more efficiently they can respond to an emergency.

To do this, a mass notification system should be able to tie into your existing on-site and mobile technologies, minimizing the need to log into different systems. This saves time by eliminating silos and creating a connected network of devices that can include panic buttons, cameras, sensors, overhead paging, digital signage, desktop computers, desk phones, mobile devices, and virtual collaboration systems. The moment an issue arises, automated messages can be sent to every connected device so people can understand what's happening and begin responding.

ANSWERING THE "WHY"

Now you know what a mass notification system can do, but you still might wonder "why" these tools are necessary. For any organization, the chance someone may miss a message that impacts their safety shouldn't be an acceptable outcome. Organizations have an obligation to provide a safe environment for the people who come through that space as part of their duty of care and must take the proper steps to ensure that space meets this expectation. It's important to assess what measures your organization currently has in place and what gaps you need to fill because without the proper tools and preparations in place, organizations are putting themselves and their people at risk.

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Differentiators

Separate the contenders from the pretenders

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Integrating Existing Technology

BUILDING AN ECOSYSTEM

You'll be hard-pressed to find a mass notification system that doesn't offer integrations with other hardware and systems. That's because a mass notification system on its own only offers so much value. A notification system becomes a critical operational tool based on its ability to expand capabilities and consolidate technology into a single system. This enables organizations to create an ecosystem of tools for safety and communication with the mass notification system serving as the backbone that ties each piece together. However, not all vendors offer the same breadth of integrations, so it's important to understand if the technology you already own will pair well and if you're well set up to add new tools in the future.

Here are technologies that you should consider integrating with your mass notification system. We put them into groups that address the components that make up a complete notification system.

DETECTING THREATS

Panic buttons: Whether it's a wearable, mounted device, or virtual button configured on a mobile app, desktop computer, or desk phone, panic buttons offer a discrete and easy method to alert people about an issue or request assistance.

Door access: Mass notification systems can also trigger other systems, such as door access controls. If you need to trigger a lockdown, you can send alerts and trigger doors to lock to prevent unauthorized access into a building or room.

Surveillance cameras: Video footage can help understand what happened after an event, but cameras with AI threat detection or motion sensors can initiate automatic notification when issues arise.

Sensors: Monitoring for air quality, water leaks, or other environmental issues can help organizations stay ahead of potential problems before they impact operations or people's safety.

Visitor management system: Being able to identify threats before they access buildings can help prevent emergencies. Visitor management systems help verify guest identities and can initiate alerts when flagged individuals attempt entry.

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Integrating Existing Technology (cont.)

NOTIFYING EVERYONE

Overhead paging systems: Mass notification systems can expand the effectiveness of existing paging systems, and even integrate with analog systems to create modern, intelligent solutions for sharing information.

Desk phones: Broadcast intrusive live or recorded audio with safety instructions that grab people's attention. Phones with displays can also show text and icons about the emergency taking place.

IP speakers: Extend the reach of your audio broadcasts to every corner of your buildings. Some IP speakers will include digital signage so audio, text, and visual messages can be delivered in tandem.

Digital signage and desktop computers: Digital signs around facilities (such as flat-screen televisions or monitors) can share emergency notifications with text and images. Display alerts on desktops that can pop up in front of other applications and even unmute the computer to share information via audio.

Mobile devices: Alert people who are away from your building and prevent them from entering dangerous situations. Mobile devices also offer a variety of message delivery types including SMS text, push notification, phone calls, and email.

MANAGING INCIDENTS

Virtual collaboration tools: Given how pervasive collaboration tools like Webex and Microsoft Teams have become, it can be useful to integrate with these tools to launch or receive notification. They can also be used to gather stakeholders in virtual spaces to assess situations and determine the best course of action.

Critical incident mapping: Being able to add maps and floorplans to notifications can help provide critical context and facilitate an efficient response.

The right mass notification system will act as a central hub to manage which devices receive a message during an emergency. An open API will offer more options for integrations. Be sure to look for a system that can provide an ecosystem that includes mobile and on-premises notifications. Many can do one or the other, but few can do both. This is a critical consideration as it provides the best chance for reaching everyone with the information they need to stay safe.

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Understanding the Role of Your Phones

TIMES AND TECHNOLOGY ARE CHANGING

For many years, an organization's phone system has been at the center of the mass notification conversation. A compatible phone system often meant that users could take advantage of the full feature set available within the solution. However, traditional phone systems are moving to the cloud as more organizations turn to UCaaS providers. This provides a unique opportunity to expand the number of organizations that can leverage mass notification systems as the phone system becomes less of a barrier to implementation.

Even if functionality is not the same across every phone system, mass notification tools are offering more robust features that can serve as workarounds or substitutes.

A WIDE ARRAY OF OPTIONS

If phone functionality is limited, mass notification systems offer a wide array of options for delivering text and audio messages to on-site and mobile devices. This can include IP speakers, digital signage, desktop computers, and cell phones. In combination with email and virtual collaboration tools, your organization can still achieve a broad reach for its emergency messages.

This is also true when it comes to initiating messages. While organizations have relied on speed dials or virtual panic buttons available on desk phones to trigger notifications in the past, more options are now available to offer greater flexibility and automation for deploying emergency alerts. Physical, mobile, and wearable panic buttons, contact closures, monitored RSS and CAP feeds, and keyboard shortcuts can all activate a notification with the push of a button or when certain criteria are met.

WHEN IN DOUBT, ASK

It's important to speak with your vendor about the type of phone system in place in your organization and whether or not it is compatible with the solution you are considering. Understand potential limitations and what alternatives the vendor offers either via the features available in their system or through a third-party solution.

Calling vs. Broadcasting

AVOID FAILED CALLS

Phone compatibility is an important factor to consider because not all mass notification vendors deliver audio to phones in the same way. Occasionally, we hear how other mass notification providers claim they can reach desk phones by placing a call through their telephone. This may seem like a simple solution, but the hidden complications can have severe consequences. Several factors will contribute to large numbers of simultaneous calls failing to get through; the most common being trunking capacity. This is the number of phone lines that are connected from a phone system to the outside world.

Very few organizations (businesses, schools, hospitals, etc.) pay for an active outside phone line for every phone. The typical ratio is four phones for every outside line. That means when a mass notification service provider tries to call all of an organization's phones at once, 75 percent of these calls will be blocked due to a lack of trunking capacity. If the mass notification system is smart enough, it will try repeatedly until it reaches every phone. However, a lot of time will have passed while those calls are being placed, which is far from ideal if an emergency is unfolding. And if all of the trunking capacity is being used, no outbound phone calls can be made to 911 or anywhere else.

Even if an organization had trunk capacity for 100 percent of its people, most phone systems would perceive hundreds or thousands of simultaneous phone calls as a denial of service attack. Their response would be to block many of these calls.

BROADCASTING RELIEVES THE PRESSURE

Mass notification systems that utilize broadcasting are able to overcome the challenges of calling. Using a single multicast audio stream across the internal network allows phones to play the audio stream via their speakers or the handset. This uses zero phone trunk capacity. There is no need for the end-user to answer the phone because the audio is automatically broadcast via the speakerphone.

Consider an enterprise-class mass notification system that reaches mobile phones and on-premises devices like desk phones, computer desktops, overhead paging, and digital signage, all with the press of a button, and without using any phone trunk capacity.

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The Limitations of Mobile-Only Solutions

WHY SETTLING FOR LESS ISN'T AN OPTION

The mass notification industry is largely centered around sending bulk SMS text messages to mobile phones. Maybe your organization is already using this kind of tool to send mass messages. It's a necessary component of effective mass notification, but by itself, it's insufficient. Research done at Western Washington University shows that mobile notifications are only ~80 percent effective. That may sound ok, but what if you're one of the 20 percent that didn't receive an alert? What if that alert contained critical information about an active shooter, or the need to take shelter from an approaching storm? Would your organization still think 80 percent was good enough?

Many factors can prevent mobile notifications from reaching 100 percent of their intended audience. Some organizations don't have everyone's phone numbers in the system. Mobile phones are often on silent or otherwise out of sight. Sometimes it's as simple as being in a building with poor cellular coverage.

COMBAT INEFFECTIVE NOTIFICATIONS

The key to achieving 100 percent reach is to supplement mobile mass notification with additional communication methods, such as in-building notifications, specifically audio and visual broadcasts to existing overhead paging public address systems, desktop alerts, digital signage, and desktop phones. Using multiple channels, i.e. in-building communications as well as mobile notifications, has the added benefit of increasing the sense of urgency perceived by the recipient.

Some systems will also utilize GPS to establish an area of interest for emergency notifications. Using GPS coordinates, you can define an area that can include an entire campus or whatever area you think is pertinent. Then, using the GPS in people's mobile phones, you can configure the system to send alerts to everyone inside that area or be alerted when someone (like faculty) or something (approaching severe weather) enters the area.

By combining in-building notification methods with mobile notifications, your critical alerts will be received far faster and will reach much closer to 100 percent of your desired population.

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Emergency & Daily Operations

MASS NOTIFICATION FOR NON-EMERGENCIES

When it comes to mass notification, emergency situations often drive the need to implement these solutions. We've talked about how mass notification systems tied to the right devices throughout an organization have the ability to reach as many people as possible, as quickly as possible. This can help minimize confusion, help with response times, and generally keep people out of harm's way. But a mass notification system is a big investment, and most organizations aren't going to select a tool that they're only going to use when a crisis occurs. For better ROI, organizations need to look for solutions that deliver mass notifications during an emergency and help perform daily non-emergency-related tasks.

THE POWER OF PAGING

Often organizations leverage a mass notification system for daily paging announcements. The right mass notification system can help modernize outdated analog systems and make them compatible with IP systems to make it easier to send and deliver audio broadcasts. This often offers an immediate and recurring ROI, because organizations can move from having a single device in a single location they use for paging to enabling any connected desk phone. This greatly expands their ability to page whenever they need to share audio announcements.

SCHEDULED MESSAGES

While mass notifications help get the message out the moment an emergency occurs, some systems also let organizations schedule messages in advance. This can help organizations that need to make regular announcements. For example, schools can schedule bells, alleviating the need for manual triggers or managing that task from a separate system. In healthcare, hospitals can use it to announce that visiting hours are over, giving staff more time with patients. Manufacturing facilities may want to use it to schedule break times or other work stoppages. In retail environments, it can be used to warn shoppers that a store will be closing soon.

Scheduled messages have the added benefit of helping to test your mass notification system and its connected devices. If messages aren't being played over certain devices, or in certain areas, there's a good chance there's a larger problem that needs to be addressed. It's a best practice to find daily uses for a mass notification system to ensure that every element works properly when you need it.

Emergency & Daily Operations (cont.)

AUTOMATED PROCESSES

The same scheduling tools can often be used to automate other processes via a contact closure. This can be used to either activate or shut off certain systems at specific times. For example, a K12 school connected its mass notification system to a contact closure or the system that automatically flushes the school's toilets at regular intervals. With a scheduling tool, they can now shut off flushing when the school is not in use, helping to save money on their water bill. A manufacturing company uses its system and contact closures to trigger music, signaling that production has stopped because the production line has run out of product. This has helped increase productivity. The only real limit for this use case is an organization's imagination and the tools they have available.

GROUP ALERTS AND ANNOUNCEMENTS

Dynamic mass notification systems will give users the ability to create multiple groups to reach people with specific messages. For emergencies, this comes into play when needing to alert security teams or administrators before sharing a notification with an entire organization. However, with customizable message templates, those use cases for messaging groups can greatly expand. For example, when someone calls in sick, a mass notification sent to a group of available employees can help fill that shift more efficiently than calling individuals one at a time. It could even be as simple as sending an alert to a group that includes all the devices in a building to let people know an organization-wide meeting is starting or that a catered lunch has arrived.

PROXIMITY NOTIFICATIONS

If a mass notification system offers geo-fencing capabilities or the ability to establish an area of interest, this also offers possibilities for non-emergency use. This kind of feature is typically used to ensure that everyone within a defined area receives an emergency alert, but it can also be used to send notifications when someone or something enters or leaves an area. Certain organizations use this function to be made aware of deliveries that will be arriving soon, and some hospitals have even experimented with using it to alert staff when pregnant patients are arriving to give birth. This minimizes downtime and confusion and helps operations run more smoothly because the right people are informed at the right time.

The more ways you can find to use a mass notification system the more valuable your investment becomes.

Visitor Management Integration

UNDERSTANDING THE BENEFITS OF VISITOR MANAGEMENT

For any organization, safety considerations should start at the front door, because if a threat can be prevented from entering a building, it can greatly reduce the risk of anyone being harmed. That's why many organizations are investing in visitor management solutions to verify guest identities.

However, on their own, the benefits of visitor management tools can be limited. How do people within an organization know when an issue arises with a guest? How do permitted guests get included in critical alerts should an emergency arise? These are just a few of the questions organizations may struggle to answer, but there is a solution.

Some mass notification systems integrate with visitor management tools offering a comprehensive way to detect threats, deliver notifications, and even manage incidents.

AUTOMATIC INTRUDER NOTIFICATIONS

Visitor management systems offer organizations a way to create a standard procedure all guests must follow when they arrive at a facility. This typically involves presenting an ID and having a picture taken. That information can then be screened against national sex offender databases, government watchlists, legal injunctions, and banned visitor lists to identify potential threats. If there is an issue, the person manning the front desk will receive an alert, but what if they need additional assistance?

Integrating with mass notification systems can extend the reach of flagged issues to deliver messages to key stakeholders like safety or security teams. This provides an immediate notification to people who can assist to prevent issues from escalating and ensure the banned visitor is escorted out of the building without incident.

ENROLL VISITORS TO RECEIVE NOTIFICATIONS

Organizations have a duty of care to fulfill for anyone who comes through their doors, but they may not have an easy way to reach guests with the information they need should an emergency arise. Further complicating the issue is the fact that guests will likely be unfamiliar with safety protocols, so even if an organization starts sending out alerts, guests may be confused or unsure of what to do.

Integrated visitor management and mass notification systems can offer guests the option to receive text messages during their visit to let them know about safety or operational concerns. This could be a safety drill that is being run that day that the guest could be unaware of, a burst pipe that restricts access to certain areas, or a violent intruder. Being able to deliver clear instructions to guests via a text message helps keep them on the same page as the rest of the people within an organization, reducing confusion and prompting immediate action when it matters most.

LAUNCHING NOTIFICATIONS

Integration between these solutions can also offer the ability to launch mass notifications from the visitor management system interface. Employees who monitor the visitor management system can jump from that platform directly into the mass notification system when they notice an incident has occurred and begin sending notifications.

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Support Services

Ensuring successful implementation & deployment

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Get the Right Kind of Help

DON'T WAIT UNTIL IT'S TOO LATE

At this point, you probably understand why a mass notification system is important, but it's not just about what you're buying, it's about who you're buying from. If you don't have the support you need, you won't get the value out of your investment, and what's worse, you could be continuing to put your people and operations at risk.

You don't want to wait until an emergency occurs to begin your implementation, which is why you need a vendor that will help you achieve a successful deployment. We've compiled four key areas to consider when it comes to the support services a vendor offers.

1. PLANNING

A good vendor doesn't just hand over the keys and expect you to figure out how to work the system on your own. You want a vendor that is as invested in the success of your deployment as you are, and that begins with planning. Look for a vendor that will help you plan how your organization will use the system and who will be the people in charge of using it. This may seem like a rudimentary exercise, but without a partner to guide you, it can be difficult to know where to begin.

2. IMPLEMENTATION

The technical knowledge within your organization may vary, and time and resources may prevent those with the most know-how from getting overly involved in implementing your system. Vendors that provide access to their technical team during the implementation can help ensure that you get set up correctly from the start.

3. TRAINING

Once your system is set up, you still need to know how to use it. Initial training will help familiarize key stakeholders with how the system works and how it can be maintained long term. This could include identifying opportunities for using the system daily to keep people familiar with it should an emergency arise.

4. ONGOING SUPPORT

Understand the availability of the vendor's support team, and how they can be used. Learn about other resources that are available like on-demand videos, support communities, user guides, and webinars that provide ongoing education so you can continue to get the most out of your system.

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What to Expect from Your Support Team

KNOW WHO TO TURN TO
When it comes to tools that keep people safe, your organization needs to have confidence that those solutions will work when you need them most. If a mass notification system doesn't function the way an organization intends, it can do more harm than good. As with any technology tool, mass notification systems require configuration and setup time to work properly. If an organization runs into an issue during setup, testing, or using it in a live scenario, they want to know they have someone to turn to work out any bugs they might be experiencing.

That's why a stellar customer support team is of the utmost importance when considering a mass notification system. Here are a few factors every organization should look for when working with a mass notification system support team.

PROFESSIONALISM
Safety is a serious issue, and organizations expect their issues to be taken seriously. The vendor you select should understand that every request they receive is from someone trying to do an important job: protect their people.

KNOWLEDGE AND ACCURACY
A support team is only as good as the knowledge they can offer. They need to be able to answer customer questions correctly the first time and provide details that require minimal follow-up.

QUICK RESPONSES
Your time is valuable, and when it comes to safety, waiting for extended periods of time to get back up and running isn't an option. A team that can deliver quick responses will ensure minimal downtime.

ABOVE AND BEYOND CARE
In some ways, it can be easy to find an answer to a question and regurgitate it to the person asking it. But the real value comes from support teams that go above and beyond that and provide customers with everything they need to be successful when it comes to protecting their people.

CONSISTENCY
No one wants to make multiple calls to a support line, but if they do, they want to make sure they're receiving a consistent level of support. Regardless of the size of your organization or which team member you talk to, you want to feel certain you're receiving the highest level of service available.

Budgeting

Securing the funds to get the solution you need

How Much Does It Cost?

FINDING THE BEST VALUE

A mass notification system is a significant investment for any organization. While safety and security should always be a top priority, the cost of implementing a system like this will always be a critical factor. But what differentiates various mass notification vendors and how does that impact pricing?

We can't provide a detailed rundown of pricing for every emergency notification vendor out there; as you probably already know, there are quite a few. Here, we will outline the factors that can raise or lower the cost of an emergency notification system and the questions to ask to ensure you're getting the best value.

WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO DO?

First and foremost, you need to understand what your organization is trying to accomplish. Is it trying to fulfill a government requirement? If so, there may be very specific functions you need to consider, regardless of how much they cost. Are you trying to reach people within a particular area, or wherever they are? This will have a big impact on price. Mobile solutions are often less expensive, but what you gain in dollars, you lose in functionality and reach.

It's important to take an apples-to-apples approach when comparing emergency notification systems. Two solutions may have the same price, but it's important to look deeper to see exactly what functionality each offers. Does it only send SMS text messages? Or can it go beyond that and also send messages throughout your facilities? Does the system offer incident management capabilities, like message confirmation, virtual collaboration, and reporting? You can begin to see how even though the price may be the same, the value is much different.

KEEPING COSTS DOWN

If you're looking at an inexpensive mobile solution, be sure to consider the two most important factors: speed and reach. Sending bulk SMS text messages is of limited effectiveness because you're only leveraging one way of communicating with people. You may supplement this with another communication tool, but now you've invested in two solutions, and it may take twice as long to get your message out.

It's always a good idea to look for mass notification systems that can integrate with your existing technology. Whether it's IP phones, IP speakers, desktop computers, or some other piece of technology, you can get more bang for your buck by connecting with what you already own. This keeps the cost down and ties everything together. Be sure to ask the vendor to demonstrate integration capabilities and look at how the systems are managed.

Ideally, you want to look for a solution that can reach as many people as possible, as quickly as possible while helping you manage every step of a crisis. This won't always be the least expensive option, but the safety value you get in turn can be immeasurable.

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Securing Buy-in and Budget

OVERCOMING POTENTIAL HURDLES

Selecting a mass notification system can be daunting. First, you need to find the solution that is the best fit for your organization, and then you need to implement it. But between those steps, you need to find the money to pay for this new safety tool and convince others in your organization it's worth the investment.

This can be a challenging hurdle, but with the right approach and buy-in from other departments in your organization, you can make this process less of a headache, and more of an opportunity to emphasize the need for a tool that will help enhance safety and communication.

DEFINE GOALS AND ROI

In this ebook, we've already answered, "Why does your organization need a mass notification system?" Having this answer will help you outline the goals you wish to achieve and the ROI that can be expected. Goals can include how many people and devices your organization wants to be able to reach and how quickly you want to be able to reach them. Goals may also relate to fulfilling certain government guidelines or how efficiently safety drills can be conducted. Spend some time brainstorming 5-10 goals and how a mass notification system can accomplish them.

Determining ROI can be a more difficult task. It's hard to provide a direct correlation between revenue and a safety tool, but that doesn't mean it's impossible. Understand what current capabilities can be measured and tracked and how you will compare those analytics once the solution is implemented. Also, be aware of the impact on continuity. Emergency situations have a tendency to disrupt operations, and how big of an effect that interruption has depends on how quickly you can get back up and running. A key metric to consider is how much revenue would be lost each day if business was significantly interrupted.

FOCUS ON BENEFITS

Safety and communication are the two key reasons most organizations look to implement a mass notification system. However, an underlying factor is that the processes and tools an organization currently has in place are ineffective. Maybe you need to log into too many different systems, which wastes time. Maybe your systems and devices can't speak to one another. It might be that people are too often missed when alerts go out, or there isn't a way to group different alerts.

Understand what measures are currently in place, and provide details about how situations are managed. Know how people are reached and what devices and systems are used to reach them. Then you can highlight how a mass notification system can improve this process. The mass notification system you are considering should have specific and demonstrable benefits that address whatever issues your organization is experiencing.

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Securing Buy-in and Budget (cont.)

WALK THROUGH SCENARIOS

Providing people with potential scenarios can help better illustrate the benefits a mass notification system offers. You may be trying to convince people in your organization who have no idea how this process currently works, so giving a detailed, step-by-step walk-through will help educate them about current obstacles. Pick a scenario that would have a large impact on operations and will leave an impression on the people who have control of your budget. This might be as extreme as an active shooter, or as routine as a severe weather closing. Whichever event you choose as an example, it should be relatable to the audience you are speaking with.

Then, go through that same scenario, but explain how the process would work with a mass notification system. Call out differences between the current setup, and how enhanced safety and communication tools will lead to better outcomes should this scenario occur.

BRING IN OTHER DEPARTMENTS

No matter what their role is, safety should be everyone's concern within an organization. When it comes to budgeting, having IT, security, HR or some other department involved can help sway decision-makers and defer costs by pulling resources from multiple areas. Different departments will have different insights they can share about the current procedures and tools in place and what is needed to improve them. The more people that are invested in the success of your organization's safety operations, the better your planning and deployment will be.

SIMPLIFY

Chances are, when looking to secure your budget for this project, you'll be speaking with people who may not even understand the term "mass notification system," much less the higher-level technical terms associated with it. Simplify your arguments as much as possible to keep ideas and solutions grounded in a way that everyone can comprehend. This will invite dialogue about the solution you are considering and prevent people from tuning out due to too much jargon.

Cost Saving Tips

DISCOVER YOUR OPTIONS
When it comes to mass notification systems, organizations sometimes go with a less expensive solution because it's the best fit for their budget. However, they can often find that they've ended up with a solution that doesn't meet all of their needs and can end up spending more money than they intended to fill the gaps.

So how do you get the best value without sacrificing functionality?

PRIORITIZE SAFETY
No one wants to put a dollar figure on a human life, but organizations have finite resources to complete projects. If your organization is running into issues, take a step back and consider the bigger picture. A mass notification system may seem like a large upfront cost, but take into account the costs you may incur if an emergency takes place. Without the right tools, people may miss important safety messages. If you can't efficiently coordinate a response, people may be harmed. This could expose your organization to much higher costs than the safety tool that could prevent these things from happening.

LOOK AT WHAT YOU ALREADY OWN
When looking to save money, start by assessing the equipment you already own. Desk phones, IP speakers, desktop computers, digital signage, and mobile devices can all be used to help spread critical safety messages. Costs grow when organizations need to purchase and install new equipment on top of a mass notification system. Look for a mass notification system that offers flexible integration options that will allow you to avoid purchasing new equipment. This will also add value to devices in which you've already invested.

CONSIDER DAILY USE CASES
The best way to get the most value out of a mass notification system is to find a way to use it regularly. Organizations have plenty of reasons they need to communicate with their people that don't revolve around emergencies. Mass notification systems can help deliver daily communications and automate tasks, saving time and increasing efficiencies.

CONSOLIDATE
In addition to daily uses, mass notification systems can also help consolidate existing systems. You may find you can accomplish much more with a single mass notification system than multiple-point solutions. By eliminating extraneous tools and consolidating them into a single system you can cut costs and streamline workflows.

Making Your Decision

Determining the right fit

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3 Mistakes to Avoid

GET EXACTLY WHAT YOU NEED

As you get ready to make a decision, it is important to be confident in your purchase. Since safety is such a high priority, we've put together a list of three common mistakes to avoid when evaluating and purchasing a mass notification system.

1. NOT REQUIRING A THOROUGH DEMONSTRATION

It can seem like all the information you need about a product is available on a vendor's website. However, a thorough demonstration can add a better level of understanding of what a product is capable of doing. If the vendor says, "it can do that", then ask them to show it.

This is especially true when reviewing on-premises notification functionality. For most vendors, it's not standard to reach communication devices inside your network, such as desk phones, computer desktops, overhead paging systems, and digital signage. They may be able to do it through a third-party integration, but it's not something they do natively. That means demonstrating it isn't easy. Ask to see it.

2. PURCHASING FOR BULK SMS TEXT MESSAGING

You may know of a mass notification product used by a nearby local government entity and think, since it works well for them, it will work well for your organization. Notifying citizens of a city or county is a worthwhile and necessary service, but these types of systems are often centered around bulk SMS text messaging. Comparing these public notification systems to mass notification solutions for a business, school or hospital is really comparing apples and oranges. Why? Because any system used by a business, school or hospital should be doing more than bulk SMS text messaging. You want to reach as close to 100 percent of your people in one minute or less, and with bulk SMS text messaging, that simply isn't possible.

3. NOT UNDERSTANDING WHAT'S INCLUDED AND WHAT'S EXTRA

The distinction between what a system does and what it can do isn't always clear. This is another instance of a vendor saying, "We can do that." You need to make them back up what they are saying. They may not be lying in the strictest sense of the word, but they're not being exactly forthright. They may be able to make this functionality happen with a statement of work for professional services and/or custom software development, but this is really something you need to know up front, before signing a service agreement. Getting this clarified can be the difference between making your budget or going over it.

12 Demo Questions

ASK THE RIGHT QUESTIONS, GET THE RIGHT SOLUTION

If you're following our advice from the previous section, you want to schedule a demonstration of the mass notification system you're interested in to see if it works as advertised. However, if you're short on time, you might not be able to prepare as thoroughly as you intended, or an important question might be forgotten or glossed over as the vendor goes over different features. This could have the unintended consequence of leading you to select the wrong solution which could be particularly harmful if it doesn't offer the functions you need to keep your people safe.

Use these 12 questions during your demo to stay on topic and help you select the right mass notification solution for your organization.

1. DOES THE SYSTEM REACH ON-SITE AND MOBILE DEVICES?

Managing multiple systems to achieve the same end goal is a pain, and relying on one channel to communicate a message rarely does a sufficient job alerting all of your people. When it comes to emergency notification, you want to be able to reach as many people as possible, as quickly as possible, and that means reaching every available device. A solution that can send alerts to on-site and mobile devices, and can manage those alerts from the same interface, means you can send more alerts, more quickly, with more consistent messaging than using multiple systems.

2. DOES IT OFFER INCIDENT MANAGEMENT FEATURES?

Sending out an alert is just part of the challenge when an emergency occurs. Managing the situation from start to finish can be just as important to keep people out of harm's way. A system that offers incieent management capabilities can offer more value to ensure you can automate response plans, collaborate with stakeholders in virtual spaces, access the resources you need, and receive real-time insights and after-action reports.

3. DOES IT BROADCAST TO DESK PHONES OR CALL THEM?

This distinction may not seem important, but during a crisis, it can make all the difference. Some systems may claim that they can reach your desk phones, but how they reach those devices is important. Sending a large number of phone calls can be seen as an attack, resulting in a denial of service. Broadcasting to a desk phone treats the device as a speaker, meaning simultaneous intrusive audio catches people's attention and is less likely to fail than calling.

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12 Demo Questions (Cont.)

4. CAN YOU SHOW ME HOW THE SYSTEM DOES A LIVE-AUDIO BROADCAST?

Live audio can sometimes be the best way to get people's attention, especially during an emergency. Pre-recorded messages may be fine to let people know an event is taking place, but being able to communicate messages live helps manage ongoing situations. It's also important to understand where audio can be delivered. Desk phones and speakers are great, but additional delivery systems like desktop notifications help expand the reach of the message.

5. CAN THE SYSTEM BE CONFIGURED FOR PANIC BUTTON TRIGGERS?

Panic buttons are in high demand because they offer a discreet, quick way to ask for assistance. Systems that offer multiple methods for panic button configurations, whether it's virtual ones established on a desk phone, a mobile app, or integration with mounted or wearable devices, these tools can make mass notification as easy as pressing a button. Know what options are available to take advantage of easy alert triggering.

6. DOES IT WORK WITH OTHER SYSTEMS AND DEVICES?

If the answer is no, chances are, this isn't the right solution for you. Robust notification systems offer a wide range of integrations with devices and systems organizations already have in place. This provides additional value to existing technology investments like paging systems. There may not be time to go through every compatible device and system, but be sure to have a few key components top of mind to ask the vendor about during the demo.

7. HOW DOES IT HANDLE WEATHER ALERTS?

Every organization is susceptible to severe weather. Any emergency notification system should be able to address this basic use case, but how it addresses it can have a major impact on how quickly notifications go out. If a system only lets you pre-build messages for weather events, without a means to automatically trigger, you could waste precious minutes before sending out an alert. Systems offering configurations to actively monitor CAP feeds to trigger alerts when severe weather approaches means people are notified more quickly and can start responding faster.

12 Demo Questions (Cont.)

8. HOW DOES IT COMPARE TO OTHER SYSTEMS?
If you're looking at other systems, don't be afraid to ask the vendor directly how it compares to the competition. They should be able to answer directly then and there the difference between their offering and a competitor's.

9. WHAT KIND OF SUPPORT DO YOU OFFER?
While you're likely looking for a simple solution, no matter how easy a system appears, it may require some help to set up. Understand how support requests are handled, when help is available and what level of support is offered. It may also be beneficial to ask if they have any customer comments that can back up the effectiveness of their support team.

10. ARE THERE OTHER CUSTOMERS THAT HAVE USED IT THIS WAY?
No one wants to be a guinea pig when testing out new safety features, so it's important to ask a vendor for examples of other customers using the system in the way you want to use it. It's easy for a vendor to say "yes" to a potential use case, but having evidence to back it up will help assure you that you are making the right decision.

11. HOW QUICKLY CAN I IMPLEMENT IT?
Finding the right solution takes time and money, so you likely don't want to waste either once you've made a decision. This answer will likely vary depending on the size of the implementation, so it's not something many vendors will advertise. However, by the time the demo takes place, the vendor should have a good idea of the size of your organization and your needs to be able to provide at least a rough estimate for implementation.

12. HOW MUCH DOES IT COST?
Depending on where you are in the decision-making process, you may already have an answer to this question. However, make sure there aren't any additional costs you or the vendor may have missed.

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8 Questions to Ask Before Buying

PURCHASING QUESTIONS

As you reach the point where you are ready to make a decision, there are some final questions you should ask and answer to confirm that the mass notification solution you are selecting will meet your needs. Most of these questions have been covered in this guide, but if you have not answered them by the time you are ready to purchase, you may end up with an insufficient tool.

1. WHAT PROBLEM ARE YOU TRYING TO SOLVE?

This is an important place to start because without this answer you can't know what mass notification features will be most useful to your organization. You may have been told this is simply something your organization "needs" without getting more details as to why. Taking that extra step to gather more details will give you a better sense of what tools will be the right fit. It may be that you need to fulfill a certain legal requirement, or that you don't have a way to reach all of your people during an emergency. Once you begin to understand these factors you can look more closely at the features that will help those problems.

2. WHAT SITUATIONS DO YOU NEED TO PREPARE FOR?

These are often referred to as use cases and are the practical ways a mass notification system will be applied to situations your organization is likely to face. For example, you may need a tool to help send severe weather alerts, but can you alert people about an active shooter situation? Medical emergency? Chemical spill?

A mass notification system should not be a single-use solution; it should be the backbone of your entire emergency response plan. To get the most out of your investment, you need a flexible tool that will help address any emergency situation you may encounter and can be used for non-emergency scenarios.

3. WHAT ARE YOU CURRENTLY USING FOR MASS NOTIFICATION?

It's important to look at the tools you use to communicate. Even if they don't fit into the typical definition of mass notification, your organization has ways to reach people. Conducting an audit of the tools and processes already in place can help you select the correct solution. You will understand if you have too many disparate devices and systems and if you should be looking for a solution that will tie them together. This can also help your organization save time and money in the long run by investing in a system that integrates with existing equipment.

4. WHO NEEDS TO BE INVOLVED?

To help identify the problems you are trying to solve and the technology you already have in place may require you to expand the number of people involved in the decision-making process. Safety is everyone's concern, so determining the right solution should not fall on one person or department. It takes collaboration among upper-level management and administrators, security personnel, facilities managers, IT and HR to fully comprehend what is needed to improve communication and safety within an organization. With this information, you can develop a more comprehensive list of needs.

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8 Questions to Ask Before Buying (Cont.)

5. WHAT DO YOU NEED?

Do you want to leverage existing communication channels to deliver the message, like IP phones, IP speakers, mobile devices, desktop computers, and digital signage? Do you need to be able to reach people on-premises and when they are mobile? Do you need to use audio and text messages and well as visual elements to ensure everyone sees and hears critical safety information? Do you need to be able to reach everyone with the push of a button? Do you need to be able to customize your messages? Do you need critical event management features that help you handle emergencies from start to finish? Every organization is different, so take time answering these questions to cover all of your bases.

6. WHO WILL OPERATE THE SYSTEM?

Once you decide on a system to buy, you need to determine who will be responsible for running it. This can sometimes be challenging as different groups may want different levels of involvement. One team may need to be in charge of day-to-day maintenance, while another is in responsible for triggering messages. You'll need people who can educate the rest of your organization that a new system is in place and explain how it works. You'll also need to put people in charge of testing the system to ensure it is working. It's important you answer these questions upfront to help get the most out of your implementation.

7. HOW WILL YOU PAY FOR IT?

How to pay for new technology is often the biggest challenge for organizations. They know they need a solution, but don't know where the money will come from. Further complicating this part of the process is the fact that many mass notification vendors do not make pricing information readily available, meaning you may get pretty far in your decision-making process before you get a full idea of how much it will cost. If it's too expensive, you've wasted valuable time and energy researching a tool that may not be viable.

You can overcome this challenge in a number of ways. One is to be forward-thinking. A mass notification system may seem like a big investment at face value but consider what kind of costs your organization could incur if someone is harmed because you did not have the right tool in place to alert them about an emergency. The second is to find a tool that can integrate with existing technology, which can help you get better ROI on your investments in other equipment. Finally, by bringing in people from multiple departments, you may have the opportunity to draw on multiple budgets to purchase your system. This alleviates the burden of placing the entire investment on one department's budget and helps other departments have more of a stake in the implementation's success.

8. WHO CAN YOU LEARN FROM?

Chances are, all of the previous questions have already been answered by someone else. When working with a vendor ask if they have similar organizations already using the tool you are considering. Consult with other members of your team as they may have connections that can recommend solutions and best practices. This will help better inform your purchasing decision and prepare you for a successful implementation.

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Mass Notification Comparison Worksheet

Now that you know what to look for, it's time to find a complete solution that helps you detect threats, notify everyone, and effectively manage incidents. Fill out the checklist below to compare our InformaCast software to other solutions you may be considering to help find the best tool to keep your people safe and informed.

	InformaCast	Option B	Option C
Threat Detection (Automated and Manual)			
Visitor screening integration	☑		
Panic buttons (app, wearable, mounted, virtual)	☑		
Mobile app	☑		
Web console	☑		
AI video surveillance	☑		
Gunshot detection systems	☑		
911 call monitoring	☑		
Weather monitoring	☑		
Email monitoring	☑		
Chemical spill sensors	☑		
Vape detection	☑		
AED box activation	☑		
Mass Notification (On-Site)			
Desk phones	☑		
Desktop computers (full screen and tray)	☑		
IP speakers	☑		
Analog and IP paging systems	☑		
Digital signage	☑		
Two-way radios	☑		
Strobes	☑		

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	InformaCast	Option B	Option C
Mass Notification (Mobile)			
SMS text	☑		
Emails	☑		
Push notifications	☑		
Phone calls	☑		
Collaboration tools (Webex, MS Teams)	☑		
Incident Management			
Scenario planning	☑		
Critical incident mapping	☑		
Virtual collaboration (Webex, MS Teams)	☑		
Real-time insights	☑		
After-action reporting	☑		
Rostering and reunification	☑		
All Clear - resume normal operations	☑		
Support			
Highly-rated customer success team	☑		
Supported setup and implementation	☑		
Professional services	☑		
On-demand video resources	☑		
Expansive knowledge base	☑		
Detailed user guides	☑		
Regular software updates (new features, usability)	☑		

InformaCast is one of the most comprehensive solutions on the market, offering the ability to detect threats, deliver mass notifications, and manage incidents from a single platform. With a wide array of technology integrations, InformaCast adds value to your existing investments by making them critical parts of your safety and alerting strategy.

Want to learn more? To see how your organization could benefit from implementing InformaCast, visit **www.singlewire.com/demo** to schedule time with our team.

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