

Selecting a Visual Communications System Provider

Seven tips for emergency management personnel in higher education institutions

Berkly Trumbo, Inova Solutions



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Introduction

Emergency management personnel at colleges and universities across the country have recognized the importance of visual message boards as part of a holistic emergency notification strategy. Visual message boards are among the most reliable and cost-efficient mass alerting technologies on the market. Most importantly, they effectively fill a critical gap left by other notification media such as voice/siren systems and SMS/text message alerting.

Not all emergency message boards are created equal, and the consequences of selecting a low quality product or provider can prove disastrous during a system test or actual emergency. Here are a few standards which should be considered when selecting visual communications devices.

1. Needs Assessment

Since every campus has different needs and challenges, be wary of vendors that offer a “one size fits all” solution. It may not meet the unique requirements of your campus’ physical layout, internal processes, protocols or technology infrastructure. Ask your vendor to personally visit your campus to evaluate relevant factors and make recommendations for placement, installation and implementation of a visual notification system. If your vendor does not have the expertise or willingness to participate in a customized on-site needs assessment, consider that a red flag.

2. Integration with Existing Systems

Like other means of notification, visual message boards are most effective when they are one piece of a larger strategic communication puzzle. The more notification “layers” or “modes” you add to your infrastructure, the better. For example, SMS/text message alerting is a popular notification technology employed by many schools, but cell towers are unreliable and can be too overloaded during an emergency to serve as the only means of notification. Emergency managers must also account for those who have not registered their cell phone with the school system, or who do not have access to it at the time. These limitations and others can be addressed by adding other notification solutions, such as “smart” LED signs.

Since many higher education institutions already have some kind of emergency

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notification system in place, it is vital that additional technologies fit into this pre-existing infrastructure. In an emergency, there is often no time to fumble with multiple message delivery systems and cumbersome procedures. When all components of a mass notification system integrate with each other, the result is a more streamlined, efficient and reliable process.

Look for a message board vendor that has been tested alongside leading mass notification platforms to be sure that the technology works together well.

3. PoE, AC or Wireless?

Message boards can be powered in a number of different ways, but Power over Ethernet (PoE) technology offers clear advantages.

- » PoE draws both data updates and power from an organization's existing network.
- » PoE displays are significantly more energy-efficient than their AC-powered counterparts. The IEEE standard allows for up to 15.8 watts per PoE unit., to ensure data integrity transmitted over the CAT5 cabling. PoE displays that consume more than 15.8 watts do not meet IEEE standards.
- » Since PoE devices operate from the network, they are protected with the organization's own network security measures. Wireless devices are less reliable and secure than point-to-point connections via network cabling.
- » It is estimated that AC outlet installation at every display location can cost up to \$1,000 per unit, requiring electricians and a more extensive mounting/servicing effort.

4. Range of Functionality

A sophisticated visual notification system should have a wide range of applicable functionality beyond the basics. Think about what your institution might require of the system down the road. Can it provide additional value? Consider the following features and functionalities.

- » Although primarily used for emergency communications, the system should be

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capable of displaying ad-hoc, non-emergency messages across the network .

- » The devices should not only be compatible with email, but also with RSS feeds and other information inputs.
- » Displays should sound an audible signal for any incoming emergency or high-priority messages. This can originate from a speaker mounted on the unit itself or from an existing nearby speaker.
- » An industrial-grade solution provides data regarding the status of each existing message board on the network.
- » Compliance is an important campus safety and security concern. Visual notification systems should provide an audit trail as to how and when the messages were delivered.
- » A visual communications solution should securely support layers of administrative users to align with roles pertaining to COOP and NIMS/ICS.
- » Administrators should be able to assign displays to groups to increase granularity in location-specific messaging. Examples of this functionality include grouping by building or section of campus.
- » The system should employ service-oriented architecture (SOA) in order to automate message distribution and reduce demand for IT resources.

5. LED or LCD?

Some schools are opting to install LCD screens for their emergency notification needs. Despite the modern look to these screens and their ability to showcase rich media, they are widely regarded as the wrong choice for crisis communications.

- » LCD screens are significantly more costly to purchase, implement, and operate than LED displays.
- » LCD screens consume 20 times more energy than comparable Power over Ethernet (PoE) LED displays.
- » LCD screens have limited visibility from distances and angles. Text on LED message

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boards can be clearly read from up to 100 feet away (three times the maximum viewing distance of LCD screens).

- » LED displays have been proven to have a higher degree of visibility through dust and smoke (compared to other visual communications devices).
- » Research shows that overexposure to television advertising has caused people to tune out messages broadcast on LCD screens. LED displays have been proven to command attention, and are still regarded as the single most effective way to deliver important visual messages to the public.

6. Product Quality and Warranty

Some emergency message board manufacturers offer short product warranties or no warranty at all. This is an indication of the vendor's lack of confidence in their own product and their unwillingness to help if a problem arises down the road. Look to a company's history and a longer warranty as an indication of the design integrity of the message board.

7. Proven Track Record

Emergency mass notification is an emerging industry, and many vendors do not have the experience or expertise necessary to provide an effective solution. Ask your vendor for proof of successful system implementations at colleges or universities comparable to yours. A trusted vendor should also be willing and able to partner with you for a proof of concept.

Conclusion

Campus safety is a serious concern and selecting a visual notification system vendor must be approached with careful scrutiny. Emergency managers should select a system that aligns with other communication technologies and contributes to a comprehensive mass notification strategy.

Be sure to ask the following questions when shopping for a visual notification solution.

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	Yes	No
Will the vendor conduct an on-campus assessment to make recommendations based on your specific needs and requirements?		
Does the system integrate with your existing mass notification systems?		
Is Power over Ethernet (PoE) an available power source? (PoE devices consume less than 15.8 watts of power)		
Does the system support multiple functions, including RSS message delivery, ad-hoc message capability and audible tones?		
Is the visual notification system based on LED displays?		
Does the vendor offer a substantial warranty?		
Does the vendor have a proven track record, including successful implementations at other colleges and universities?		

About the Author

Berkly Trumbo is the Director of Emergency Communication Systems for Inova Solutions, an industry-leading provider of real-time communication solutions. Berkly welcomes questions and comments and can be reached at btrumbo@inovasolutions.com or 434.951.8154.

About Inova Solutions

Since 1984, Inova Solutions has been helping schools and universities, hospitals, manufacturing facilities, call centers and others communicate vital real-time information. Inova's visual notification system, Inova OnAlert™, has been successfully deployed at Virginia Tech and other leading institutions. To learn more, visit www.inovasolutions.com/mass-notification or call 1.866.686.8774.