

TOP FIVE CRITICAL MISTAKES IN EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS

BY STEVE BARENBAUM



An emergency plan is only as good as your ability to act upon it in the event of a crisis. Despite putting hundreds of hours into plan development, many organizations fall prey to several unforeseen problem areas along the way. Often, the plan is ineffective or worse yet, improperly executed.

Fortunately, software-based event and emergency communication systems can automate planning processes while providing the tools necessary to avoid catastrophe. Learn from the mistakes of others by taking heed of these common pitfalls made in crisis planning and communications.

1. Practice What You Preach

Many organizations make the mistake of shelving their plans until the moment of truth is near. Whether the emergency communication system is hard copy, document-based or online, it is still useless if your staff and stakeholders don't know how to use it or what to expect. Consistent communications and personalized training programs are key to the success of your crisis plan.

Good emergency managers will advise, "practice, practice, practice." Set up drills and scheduled training sessions for your response team and all others involved at any level. Organize brown bag lunches and prepare communication materials that reiterate appropriate steps, processes and expectations around the proper execution of the plan.

Think like a Boy Scout and "be prepared."

2. Go Beyond the Short Term – Think Big

Often after the post-crisis dust settles and the bases are covered, many organizations find themselves asking, "What now?" It's important to avoid shortsightedness. Be sure that both your plan and your communication systems will scale. Choose the highest-functioning emergency notification system you can and follow through by asking yourself, "What next?"

A thorough, well-designed communication plan will account for people, processes, IT and organization-wide contingency plans. By thinking beyond the urgent, you'll be able to avoid post-event confusion while preparing for future challenges.

3. One Size Does Not Fit All

Just like every organization has different needs, each specific user and event should have a different set of criteria. In emergency communications, generic solutions don't cut it and there isn't such a thing as a quick fix.

It's important to do the due diligence up front by mapping every scenario, process and responsibility by role. By using sophisticated communication tools, you can have the capability to tailor dynamic views unique to each user. For example, custom designed templates can represent different events and role-based activities. With the framework in place, a modular system will support real-time management decisions by giving administrators the flexibility to make modifications.

4. Don't Cut Corners - Do it Right

In an emergency, one common mistake is trying to fit a round peg in a square hole. Don't try to get by with something that simply doesn't fit your needs.

It's crucial not to skimp early on in communication planning and technology purchase decisions. When the price of error could be human lives, make sure that you have taken the time to match your needs with the right solution.

If you need help designing your plan, it's worth the investment to outsource. Stick to what you do best and hand over the planning process and the technology implementation to the experts. Then, you will be ready and confident when it comes time to execute.

5. Don't Plan in a Vacuum

Siloed emergency departments are defunct. We live in a fast-paced environment and we have the tools to create, combine and share communication plans. A mistake that must be avoided is one-dimensional emergency planning. Organizations need to think outside the box and integrate with outside stakeholders such as law enforcement and community emergency teams.

Today's emergency communication systems are able to link into external systems which, in turn, can help prevent a domino crisis effect, staffing shortages, confusion in talking with the media and other snafus commonly caused by miscommunications.

Remember, proper planning, preparation and communication on the front-end will save you from headaches and disaster on the back-end. By avoiding these five critical mistakes, your paperweight becomes a crisis plan well worth its weight in gold.

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