

deployments

>> SUCCESS STORIES

STUDENTS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA TAKE A LEISURELY STROLL ALONG THE PHILADELPHIA CAMPUS' LOCUST WALK SEVERAL WEEKS BEFORE A TEST OF THE SCHOOL'S MASS MESSAGING SYSTEM.



Messaging System Passes the Test

In a drill at the University of Pennsylvania, an emergency notification system reaches 53,000 people in less than eight minutes | BY LEONARD KLIE

Speech TECHNOLOGY

The University of Pennsylvania recently issued an emergency message to more than 53,000 students, faculty, and staff, advising them to quickly find a safe location. “This is a UPennAlert. Please find a shelter area in the building where you are located,” the message said.

Luckily, this was only a test of the Ivy League school’s UPennAlert Emergency Notification System, a mass-message delivery system powered by MIR3. The school’s Division of Public Safety subjected the system to a campuswide test in November to ensure everyone could be notified with critical, accurate information in the event of a real emergency.

The MIR3 system successfully sent more than 73,000 notifications to cell phones, landline phones, pagers, faxes, or email addresses in just seven-and-a-half minutes—“nothing short of exceptional,” says Maureen Rush, vice president of public safety at UPenn.

“The performance of the MIR3 notification and response platform in this drill has only heightened our confidence that in the event of a real emergency, when we push that button, we’ll reach 53,000 people in approximately seven-and-a-half minutes. You really can’t ask for more than that,” she says.

The UPennAlert system, developed by San Diego-based MIR3, is a Web-based application that contains a handful of pre-established messages ready to go. In the event of an emergency, university administrators would log onto the Web site, select the appropriate message, select the target audience, and hit the send button. It’s that simple.

“It saves a tremendous amount of time when you’re under a lot of stress in an emergency,” Rush says.

The system lets the university send messages only to specific buildings or campus areas rather than to the entire community. If they want to, officials also can use it for facilities management, polling, school closings, general announcements and reminders, and other messages that need to be sent to select groups. Users can create custom messages

with voice recordings or text options, and can even receive a real-time audit trail of delivery, receipt, and response.

“We only use it in emergencies,” Rush explains, noting the response is set on a case-by-case basis “based on things we believe would be a factor in creating an unsafe condition.”

SPURRED BY VIOLENCE

The fatal shootings at Virginia Tech two years ago and the death of five students during a shooting rampage at Northern Illinois University in February 2008 have inspired many schools to consider implementation of mass-message delivery systems. Since those tragedies, MIR3’s platform has been deployed in more than 100 major U.S. colleges and universities, including Syracuse University in New York, five regional campuses of the University of California, Joliet Junior College in Illinois, Texas Southern University, the state universities of Louisiana, and Kean University in New Jersey.

But Rush points out that UPenn’s interest in such technologies began several years earlier. “Virginia Tech was the catalyst, pushing a lot of schools to this, but [UPenn] was investigating before that,” Rush says.

MIR3’s notification and response technology was a natural fit to fulfill the university’s needs, having been in use for several years already by Fortune 1000 companies around the globe for their crisis management and business continuity programs.

“The process is very simple,” Rush says. “Messaging with MIR3 is not difficult at all.”

In fact, “sending the messages is the easy part,” she says. The hard part? The gathering of information about an incident and setting up conference calls with the crisis management teams to discuss the response, Rush says. Thankfully, the MIR3 system, which works with UPenn’s regular phone system, comes with a conference call feature.

“ It saves a tremendous amount of time when you’re under a lot of stress in an emergency. ”

Only a handful of people have access to and are authorized to use the MIR3 system. Though the system is accessed via a secure Web site, if an authorized user can’t get to a computer, then she can call MIR3, which will handle the details.

Equally challenging was compiling the database of contact information for all of the school’s students, faculty, and staff. In some cases, parents could be added to the notification lists, too, greatly expanding the pool of contacts. In gathering contact information, Rush worked with Mitch Yanak, the project manager, Dan Shapiro, head of information systems and computing at the university, and representatives from several other university departments, including the communications office and the marketing office. They created a university Web site where students, faculty, and staff could enter and update their contact information and preferences. The team also reached out to the entire university community with a huge marketing campaign at the start of the school year.

But despite all of these efforts, system tests typically resulted in a lot of people reporting they didn’t get the message right away or in their preferred medium. In most of these cases, the university discovered those people either did not input the right information, entered it in the wrong field, or failed to notify the university of a change. But, as Rush points out, it’s better to find that out during a test rather than during an actual emergency.

According to Yanak, the university also did a lot of research before implementing a system, and then engaged all segments of the school community. The school began looking at solutions in 2004, and then

went live with the system in late 2007. “We wanted to make sure we had all the public safety issues covered,” he says. “We wanted to make sure we had buy-in, and we wanted to make sure we had the best interests of the entire university.”

Then, prior to rolling out the system, the university subjected it to hundreds of tests.

“We appreciate the University of Pennsylvania putting our notification and response technology through such an extensive and large-scale drill, in addition to the ongoing, smaller-scale test notifications they send weekly,” MIR3 CEO Amir Moussavian said in a statement. “Our team has worked very closely with the University’s Division of Public Safety over the past two years to make sure the MIR3 platform works the way they need it to, each and every time they use it. That our technology allows them to reach their university population so quickly and thoroughly, test after test, is a gratifying validation of the efforts of a lot of people at MIR3 in partnership with the safety team at the University of Pennsylvania.”

And the school’s not done there. “We test the system constantly so people are familiar with it and know what to do,” Yanak says. “We’re relentless at it, and we will keep doing it.” ☒

→ App At a Glance

WITH THE MIR3 MASS MESSAGING SYSTEM, THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA WAS ABLE TO:

- reach 53,000 students, faculty, and staff members in seven-and-a-half minutes; and
- send more than 73,000 messages to cell and landline phones, fax machines, pagers, and email addresses.