How to Select a Mass Notification System: A 12-Step Program

Amanda Ruth Phillips-Savoy, MD FAAFP

Master of Public Health Capstone Paper
Medical College of Wisconsin
Summer 2009
Introduction

• Mass notification systems use computer technology to deliver messages to a large numbers of people in a very short time.

• Public health officials are expected to meet the community’s public health care needs for everything from monthly staff meetings to seasonal flu shots and pandemic outbreaks, and must also be prepared for natural disasters, industrial accidents, acts of terrorism, and other emergencies.
Introduction

• An integrated mass notification system (MNS) solves critical communication challenges, enabling public health officials to quickly deliver the message to one or thousands of target audience recipients.

• Mass notification systems assist by providing faster communication using fewer resources.
Purpose

• This article is designed to help develop a simple plan.
• By following a logical and systematic selection process, a decision about which MNS to choose will be made.
• These 12 steps will help make the selection process easier and lead the organization to a MNS that is right for the public health official and organization.
• This paper will focus the selection process for public health officials using the system for routine, urgent, and emergent public health notification
Emergency Preparedness

• The ability of public health officials to have a plan for routine, urgent and emergent events is of utmost importance.

• This “emergency preparedness” is the ability of the organization to estimate the impact of public health events that have occurred or may occur and the ability to establish and carry out public health practice policies.
Hazards

• It is important to identify, analyze, and inventory the possible treats to the public health organization and the communities that the members serve.

• A MNS should be established to improve the detection, notification, and control after any hazard or event occurs.

• Public health hazards such as natural disasters, terrorist attacks, known infectious diseases, unique infectious diseases and infrastructure changes are challenges that face the public health officials.
Target Audience

• It is also important to identify and characterize your target audience.
• The target audience of a MNS for public health may include the following: public health staff, emergency management personnel, disaster preparedness personnel, city planners, media, local clinics and hospitals including department managers, nursing staff, laboratory technicians, nurse administrators, hospital administration, and most importantly, those who provide direct care in the region to patients, including community physicians.
Current Challenges

• Current challenges include the need for crisis communications to coordinate care, provide medical services and increase awareness of public health concerns.

• Inefficient methods of sharing information can jeopardize safety, severely impact health outcomes and delay recovery efforts.

• Fortunately, these threats can be easily mitigated though the use of emergency notification technology. Information or potential life saving instructions needs to quickly reach their intended audience.
Step 1: Identify Decision-Makers

- Select a committee
- Find a champion
- Recruit influential people
- Locate specialist
Step 2: Clarify Goals

- Functionality
- Cost
- Technical support
Step 3: Write a RFP

- A request for proposal (RFP) will tell the prospective vendor about the organization, its resources and the priorities in terms of MNS functionality.
Step 4: Selecting RFP Recipients

- Can the MNS utilize the organization’s current target audience database?
- Is the MNS typically marketed to organizations of the scope and size?
- Does the MNS have favorable reliability, ratings, and references?
Step 5: Review RFPs & Narrow the Field

• The goal is to pick the top contenders to visit and give a demonstration of their system.
Step 6: Attend Vendor Demo

- Try not to interrupt their demonstration for at least 15 minutes.
- Present them with two or three standard “events” scenarios to play through and document, keeping the scenarios consistent from vendor to vendor;
- Do not focus solely on ease of message creation. Instead, pay attention to how the MNS enables users to easily update database information and select groups for message dissemination.
- Prepare a rating form in advance and ask every committee member to complete it at the end of each demonstration.
Step 7: Check References

• The vendor will provide a list of references - likely the vendor's happiest customers, who may be receive financial incentives for talking to potential customers.

• Be skeptical.

• Have a prepared list of questions for these phone calls.
Step 8: Solidify Commitment

- If the organization is small, hopefully all the key decision markers already are involved in the process to this point.

- If the organization is a larger organization, or the public health official that has some potential dissenters, discuss the selection committee's recommendations with all the relevant stakeholders.
Step 9: Rank the Vendors

Before ranking the vendors, the committee should formally weigh the priorities in the following areas:

• Functionality - How well does the product perform the desired functions?

• Total cost - How much will the product cost, including hardware, software, support, etc.?

• Vendor Characteristics - Does the vendor offer excellent service; training and implementation support, and are they financially secure?
Step 10: Conduct Site Visits

- Go to organizations that are similar in size and configuration.
- Bring at least one committee member and the most senior management person.
- Plan to visit with the site personal that are responsible for using the system the most and observe how the system works.
- Also talk to back-office personnel, relevant management and the organization’s key IT personnel.
- Take lots of notes.
Step 11: Select a Finalist

- After each site visit, go back to the vendor ranking and see if it still holds.
- Select the top contender and a runner-up.
- If negotiations do not go well with the number one choice, the committee may want to fall back on number two selection.
- A serious back-up choice will give one more leverage in the negotiation process
Step 12: Negotiate a Contract

- Current and future costs should be written out, as should the role the vendor will play and the amount of time the vendor will commit to the implementation process.

- Be sure to consider the possibility that the vendor could go out of business before the organization does.

- Have a lawyer experienced in software contracts help with this step.
Discussion

• The MNS selection process is time consuming, but for a decision as imperative as this one, it is necessary to save lives.

• One cannot afford to obtain an MNS impulsively, and one want to make sure the organization is committed to the goals.

• If the selection process is methodical, critical and probing, one will undoubtedly be happy with the final MNS choice.