



# Selecting An Emergency Notification Vendor

## Top 10 Points to Consider

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As an emergency situation unfolds it becomes critical for public safety managers to be able to send timely and accurate information to the people affected by the event. Getting the right message to the right people requires rapid action using accurate and up-to-date data and an easy-to-use system that is highly reliable and available 24/7/365. When evaluating mass notification vendors here are the top 10 points for every decision-maker to consider.

## **1. Relentless Reliability**

Secure systems, company stability, and longevity speak volumes.

The vendor must assure your contact data will always be safe and secure. A company with multiple years of experience, solid financial stability and an excellent proven track record of successful message deliveries help assure potential clients their ongoing services will remain available in the years to come.

**Ask the vendor:**

- Assurance they have at least, a dual mirrored infrastructure that is redundant and geographically dispersed throughout the U.S. protecting client communications against single points of failure.
- A description of their physical, application-level, database, encryption practices, and human resources security policies.
- A description of their backup policies.
- A copy of their disaster recovery plan.
- A guarantee of 24/7/365 availability of at least 99.9% and a copy of their Service Level Agreement.
- A description of their experiences with government agencies, both large and small.
- For examples of notifications sent, any problems, if any, that arose and how their services helped those clients.
- For client references. Investigate any negative press on the part of the vendor. Make sure the vendor's primary business is that of mass notification and not telemarketing.
- A description of their staff's expertise.

## **2. Capacity & Speed**

Robust systems and successful deliveries matter.

Be sure that the vendor can handle an unlimited number of contacts, messages and scenarios. The vendor must not have restrictions in the volume of data they can handle for you. The service must provide you with guarantees on the types and

number of messages they can process per hour. During an emergency event, the last thing you want is to find messages are held up for some reason.

**Ask the vendor:**

- What messaging types they offer and how many messages can be delivered per hour. Don't be swayed by a vendor's exaggerated claims of volume of messages per hour; ask for specific examples to verify message delivery experience.
- How they can help you not only send but also successfully deliver messages.
- How many ports are available and if messages can be sent simultaneously.
- How the vendor will help you work with your local exchange carrier.
- How they can help you control large volumes of messages through throttling.

### **3. Contact Data Management**

Accurate contact information is absolutely vital.

Be sure the vendor can import your contact data in a timely fashion. The vendor must provide details on how they handle data security. The vendor should be able to import and manage a variety of contact data including hosting your own data, commercial, or 911 data. The vendor must offer up-to-date, online mapping using the common ESRI format. Also the vendor should offer a public signup page where the public can supply additional contact information and alternate contacts. The vendor should offer a preference management tool in which your contacts can specify which messages to receive, with which messaging channel and preferred times.

**Ask the vendor:**

- Where they get the contact data and how often it is updated.
- To describe their preference management module that enables contacts to specify message type, channel and when to receive.
- To describe how data is encrypted throughout their system.
- If transmissions of their user logons are encrypted over HTTPS port 443.
- If they scrub the data and remove duplicates.
- If they can supply a public signup page for the client's contacts to add additional contact information such as cell phone number and email.
- If they can handle automated updates from a client's database.
- If mapping is to be used, how often the mapping updates are handled and if they can import a client's mapping layers.

- If they have a company policy to never divulge, re-sell or disclose customer data to outside agencies. And, that this assurance is written into their contracts.
- If all contact data will be returned to you at the end of your contract term.

## 4. Multiple Messaging Options

Reach your citizens in as many ways as possible.

The public expects to be contacted in a variety of ways. Besides phone calls and emails, your citizens also expect to be reached via text messaging, and fax. In addition, the public may look to social media as another vehicle to receive messages and check in on updates.

### Ask the vendor:

- What messaging modes they offer. At minimum, the vendor should offer messaging to landline, cellular, and VoIP phones; text messaging, email and fax.
- If messaging via social media (Twitter and Facebook) is available.
- If they offer the ability to conduct surveys and polling.
- If message confirmation is available.
- If vendor offers TDD/TTY messaging to the deaf.
- Besides recorded messages, if text-to-speech is also available.
- If messages in multiple languages are available.
- If your citizens have the option to specify their preferences by which message type, message channel and when to receive.
- If they offer inbound calling capability via menu response options.
- If they can send and receive calls simultaneously without sacrificing speed.
- If their Help Desk is available 24/7/365 to help you create and send messages.

## 5. Reporting

Notification sent, was it successful?

The results of a current notification and past notifications are essential to gauging success. Users want to see real-time results so problem deliveries can be handled quickly. The users want to be able to quickly resend notifications to those who did not receive initial notifications.

### Ask the vendor:

- If they offer real time reporting during notification.

- If reports contain all details including success, failure and reason for failures.
- If you can run reports on 1 or more notification campaigns based upon selective criteria.
- If report results can be exported in standard delimited format.
- How long those reports will be available to you.
- If you can resend a notification, with just one click, to those who did not receive original notification.

## **6. Superior Customer Service**

Help should be available to you, all the time.

It is critical for users to have access to live technical help 24/7 throughout the year. When emergency events occur, the vendor's live help desk should be ready at a moment's notice.

**Ask the vendor:**

- If their Help Desk is available 24/7 throughout the year.
- If a live person answers the phone and is able to help you immediately.
- If the Help Desk staff is located at the vendor's location.
- If a dedicated client manager is assigned to each client.
- If the client manager is involved with project implementation.
- If this client manager will remain with your account after implementation.
- If they offer assistance in generating public awareness for the emergency notification system.

## **7. Ease of Use**

Send messages with just one click.

During a crisis, users need to quickly and easily launch their notifications. When a user needs to create and send notifications they want to use an intuitive user interface to get their messages out ASAP. Users need and want to have the confidence in being able to create messages, select contacts and send without uncertainty.

**Ask the vendor:**

- For a description of their messaging process.

- How many steps it takes to create and send a message.
- If the system is simple enough so that a notification can be launched with a minimum of training.
- If predefined scenarios, complete with contacts, messages and notification parameters, can be easily accessed and launched with just one click.

## **8. Implementation Before and After**

Smooth Implementation with no surprises.

Clear project planning in conjunction with the vendor's client manager is essential for the success of the project. Be sure the project is clearly defined without loose ends. Be sure the vendor is committed to the project every step of the way.

**Ask the vendor:**

- For a full project plan and timeline.
- If system can be ready within 30 days.
- If the project will require the agency to hire additional staff to support the project.
- To describe their quality assurance practices.
- If training can be done onsite and/or via webcast.
- If ongoing training is free of charge.
- If supporting materials such as training, manual and online help are available.
- If the test site remains available, indefinitely, for training purposes.

## **9. Scalability and Flexibility**

Adaptability is critical for ongoing success.

The vendor's system must be readily expandable to accommodate any size of data. The vendor's system must be flexible enough to incorporate ever-changing technologies.

The system should offer clients the ability to create customizable tiers of security groups which give a variety of permissions-based access to their users. The system should allow users multiple options in which to create, launch and schedule messages. The vendor should be able to accommodate any number of simultaneous notifications.

**Ask the vendor:**

- If their system can handle an unlimited number of contacts and call groups.
- If their system allows users to set up their own security groups that each have their own access permissions rights.

- If messages can be accessed and launched online, by mobile device and with the help of the 24/7/365 help desk.
- If the system can be used for both emergency and non-emergency messaging.
- If a message can be sent using multiple channels simultaneously.
- If a unique message can be set for each message type.
- If messages can be launched immediately or saved for future use at any time in the future.
- If messages can be set to recurring messages.
- For a description of their R&D team and examples of features they've instituted.
- What they are doing to be ready to interface with FEMA's IPAWS (Integrated Public Alert and Warning System).
- If they offer integration via API (Applications Programming Interface).

## **10. Simple Pricing**

No complicated pricing, please.

### **Ask the vendor:**

- That no hidden fees be part of the pricing.
- If system upgrades are free of charge.
- If additional online training sessions are free of charge.
- To describe all the costs associated with the proposed system.
- For pricing for unlimited messaging, any type at any time.

## Vendor Evaluation Rating Chart

When evaluating potential vendors, it is suggested that you use the following rating tool.

		Rank each vendor on a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the highest		
Score Sheet	Weight	Vendor A	Vendor B	Vendor C
1. Stability & Reliability	9			
2. Capacity & Speed	8			
3. Contact Data Management	7			
4. Multiple Messaging Options	7			
5. Reporting	8			
6. Superior Customer Service	10			
7. Ease of Use	8			
8. Implementation Before/After	6			
9. Scalability	5			
10. Simple Pricing	9			

Twenty First Century Communications is a technology company that helps organizations like yours quickly send high volumes of information to the right people, at the right time, using any communication device. Founded in 1989 and recognized nationally for our proven track record and relentless reliability, we're proud to host high-profile clients across the U.S. TFCC is an affiliate of West Corporation, a leading provider of technology-driven, voice and data solutions. For more information about TFCC Alert, visit [www.tfccalert.com](http://www.tfccalert.com).

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