Emergency Notification: Best Practices for Citizen Registration
Introduction

If you send a critical notification, and no one receives the message, your communication has failed. In order to reach citizens with important information—a school closure, a fire downtown—you need to know who they are, where they are, and how to reach them. A successful strategy for getting citizens to opt-in to your communication platform is essential for towns, cities, and municipalities, as it ensures that your community will receive notifications about emergencies and other important events.

A primary way of capturing citizen contact and location information is through a simple registration website, where community members can create and update accounts. This is known as an “opt-in portal.” With a best-in-class opt-in portal, registrants choose the types of alerts they want to receive, enter contact options, and provide address and location information.

In a perfect world, citizens would register, or “opt-in”, as soon as your system is implemented, but that generally isn’t the case. People may not know how to register, or they may not understand the value of providing their contact information. In fact, a survey showed that two-thirds of residents were unsure whether or not their city even has an emergency notification system in the first place¹.

By following best practices, you can create a successful opt-in strategy for critical communications, which can help increase data coverage and accuracy, and improve awareness.

Opt-In Portal Best Practices

Ensure that your citizens are signed up to receive important notifications—from emergencies to events that impact their day-to-day life, such as town meetings, road closures, or local festivals.

Plan to Succeed

The first step toward creating a successful opt-in strategy is planning. Identify a project manager, who can take hold of setting the strategy, gathering resources, and managing the execution of the plan.

Plan to use as many methods of communication as possible to reach your citizens. Gone are the days when sending notifications only via landline phones was the primary—or only—method of reaching people. The more ways you have to reach each citizen, the more likely that one of these ways will be successful. Consider paths including mobile phones, email, SMS, social media, and fax—among other methods—which can all be potential ways to reach your community members.

When setting contact methods, it is important to remember that your city, town, or municipality likely has more than one type of citizen. For example, consider access and functional needs populations and the types of communication they might require.

Also think about what type of communication would be most effective during each type of potential event. This can help prevent confusion when it comes time to actually reach people in an emergency.

Here are some questions you should be asking in planning:

- Who is the target audience of my notification?
- What are the audience members’ notification needs?
- What means of communication does my audience find most receptive?
- Will the time of day impact what means of communication is used?
- Will demographics or language requirements impact my strategy?
- What information does my audience need to receive?
- What feedback do I want from my audience?
- How will my audience be notified?
- Who can I enlist to provide support for the implementation of the opt-in plan?
- What percent do I want to opt-in to call this plan a success?
Remember that Citizen Registration is a Continuous Process

Treating citizen opt-in as a one-time event can lead to a multitude of issues, including contact information that becomes out-of-date, preventing you from successfully notifying your citizens. It is important that you understand that opt-in—both registration and account management—is a continuous process. Something as simple as a job change can lead to the creation of a new email address or mobile phone number for your citizens. And new residents need to be aware of the notification system, and how to sign up for it, regardless of when they move to the community. To keep up with these changes, think of ongoing ways to encourage citizens to either sign up or update their information. For example, are there ongoing events where you can make sign up information available? Does your critical communication system have a polling feature that can be used to verify contact information throughout the year? Schedule multiple opt-in programs each year to keep citizens informed about the importance of having up-to-date contact information in your notification system.

Think Beyond Emergency Alerts

Many mass notification systems are used only for emergency alerts—out of fear that too many notifications could weaken the impact of a message. However, communication expert Dr. Robert Chandler recommends that you should find a way to use your system before a crisis occurs, which should include more than tests and drills. Frequent use can help get your citizens familiar with the system and work out any bugs and kinks prior to an actual emergency situation.

In order to keep messages sent from the system both targeted and relevant, use your system registration process to allow residents to select what type of alerts they would like to receive.

Five years ago, standard practice for most municipalities was to send one message every three months, totaling just 20 messages in a five year span. But, with the dramatic growth of social media notifications and the desire of people to be informed about major events and activities, many customers send out 20 messages per month, driven by alerting citizens about more than just emergencies. Offering self-subscription categories, such as town events or road closures that peak the interests of your citizens, are essential in driving the success of your opt-in. For example, your citizens could be interested in information about a local music festival (i.e. where to park, is it canceled during a rain storm, etc.). These types of self-subscription categories can help answer the “What is in it for me?” question your citizens may have when being prompted to opt-in for alerts.
Design Your Opt-In Page with Simple Navigation

The design of your opt-in page is critical. If it is too difficult to navigate, citizens could become frustrated and pass on signing up for alerts. For example, an opt-in page could be as simple as having citizens enter contact information and preferred contact method, along with a section that has them select which type of alerts they want to receive. You can make it so emergency alerts are mandatory, but also offer other self-subscription categories that add value to the system for citizens, such as road and traffic events, water outages, and parking bans. Self-subscription is important, as citizens with unique interests are likely to care about the different notifications. If citizens are able to sign up for alerts about emergencies and events that directly impact them, your communication strategy overall is likely to be more successful.

Remember who your target audience is, as this could factor into how your opt-in page is designed. Just because a native speaker is able to easily navigate your page, doesn’t mean a non-native language visitor will have the same success. Design your page for the ease of the visitor, not the writer or website designer. It is also important that your citizens understand how their data will be used and by whom, what messages they’ll receive, and what they can optionally elect to receive.

Promote Opt-In Through Local Media

Local radio, television stations, and newspapers can be utilized to get the word out about registering for your notification system. Consider sending whoever is responsible for implementing your system on a media tour. Radio, TV, and newspaper interviews can help you reach a wide audience and are much more cost-effective than purchasing advertisements and public service announcements (PSAs). Don’t forget to use a diverse set of news sources, including those targeted at specific sub-sets of your population, to help reach the widest possible audience.

Seek Assistance from Local Schools and Colleges

Local schools and colleges can be valuable resources for promoting opt-in. Consider using school newspapers, parental newsletters, PTA meetings, student orientations, and other campus programs to help build awareness and increase your opt-in percentage. For example, you could include an ad promoting opt-in with school newsletters that go home to parents. You might also consider holding a required seminar on the importance of opt-in and critical communication at college and university student orientations.
Put Up Billboards and Posters in the Community

Another way to reach a high number of citizens is to put up billboards and posters throughout the community promoting your opt-in portal. Standard billboards can be useful, but digital billboards are more cost efficient, as you are able to create customer messages that can be changed based on time of day, or other factors.

For posters, public transportation is a great place to start. Consider using buses, subways, public service vehicles, and neighborhood stores. It is also recommended to have posters at community and charitable events in your area.

Use Social Media, the Internet, and Email for Promotion

In this day and age, social media is one of the best ways to reach people. As of March 2014, Facebook had 1.28 billion monthly active users, so it’s a highly attractive medium to promote opt-in. Twitter and its 255 million monthly active users is another useful social network for registration campaigns.

However, social media promotion won’t do you much good if users aren’t able to easily find your opt-in portal. Many municipalities house opt-in on their fire, police, and utility websites – make sure that the location of your portal is clear, and link promotions directly to the registration page. You may also want to consider adding a link in all employee email signatures that goes directly to your opt-in page as well.

Consider Reaching Out to Religious Centers/Other Clubs and Organizations

Religious centers (including churches, synagogues, mosques, and temples) are a great place to connect with people in your community—who you may not be able to reach with other methods—about opt-in.

The State of Connecticut received assistance from the United Chaplains of Connecticut. Here is what they said when reaching out:

“We encourage every chaplain to register to receive CT Alerts. The State of Connecticut has implemented a state-of-the-art emergency notification system to alert residents anywhere in the state about life-threatening emergency conditions.”

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Clubs and organizations can be a good tool for opt-in promotion as well. For example, Brian Radcliffe of the South Central Task Force utilized the local Girl Scout troop for opt-in:

“We have a Girl Scout leader [who] thought it would be a great idea to get her Girl Scout troops set up in some of the computer rooms in the high school. They had an open house day for people who don’t have Internet access to come in and get registered and have the girls take care of handling it for them. And [Girl Scouts] would get service project credits, so I thought that was a great idea to promote the opt-in program.”

Know Your Audience

Knowing your audience is critical to a successful opt-in promotion. If your town, city, or municipality has a high population of senior citizens, your opt-in strategy is going to be much different than an area with mostly millennials. Senior citizens are the fastest growing population in the United States⁴, and make up a large percentage of many communities. Know what services, events, and activities your senior population participates in, and tie your registration efforts to them.

Your population of individuals with access and functional needs is another group you’ll need to understand how to get in contact with. Registering and identifying this population is essential to critical communication efforts, because they may have unique needs in an emergency situation. For example, in the event of an evacuation, you’ll likely want to send out a polling message to those individuals with mobility challenges to see if they need help or if they have people who are able to provide assistance.

Tie Your Opt-In to a High-Interest Event

One of the biggest problems you may run into is getting citizens motivated to opt-in. They may be aware of the system, and know how to register, but just not take the step of doing so. Tying this process into a high-interest event is a great way to provide people with that motivation. Pierce County, WA, used this strategy successfully by tying opt-in to a severe winter storm. Citizens were very interested in information about the storm, which provided them with motivation to sign up for alerts from the county.

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Here is an example of how Pierce County used the winter storm to promote opt-in:

“*The National Weather Service is alerting emergency officials of a significant winter storm coming up from the Pacific and has grave concerns on the intensity of both the wind and rain that is on its way. The TV and radio stations are alerting citizens but you don’t have yours on. Would you want to be notified?*

*Get alerts about emergencies and other important community news by signing up for our Pierce County Alert Program. This emergency notification system enables Pierce County to provide you with critical information quickly in a variety of situations, such as severe weather, unexpected road closures, missing persons, and evacuations of buildings or neighborhoods.*

*You will receive time-sensitive messages wherever you specify, such as your home, cell, or business phone, email, text messages, hearing impaired receiving devices, and more. You pick where, you pick how.*”

Winter storms aren’t the only events that you could use to encourage people to opt-in to your alerts system. If your town, city, or municipality is on the Eastern Seaboard, Hurricane Season could be a good time for promotion. You can also use any high-traffic or high interest event; if there is a popular festival in the area that citizens are highly interested in, it could also be used to tie into your opt-in.

**Use an Opt-Out Strategy**

If you already have contact information for residents who should be receiving emergency notifications, using an opt-out strategy could be a useful strategy. An opt-out strategy means that citizens would receive alerts unless they choose to opt-out on their own.

Opt-out strategies have worked well for organizations that already have a list of contacts, including colleges and universities—some higher education institutions saw participation rates jump from 40-50 percent to 80-90 percent once an opt-out strategy was employed. Of course, you’ll still have to get in touch with citizens to make sure their contact information is up-to-date, but not having to pester people to register in the first place could be a major plus. If you do choose an opt-out strategy, it is still important to include self-subscription alerts, which allow your citizens to sign up for notifications based upon their interests.
Automate the Process if Possible

If your town, city, or municipality has an internal HR or contact database, it could be synchronized with your critical communication system, allowing you to automate new employee opt-in and information updates. One way to accomplish this is by using an Automated Programming Interface (API) that connects your database with your critical communication system. The API can be programmed to automatically handle a new member, change a member’s contact, or delete contacts that have left. This removes the need for constant – and time consuming – manual updates.

Seek Help If Needed

If you are using a critical communication service provider, chances are they’ll have resources available that can help you during opt-in. Ask your vendor about a Citizen Opt-In Kit, which includes templates for press releases and community announcements, website content and links, mail inserts, and opt-in instructions for users, among other important resources.

Conclusion

If you send a notification about a severe weather event or other emergency, and your citizens don’t receive it, you could be responsible for the hardship caused to people you’re supposed to protect. It is crucial that all key stakeholders and as many citizens as possible are in your notification system, so they can receive important information and updates. Especially now in the age of social media, it is important that information is accurate and received quickly, as misinformation and rumors can spread and cause confusion. Employing opt-in best practices ensures that your town, city, or municipality can successfully reach the community with critical communications.
About Everbridge

Everbridge provides a unified critical communication suite that helps clients be better prepared, make better decisions, and respond quickly and confidently during disruptive events. When an incident happens, whether it’s a natural disaster or an IT service outage, we automate communications to ensure that the right messages get to the right people at the right time.

Widely recognized by analysts as the market leader, Everbridge solutions are trusted by clients in all major industries and government sectors to connect with over 50 million people around the world.

THE ONLY END-TO-END PLATFORM

- **Planning**: Everbridge is easy to set up, maintain, and organize, meaning that you’re always ready for a quick, coordinated response. Everbridge ensures that the right messages get to the right people - with the most advanced opt-in portal on the market, streamlined integration with internal and external data sources, and simple group and contact management.

- **Assessment**: When trouble strikes, you need rich insight, presented simply - so you can quickly assess potential impact and make an informed decision to avoid loss. Everbridge offers the only solution on the market that meets these demanding requirements, with the most advanced interactive dashboard in the industry.

- **Response**: In critical situations, ease-of-use can mean the difference between an effective response and a mistake that carries serious consequences. Everbridge is engineered to be simple to use under pressure, with a user interface that accelerates time-to-message and reduces the likelihood of errors.

- **Delivery**: Even during large-scale disruptions, Everbridge stays on. The most advanced platform in the industry ensures that you reach your contacts - every time. And with worldwide coverage and capabilities, including globally local calling infrastructure and data storage, we’re ready to support you wherever your people are in the world.

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