Top 10 Tips for Successful Message Mapping

Introduction

Incidents, events, and threats to your organization can happen at any time. When an emergency happens, you need to send clear instructions and updates to your contacts – to minimize risk, keep them safe, and resolve issues quickly. With advancements in technology and the further integration of mobile devices in our daily lives, it has become easier and easier to reach these contacts wherever they are – but are you prepared to send out the message?

In an emergency, many factors can impact the successful outcome of a notification. Message senders panic and hesitate, and recipients' reading comprehension drops to a 6th grade level.

Crafting messages in advance helps ensure that employees, customers, stakeholders or citizens receive and understand critical notifications, instructions, and updates. Disaster response organizations including the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) recommend advance scripting of message templates for a variety of scenarios and audience types to streamline communications during an incident, emergency, or disaster[1].

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Dr. Robert Chandler, an expert in crisis communications and director of the Nicholson School of Communication at the University of Central Florida, advises creating message maps: "clear, concise messages created prior to a crisis that simplify complex concepts and speed communication during chaos." Chandler advises that these message maps should be created in advance, so that organizations "have the time and resources to explore all possible disaster scenarios and map out all messaging needs by audience and stage of crisis."

Follow the 10 steps laid out in this paper to increase the success of your message maps.

1. Plan before the incident.
2. Follow Chandler's 3-3-30 rule.
3. Keep it simple in a crisis.
4. Craft your messages to match the stages of an event.
5. Choose your words and watch your tone.
6. Craft for the recipient.
7. Test, Train, and Fix.
8. Look at send and receive models.
9. Think about your mode.
10. Remember that Message Mapping is a science.

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[1] "Crisis Communications Plan", Ready.gov http://www.ready.gov/business/implementation/crisis June 2014

1. Plan for scenarios in advance.

Planning before an incident provides many benefits. Crafting messages before the incident:

- allows you to respond faster

- reduces the chance of sending a misleading or even incorrect message

- allows your legal team and senior management to pre-approve message templates

- permits the translation of messages into other languages

- decreases the anxiety levels of individuals responsible for sending the notification.

When message planning, consider a wide variety of possible situations – at a minimum, know the types of incident, event, and disasters most likely to have an impact on your business. The American Red Cross website describes more than 20 potential disaster scenarios organizations should prepare for, ranging from weather incidents to criminal acts.[2] Consider scenarios that would either impact the health and safety of your people, or disrupt your normal business operations. Brainstorming can help you walk through what needs to be done, and what messages need to be sent, during a given incident; messages that would need to be sent during a fire are likely very different from those sent during a system failure. Most importantly, make sure they are relevant to your organization and audience.

2. Follow Chandler's 3-3-30 rule.

The wording and structure of a message can impact reader comprehension. A guideline to use when crafting your messages is Dr. Chandler's 3-3-30 recommendation, outlined in *Emergency Notification*.

- No more than 3 message points

- Deliver 3 short sentences

- Keep the key content in the first 30 words

These guidelines may be hard to hit exactly, but realize that the first 30 seconds is your best chance to get your audience's attention.
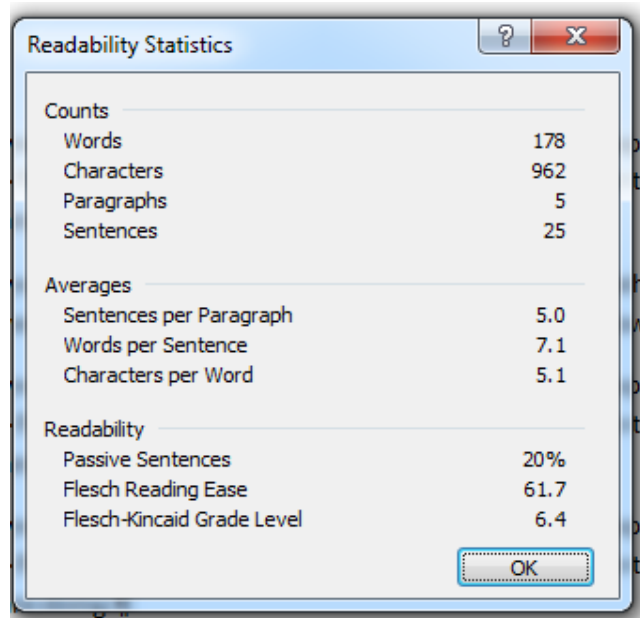
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[2] "Types of Emergency" American Red Cross http://www.redcross.org/prepare/disaster, June 2014

3. Keep it simple in a crisis.

According to his research in *Emergency Environmental Stress Induced Diminished Cognitive Capacities*, Dr. Chandler notes that the average person's reading comprehension in a crisis drops about four grade levels. Dr. Chandler recommends writing to a 6th grade level during a serious notification incident. Your audience needs to understand your message without confusion at a time when stress is heightened.

You can check a message's grade level with Microsoft Word:

1. Click the **File** tab
2. Click **Options**
3. Click **Proofing**
4. Look for the heading **When correcting spelling and grammar in Word**
5. Make sure **Check grammar with spelling** is selected.
6. Select **Show readability statistics**
7. From the **Review** tab, perform a spelling and grammar check. At the end of the check, your readability statistics, including the Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, will be shown. Make sure your message is at the sixth grade level

You can reduce the grade level of your writing by limiting the number of sentences per paragraph, words per sentence, and characters per word.

4. Craft your messages to match the stages of an event.

According to Dr. Chandler, there are six identified phases within every crisis: (1) Warning; (2) Risk Assessment; (3) Response; (4) Management; (5) Resolution; and (6) Recovery. You can simplify your messaging mapping by thinking of three major stages, and the messages needed for each:

Early stage

The event is unfolding and not all the facts may be known.

- Provide the information you have
- Realize stress is high and the time may be short
- Be clear, precise, and specific.

Mid-stage

There is more information about the event and the desired actions by audience.

- Motivate the recipients to take the correct actions
- Usually includes actions and is directive based

Resolution stage

The incident is over and the outcome is known.

- Provide the information to help everyone resume their lives
- Describe services or areas that will not return to normal operation

5. Choose your words and watch your tone.

The response to your message can be affected by the words and tone you use. Think about the reaction you want. Does your message help? Does it create urgency? Does it cause panic?

A prepared message should be reviewed by the potential recipients.

- Is it suitable for gender, cultural, and racial norms?
- Are there words with misleading connotations?
- Are there non-universal jargon, acronyms, or abbreviations?
- Could it be seen as sarcastic?
- Does it contain emoticons or colloquialisms?

Find synonyms or clearer terms if needed. A message that will be sent internationally, even to English speaking recipients, must also be closely checked. "There's a fire in the boot" may have a different meaning to a US or UK English speaking recipient.

Written messages, such as those sent by email or SMS, can cause issues because tone is difficult to convey without voice inflection. Avoid writing phrases that can have multiple meanings depending on tone, such as "that's great." Emoticons, like smileys, or colloquialisms can help covey tone, but are inappropriate for official messages. It is best to always have a clear and concise message that can only be interpreted one way.

6. Craft for the recipient.

During an incident, there may be several messages and actions needed. Does the management team need written instructions, or to be put on an immediate conference call? Will messages to the security team and general staff be different? Are the actions that citizens need to take different based on their locations?

Create logical groupings of recipients based on qualities like function, role, and/or geographic location, and determine what messages would need to be sent to each group during an incident, crisis, or event. This matrix of messages and recipients can be extremely complex, especially when multiple messages need to be sent through the duration of the event. This process can be automated with a modern critical communication system, however, requiring additional planning on the front-end, but providing speed and efficiency when the incident occurs.

7. Test, Train, and Fix.

To demonstrate why training is critical, and why users need to perform an action and not just read about it, think about driving a car. Anyone who passes the driver's education test is not automatically able to drive a car. It takes actual experience behind the wheel to be licensed. In the same way, it is better to learn through simulations in a test environment rather than in a legitimate life or death incident.

Real-life simulations also help build confidence and reduce user anxiety, helping ensure that they're ready to perform needed actions in an actual event. And testing with message recipients helps familiarize them with message formats and emergency processes, and identifies any challenges. Schedule regular tests and mock scenarios. People, notification channels, and an organization's structure may change –what worked in the past may not work now.

8. Consider send and receive models.

In a send and receive model:

- the notification initiator sends a message
- the receiver gets the message and sends a confirmation or reply
- the notification initiator gets the confirmation or reply and reacts to the feedback.

Your message maps can include yes or no questions, or could include polling for more detail. For example:

> **"This message is regarding your current work location.**
> **Please respond to this message by providing your work location."**

(Polling Response Options)

> **"Please make your selection from the following choices."**
> **"Press 1" If you are working in your normal office.**
> **"Press 2" If you are working from home.**
> **"Press 3" If you are working from an alternate facility.**
> **"Press 4" If you are not working today.**

These options could be used if a building is closed due to an emergency and you need to see where your employees are located. It could also be used during a flu outbreak to see who is working and where they are. This does require that you have a way to examine the results of the confirmations or replies in real-time, generally done in the reporting tool for your critical communication system.

If you use a send and receive model, your message maps can include progressive questions based on users' responses. Alternatively, you could base your follow-up messages based on what percentage of your recipients received your message (this can be determined through confirmation reporting in your critical communication platform). These responses may influence your next notification.

9. Think about your mode.

When creating your message maps, ask yourself, "How will this message be delivered?" What mode will you use? Each mode has advantages and disadvantages, and you'll need to carefully consider your audience and potential scenario when choosing a mode priority. It is also important to understand each mode's impact on your message. In addition to Dr. Chandler's 3-3-30 rule, modes can have unique restrictions on message length, structure, and delivery. Possible modes, and some considerations, include:

Voice calls (mobile or landline)

- Needs to convey its message in the first 9 seconds.
- Choose speakers carefully based on role, articulation, and familiarity

Short Message Service (SMS)

- Should be brief and to the point – no longer than 120 characters
- Can be used when signal is weak

Email

- Can use formatting to emphasize message points (if the user and mail server permit it)
- Should still follow the 3-3-30 methodology developed by Dr. Chandler

Instant Messaging (IM)

- Allows multiple messages and replies

Twitter

- Has a 140 character limit
- Can used links to notify and redirect recipients to another information source

Facebook

- Can hold full web site contents, links, and changing information.

For Everbridge customers, your Account Manager can help you determine what combination of delivery modes works best for your needs in your industry.

10. Message Mapping is a science

Message mapping can seem fairly straightforward, but considerable time and expertise has gone into researching exactly how to structure messages for recipient response in a crisis. There are special forms and steps that can be used to guide message mapping templates and messages. Take advantage of message mapping resources available to you, such as Dr. Chandler's book, *Emergency Notification*. The process of developing a message map incorporates audience identification, goal setting, message matrixes, and key point identification. Tools can help you balance word choice, message type tiers, and message construction.

Can you show me an example?

Everbridge has compiled a library of message samples based on these guidelines and customer best practices. This library includes sample message templates for the following 30 use cases.

1. Contact Information - Update Request
2. Communications Test
3. Hurricane - Communications Test
4. Conference Bridge
5. Accountability - Are You O.K. and Safe?
6. Accountability with Assistance Transfer
7. Response - Willing and Able
8. Response - Quota Fulfillment
9. Office - Delayed Opening
10. Office - Closed
11. Work at Home / Alternate Site
12. Office - Open
13. Transportation & Logistics
14. NYC Transit- Incident Alert
15. NYC Transit – All Safe and Clear

16. London Underground Tube - Incident
17. London Underground Tube – All Safe
18. Protestors – Coming Into Work
19. Protestors – Departing Work
20. Absenteeism/Workforce Availability - Poll
21. Shooter on Campus - Shelter In Place
22. Shelter Inside
23. Hazardous Material - Shelter Inside
24. Explosion – Shelter Inside
25. Hurricane - Evacuation Order
26. Building Fire
27. Tornado Warning - Shelter in Place
28. Tsunami Warning – Seek Higher Ground
29. Incident Reporting - Daily Scheduled Inbound
30. All Is Safe and All Is Clear

Creating sample messages for potential scenarios your organization may encounter will save time and make broadcasts more efficient. If you would like to see the message mapping samples referenced above, please contact your Account Manager. If you are not a current customer email your request to: marketing@everbridge.com

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.

Visit **www.everbridge.com** to learn more.