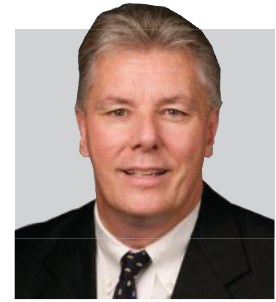# INTEGRATION OFFERS MASSICE BENEFITS *by Bob Stockwell*

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The last decade has brought many changes to the mass notification system (MNS) space, including how the technology is addressed in standards and codes, as well as the technologies deployed to broadcast messages. When considered in its entirety, in terms of the overall emergency preparedness plan, and as a fully integrated security solution, MNS offers many benefits and efficiencies for all participants.

Today, we have many options for disseminating information to the appropriate personnel in an emergency, including:

- Traditional call boxes and towers can be used to initiate a "call for help," as well as to notify the surrounding area with both visual and voice annunciation.
- E-mails, text messages and voice calls can also incorporate a response from the end user.
- Digital displays and signage, such as scrolling LED message boards, TVs, monitors and computer screen pop-ups offer immediate information.
- Sirens and voice evacuation systems as part of the fire system.
- Building intercom and paging systems.
- Social media like Twitter, Facebook and Google+; Twitter has created a service (Twitter Alerts) allowing individuals to subscribe to important information from trusted sources, including FEMA and the CDC, during emergencies.

When implementing an MNS, there are many factors that should be taken into account:

- It is important to always have multiple methods of communicating emergency information. Some people may not have their phones with them, or could have them turned off or silenced. People may be visually or audibly impaired.
- Prepare to communicate via multiple different communication channels for various broadcasts. For example, if the primary communication path is a hosted text messaging service, establish a backup plan in the case of a lost Internet connection.
- To determine the best means of notification, ensure you know the population being targeted. For instance, the majority of people on college campuses probably have cellphones and E-mail readily available, while children at an elementary school may not.
- Target the information to personnel who most immediately need it. Too many alerts to people who are unaffected could lead to apathy and a lack of response in a situation when they are in actual danger.

> **As a fully integrated security solution, mass notification systems offer many benefits and efficiencies that will lead to a safer environment for all participants.**

- Test the system regularly and train the population so that everyone — both notification recipients and responding personnel — know what to expect and, more importantly, how to react.
- Have a process in place to ensure that accurate contact information is maintained for all personnel.

A fully integrated MNS can be crucial to providing additional levels of security. For example, when an incident occurs in a large university, it typically involves a significant number of people who may be panicked and spread out over a substantial area. Assembling a response to the incident is also a complex undertaking, potentially involving campus police, local first responders, administrative staff and others.

In this scenario, where most faculty, staff and students carry smartphones, an initial notification via text, voice and Twitter describing the nature of the incident and providing direction, such as specific areas of campus to avoid, is a good first step. This provides information to the largest group of people and helps keep them out of the dangerous area; the same function can also assemble the appropriate response teams and help them communicate quickly.

Digital displays, intercom systems or voice communications over the evacuation system could be utilized in specific locations in the immediate vicinity of the incident to provide additional instructions. Video surveillance systems can be used to provide more situational awareness to the responders. The access control system could play a significant role in the response by providing the ability to lock down specific buildings or rooms.

Ideally, all of these systems would be tied to single platform or a physical security information management (PSIM) system to give the operator awareness of all incoming data, allowing for a quick response. By integrating the MNS to the overall enterprise system, communication is more effective and efficient, with better insight provided to first responders. **SSI**