

## Schools and Colleges Urgent Communications Alert Systems

*High Schools and Colleges need a new, cost-effective way to communicate rapidly with students and parents in the event of an emergency or to issue time-sensitive information without limitations. The old ways aren't fast enough. The old ways aren't sure enough.*

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## **There's a Need to Know.**

The Red Cross Disaster Preparation Guide emphasizes the importance of a plan for assured communications with the increasingly mobile parents of school age children. Safety and security issues facing school administrators range from criminal activity and hazardous weather to illness, accidents, bus delays, and truancy through grade 12. And as students grow more independent, staying in touch with them can be as challenging as reaching their parents.

Communicating urgent information to large groups of students or their parents when their whereabouts are unknown can be a nightmare, especially in today's litigious environment. You can work the phone tree, leave a message, alert the media and send an email, yet parents may not get the information they need when they need it. Or they may get it wrong. Ill-informed parents swamp the school with calls that can't get through seeking information that can't be disseminated quickly enough to please anyone. The hard fact is this: when it's something your students or their parents need to know, they need to know it fast, wherever they may be. It's up to you to get the word out.

Here's the good news: A communications system that can quickly and reliably handle emergency communications, has the added benefit of facilitating routine administrative communications. It will earn its keep every day by efficiently disseminating homework assignments, revised class schedules, changes in extracurricular event schedules and news of any stripe.

This paper will discuss the best methods of delivering detailed messages to carefully-defined audiences when every minute counts.

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## **You need to communicate better.**

Your current emergency contact/security alert plan probably connects you with the places you expect to find the parents, students or staffers concerned—their homes or their workplaces—and if they're not there, you leave a message. That's all you can do. But it isn't enough.

Email isn't much help. Because email programs won't work if electrical power is out or Internet access is down, at either end. Moreover, they won't work until the computer is turned on and the email program initiated. Typically, people feel no urgency about checking their inbox. And there are so many messages in the average inbox, an important alert may go unrecognized and unopened.

No, the phone is still the best tool for an urgent communications; you're just using the wrong phones. In the wrong way.

## **Cell phones are best.**

A truly effective emergency communications plan would bypass the home phones and the work phones and focus on the phones in our pockets and purses and backpacks. The cell phone is the one phone that's never ignored and never out of reach, so those who carry them are never out of reach. Today, over 76% of all the people in the US have a mobile device, and there are more cell phones in the US than there are landline phones or computers. Odds are, each parent has a cell phone of their own and so do many, if not most, of your students. That—together with the fact that most cell towers survive when "the lines are down"—makes cell phones the *Preferred Point of Contact* for an efficient, effective emergency communications system. And you have four ways to use it.

## You can say what you want...

1. **Auto dialer programs** deliver a recorded voice message and work well for calling a few people when there is no sense of urgency. Schools must purchase the equipment and the number of phone lines required to be effective. Each call can take precious minutes and be frustrated by busy signals, menus, non-answers and hang-ups.
2. **Web-based calling systems** allow authorized message senders to record a 60-second message from any phone, then key in a distribution list. The system uses VoIP to send out thousands of voice messages quickly, often guaranteed by a Service Level Agreement (SLA). A concern, however, is whether the Phone Company on the *receiving* end can *accept* all those calls, because phone networks are designed with the expectation that only 20% to 30% of customers will be using their phones at the same time. Some of these systems offer speech-to-text capability, which lightens the burden dramatically but requires a clear and precise articulation uninfluenced by an accent.

## ...but texting is faster than talking.

3. **Web-based short message systems (SMS)** provide text messaging to cell phones. Text messaging gets through even when people are talking on the phone; there are no busy signals. And text messaging is more efficient than voice: a 60-second voice message is around 400kb of data and takes 60 seconds to receive, while a 400 word text message is only 3.5kb and arrives in a flash. Text messaging is immune to noise at the receiving end

and is well-suited for rapid deployment of alerts. These systems require nothing but an Internet connection from any PC or a mobile device and offer you 120 to 160 characters of text, including spaces and punctuation. There are a few issues when considering such a system: Are 120 to 160 characters of text enough? Is it limited to the sponsoring carrier's network? Is it okay to have no proof that the message was received? Are messages readable from a PC as well as the cell phone?

4. **Web-based unified communication applications (MMS)**, such as those offered by iMAN, send text messages of unlimited size to any carrier's cell phones and mobile devices. The iMAN solution can be up and running immediately with temporary services in place until high-security hosted facilities are tailored to your needs and your resources. iMAN options range from plain SMS messaging to video-rich messaging with receipt verification, simultaneous email backup and links to further information at a mobile website. iMAN features excellent live reporting and can collect answers to multiple questions with up to six possible responses each, without texting back and forth. Anyone on your distribution list can go straight to the easy-to-use mobile website for all relevant messaging and information via web-enabled cell phone or any online computer and an access code.

**Have important messages to deliver to parts unknown?  
Put iMAN on it.**

- There are multiple wireless carriers in any area and iMAN works with all of them, so the messaging load is spread around.
- Cell phones will roam from network to network, if necessary, to receive a text message.
- Cell phone towers are designed to withstand a direct hit by a F3 tornado, and if one does go down, a cell phone will soon find another.

- A voice message may not be heard or understood over the noise of a sporting event, a concert, howling winds or sirens, but a text message can be read.
- A text message can be received and read without a sound when silence may be important.
- Your iMAN mobile website is easy to use and requires no computer programming skills to revise. Simple cut and paste operations make it easy to update and adapt by anyone who's authorized.
- Your iMAN mobile website is your clearinghouse for first aid and shelter information and for security alerts such as "beware of..." and "look for..." which can be posted instantly. All text messaging can be accessed at the website by the addressees. Access to administrative bulletins may be public or controlled. It's your website.

Your iMAN mobile website can become your school's digital link to parents and students alike, and can even be used as an income generator by inviting local merchants to place digital coupons on the site. Students can use the site as a free text-message exchange and administrators can use it to help get out the vote for the next school referendum. The iMAN Unified Communications program is an unparalleled alert system that's rich in options and opportunities, but offered at a monthly flat rate.

### **iMAN is the key to response-ability.**

1. We make it easy to send a message. Any message.
2. We make sure it gets through, and bring back a receipt.
3. Your secure mobile website is hosted and maintained on iMAN servers.
4. On campus training and support free for the first six months.
5. Easy but controlled access to the website from anywhere online.

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6. Mirrored hosted websites at multiple locations for unimpaired service in the event of catastrophe.
  7. Daily backup of your student information and your students' information.
  8. Flat monthly rate with unlimited possibilities.

For more information or to request a PowerPoint presentation, contact John Maier at 815-483-4426 or [jmaier@imanwireless.com](mailto:jmaier@imanwireless.com). You can also visit [www.imanwireless.com](http://www.imanwireless.com) to view a presentation for High Schools or for Colleges.

