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Best Practices for Pandemic Communications

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Introduction

In any crisis, communications are critical to an effective, ongoing response. Pandemic situations are unique because of the magnitude and scope of their impact. In today's global environment, it is imperative that organizations possess communications capabilities that enable them to reach large numbers of people in numerous different formats. Functionality must include means that reach far beyond the traditional methods of manual phone trees and website postings.

The introduction of cost-effective global communications networks has facilitated the process of modernizing communications processes within organizations, yet in many organizations the manual call tree process is still a standard. Manual phone trees are simply inadequate during critical situations, when multiple, ongoing updates to constituents will most likely be necessary. A more robust communications solution is absolutely necessary—preferably one that has the ability for message recipients to send responses back to the organization quickly and easily. The most reliable way to ensure reaching a person during a critical situation is to invest in a solution that utilizes voice and text messages over multiple devices.

Challenge

According to the World Health Organization (WHO) a pandemic is defined as a global disease outbreak that occurs when three conditions are met: 1) a new influenza virus surfaces, 2) there is no immunity to the virus and 3) The virus is easily spread (through coughing, sneezing, and close contact).

Depending on the virulence of the virus, the impact to business can be minor, such as what we are currently experiencing with the Novel A/H1N1 virus. In more severe cases such as the Spanish Flu in 1935 or to a lesser degree SARS in 2002, the impact on business can be catastrophic if proper planning, training and resources are not in place.

Depending on the business, this may be offset to some degree by a reduction in customer demand. There are some businesses that will actually experience an increased demand for their products or services. This is to be expected in areas manufacturing medical equipment (masks, gloves, vaccines etc.) as well as in the areas of food production, security, communications technology, transportation and logistics. These are directly aligned to maintaining what the Department of Homeland Security has deemed “Critical Infrastructure” and will be exceptions to the norm.

Travel is another industry directly affected by a pandemic event. Impacted by both international governmental response and global customer demand, this already troubled industry can expect to experience increased safety requirements as well as severe schedule and route disruptions as airports, cities, regions and even countries enact

restrictions on travel. These restrictions and additional requirements are the generally accepted responses in an effort to contain or slow the spread of the disease.

In these conditions, the ability to communicate becomes paramount. Possessing the technology to communicate and pre-planning proactive communications enables an organization to notify employees of emerging situations, keep them abreast of new developments, issue directions, etc. The Send Word Now Alert Service allows organizations to send voice and text messages to thousands of people in minutes, using multiple modalities including landlines, cell phones, pagers, SMS text messages, BlackBerry PIN and email.

Both public and private sectors rely heavily on mobile communications and the internet to communicate. There is some movement into satellite communications; however this is limited by cost, complexity and global restrictions for the importing of this technology into some countries. The challenge remains as to how to notify large and widely dispersed groups of people quickly, efficiently, in a reliable and easily understood manner. Send Word Now provides a solution to that challenge.

Commonly Asked Questions:

For the purposes of this discussion, we will define the “Worst Case Scenario” as a highly contagious virus starting in the annual flu season (September to February in the United States). When planning for a pandemic or epidemic, there are critical elements to be considered. Below are answers to ten commonly asked questions:

1. What are the potential risks for a business associated with a pandemic?

In the “Worst Case Scenario,” businesses will experience major interruptions in supplies, transportation, communications, workforce and production. Some industries will experience a drop in customer demand whereas others will see dramatic demand increases. The response of countries outside the United States will depend on the differences existing in the scope and timing of their responses. All affected countries have the same goal, to stop the spread, contain the outbreak and mitigate further impact to society, business and infrastructure.

2. What are the potential impacts of a pandemic on business related domestic and international travel?

Restrictions will occur as a result of governmental efforts to stop or restrict the spread of the virus. We will also see increased surveillance that includes the use of equipment that measures the body temperature of travelers, with enhanced medical safety prerequisites becoming a requirement for passage. This situation will have profound effect on normal business travel, including the relocation of expatriates and their families. Anticipate that both the speed and volume of business travel to be dramatically reduced, with increased use of technology as a replacement.

3. What are some policies that organizations can enact to prevent the spread of influenza in the workplace?

Being proactive is critical when dealing with this type of threat. Both the Center for Disease Control (CDC) and the World Health Organization (WHO) agree that certain precautions are very effective in limiting the spread of the virus. CDC's website (http://www.cdc.gov/h1n1flu/#stay_healthy) recommends the following actions:

- **Stay informed.**
- **Stay healthy.** Influenza is thought to spread person-to-person **mainly** through the coughing or sneezing of infected people. The following actions can help protect you.
 - Cover your nose and mouth with a tissue when you cough or sneeze. Throw the tissue in the trash after you use it.
 - Wash your hands often with soap and water, especially after you cough or sneeze. Alcohol-based hands cleaners are also effective.
 - Avoid touching your eyes, nose or mouth. Germs spread that way.
 - Stay home if you become sick.
- **Follow public health advice** regarding school closures, avoiding crowds and other social distancing measures.

4. How can organizations effectively communicate with stakeholders during a pandemic?

A robust communications plan should be in place in order to effectively respond to any type of situation or crisis. Because of the fear caused by disease outbreaks, establishing recurring communications early on is an effective method to educate and reassure employees that actions are being taken to address the situation. "Scripting" (establishing pre-existing communications) is also an effective method of expediting communications. This way, when a crisis occurs, there are already prepared scripts that exist with instructions or information for employees. With a mass notification system, these scripts can be used to easily update employees on the situation, no matter where they are.

5. What are the key elements of an emergency communications plan in the event of a pandemic like A/H1N1?

As stated above, all communications plans should effectively disseminate messages through a myriad of channels and platforms. In a crisis organizations tend to over communicate, sending messages that provide incomplete information. Ideally messages will expedite understanding and or actions to be taken.

6. What should you look for when selecting an emergency notification system for an organization?

All communications plans should effectively disseminate messages through a myriad of channels and platforms. The most common channels are cell phone, landline, email and SMS text message. The Send Word Now Alert Service can accommodate all of these modalities, and more. Each organization must select what meets their needs.

7. Are there any additional best practices or advice to share with other organizations or professionals charged with emergency management?

Remember that communications are the foundation for an effective emergency preparedness plan. Communications provide the information upon which decisions are made and actions taken.

Major elements for consideration are:

- *Purpose of the communications system*
- *Scope of the communications effort (Regional, National or International)*
- *Methods of message delivery (internet, email, telephone, etc.)*
- *Platforms receiving messages (cell phones, landlines, pagers, email, etc.)*
- *Audience (executives, managers, crisis teams, general employees, etc.)*
- *Scripting messages*

Last, but not least, is to define what success looks like. Clearly setting goals and expectations will guide the implementation of the system and ultimately determine the level of your success.

Summary

A crisis communications system can dramatically improve the preparedness posture of an organization. Effective communications facilitate the alert, preparation, response and recovery of the business and provide additional protection to people, assets and operations.

Early warning, coupled with a coordinated response, can reduce the impact of an incident on the organization, expedite organizational recovery, improve SVA, and potentially protect the organization from legal action. An emergency notification system is a key part of all of these efforts.