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Va. Tech tragedy led other schools to embrace emergency communications

Matt Hamblen

April 15, 2008 (Computerworld) The deadly shootings of 32 people by a lone gunman at Virginia Tech one year ago on Wednesday galvanized college campuses nationwide, leading to a surge in new mass emergency communications purchases -- especially wireless text messaging technologies.

University police and IT and communications professionals from around the nation said in recent interviews that the killings of Virginia Tech students and faculty on the Blacksburg, Va., campus by gunman Seung-Hui Cho led to a buying spree of new communications technologies and services. The goal was to bolster the capabilities of existing e-mail and voice-mail systems, as well as outdoor sirens.

The Virginia Tech shootings "heightened our awareness" of additional ways to disseminate crucial information -- including the use of text messaging because of its popularity with college students, said Corrine Hoch, president-elect of The Association for Communications Technology Professionals in Higher Education (ACUTA) and an IT professional at Columbia University in New York. "A flurry of activity has ensued" in the past year, she added, with both large and small colleges evaluating their emergency communications needs.

Virginia Tech was already in the process of finding a text-messaging system when the shooting occurred; that system launched last July as "VT Alerts," Virginia Tech spokesman Mark Owczarski said. The campus already had a number of warning systems in place a year ago, including a way to push out thousands of voice-mail messages to campus phones and e-mails to computers, as well as outdoor sirens for tornado warnings and other severe weather, he said.

VT Alerts, a system provided by National Notification Network in Glendale, Calif., has not been used for a real emergency, but has functioned well in three tests, Owczarski said. So far, about half of the faculty and staff, or more than 20,000 subscribers, [have subscribed to the free VT Alerts](#) service, he said.

The system will send out a text alert, instant message, e-mail or make a phone call to as many as three devices selected by the subscriber. The hosted service is expected to cost the university about \$200,000 over three years, Owczarski said.

In explaining the move, Owczarski said that universities need multiple forms of communications for emergencies "to meet the diverse needs of an increasingly mobile community" and to provide redundancy. While text messaging might be popular with younger audiences, he said it takes about 30 minutes to send all the text messages to more than 20,000 subscribers; an e-mail blast can go out to 36,000 addresses in just three minutes.

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Shortly after the Virginia Tech killings, the value of having multiple emergency notification channels available became clear. Students sitting in a class where no land-line phone is available might also be told by a professor to keep wireless devices off, college officials said. And campus police have long known that students sometimes go for hours or even days without checking e-mail or a Web site on a laptop or desktop computer.

"After Virginia Tech, colleges everywhere reprioritized the way they communicate emergencies," said Gary Margolis, chief of police at the University of Vermont in Burlington, Vt. As a consequence of that interest, he noted, "every systems vendor and his brother became a mass communications vendor -- even some who had only been in the business seven days."

At the University of Vermont, a new emergency notification system from MIR3 Inc. in San Diego was activated about two months ago, Margolis said. While MIR3 was fairly new to university customers, it had a long history of providing notification services to large corporations.

The MIR3 system is basically a hosted service that costs the 13,000-student University of Vermont \$35,000 a year, allowing campus officials to decide what messages to send out and when, while using the infrastructure of MIR3, Margolis said. It has worked in tests, but has not been needed for an emergency. The system allows campus officials to send out a notice as, say, a text message at first, followed by perhaps a land-line phone message, until a sufficient number of responses have been received by administrators, a MIR3 spokeswoman said.

MIR3 officials said the company's notification services have blossomed after the Virginia Tech shootings, going from a handful to more than 150 colleges and universities in a year, with the average annual contract going for \$30,000.

Although many colleges jumped on the bandwagon to add text-messaging alerts, MIR3 has urged administrators to use multiple ways of communicating dangers to students on the move and to add redundancy in case one mode fails, said Maz Ghorban, MIR3's vice president of client services.

"Every communication modality has an inherent bottleneck, so if you want to make sure a person gets a message once, we believe you need to find five ways to get it to him," Ghorban said. Even though it is popular, text messaging, also known as SMS (Short Message Service) has an inherent limitation, depending on the carrier, of up to 140 characters per message. That means that a 300-character emergency notice might have to be sent in two or three parts, leading to delays, Ghorban said.

After the London Underground train bombings in July 2005, some SMS messages took seven hours to reach users because of network congestion, Ghorban said.

College administrators must have realistic expectations of what an emergency communications system can do, supported by a set of policies on who can send messages and when, as well as what the messages say, to avoid confusion, Margolis said. "Your systems have to be timely, accurate and useful," he said. "It can't be used for anything other than an emergency, like 'the hockey tickets just went on sale.'"

Despite the buying frenzy in the last year, emergency communications technology won't substitute for good judgment and solid emergency planning, Margolis said. "Technology never solves everything and it isn't always an easy fix," he added. "Any good CIO will say 'Don't expect this technology to solve everything.'"

Margolis said the recent buying frenzy reminds him of when many colleges faced violent crime in the 1970s, and there was a move to install blue emergency lights so a panicked victim could quickly push a button to summon campus police. "The vast majority of those blue lights have never been activated for emergencies, but no college president would ever remove them. Maybe mass emergency notification systems will be the new blue lights, and if a college doesn't have them, everyone will say 'Why don't you?'"

The thinking at Virginia Tech, where the burden and loss of a year ago have been dire, is that "relying on any one form of communication would not be wise," Owczarski said.

Should disaster strike, he added, "You also can't underestimate the oldest form of emergency communications: word of mouth."