



WHITE PAPER

# TOP 5 BEST PRACTICES FOR SELECTING AN EMERGENCY ALERT SYSTEM

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**“We had a water main break on October 31st, and a bomb scare with a later ‘all clear’ on November 1st. The system worked like a charm.... Since then, we’ve seen a surge in subscriptions to the service.”**

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## INTRODUCTION

*Most frequently asked question by parents on college tours: “What are you doing for emergency communication?”*

Campus security is in the news, on everyone’s minds, and is a major topic of concern for college students and their parents. For parents of prospective students, campus emergency communication is a vital concern. Your institution’s emergency communication plans demonstrate your institution’s commitment to student security, which may have an impact on your student enrollment.

Prevailing thought supports the belief that the most direct route to deliver an urgent message to students, faculty, and staff in the in the midst of a tense or chaotic emergency situation is through text messaging. Texting is fast. It is effective, more personal, and discrete. Mobile alert solutions such as CruiserAlert™ High-priority Messaging Solution can be the anchor of a comprehensive university emergency communication strategy.

This heightened focus on campus security has vendors clamoring to provide “the right” emergency alert solution and it is changing the way colleges look at emergency communications and campus-wide communication in general. But it is a challenge to determine which alert service provider will fit the needs of your university or college.

Based on a close partnership with its clients, Timecruiser’s product and professional services teams offer the following best practices for selecting an emergency alert solution that meets your institution’s high-priority communication requirements.

### 1. EASE OF USE: FOR USERS AND ADMINISTRATORS

Selecting a system that was designed for non-technical users will ensure successful administration and usage by students, faculty, staff, and administrators. Every step of the activation, subscription, and alert sending processes should be as simple as using email, so no training is required of users and an administrator can be using the system in less than 10 minutes. During emergency situations, sometimes life threatening, campus administrators must be able to react to the situation quickly and trigger the alert system swiftly. Yet emergency alert is probably among the least used and least familiar processes. Ease-of-use therefore is critical to the solution’s success.

### 2. PRIVACY & SECURITY

Security and privacy are critical factors when selecting any technology that will manage personal information of your users. An emergency alert solution must provide mobile phone profile authentication and rely on opt-in strategies, but also offer functionality for a college to implement a mandatory opt-out policy. A secure online account management interface that requires password protected sign-in and a high-powered redundant firewall layer in the hosting environment will securely shield the personal information of all your users.

Watch out for the vendor who “invites” you to allow advertising to your constituents through text messages as privacy may be compromised – a risk no one can afford. More unfortunately, the resulting spamming effect may dilute the user’s sense of urgency when a real alert arrives.

### 3. EXPERIENCE & RELIABILITY

A solid alert solution should offer key features that will not only improve your institution’s emergency communication, but be delivered by an application service provider you can count

on in the midst of a crisis and beyond. Look for a company that collaborates with cell vendors and Internet providers to ensure messages are not perceived as spam and can provide live transmission reports.

Timecruiser has long been on the leading edge of the evolution of communication, collaboration, and eLearning management for higher education. And now Timecruiser delivers a Web-based highpriority alert solution that empowers campus administrators with the ability to react to urgent situations with swift and targeted communication to campus constituents.

#### **4. MULTI-LAYER. MULTI-TASK.**

A multi-faceted emergency communications system may include the use of bullhorns, fire alarms, loudspeakers, email, radio, Web, RSS feeds, and more. Each solution will be called into use based on the situation. For example, during a sporting event, loudspeakers might be the fastest delivery method for an urgent announcement. But some situations will call for a more expansive coverage area via discrete communication. Given that the vast majority of students in higher education have mobile phones, the text message alert may be the best means of disseminating important information to thousands of people quickly.

A solid alert system will allow you to craft one alert that is sent to every subscriber within a group, department, or campus, on all message delivery systems. In one step, you'll complete many tasks:

- compose and send an email blast
- compose and send an RSS Feed announcement
- compose and send a text message to mobile devices and landlines

#### **5. VALUE OF INVESTMENT (VOI)**

Include factors other than cost when determining the Value of Investment (VOI). Since the ultimate value of your alert system goes beyond financial considerations, determine benefits and their effect on institution mission, goals, mandates and other requirements. Taking the time to quantify these values allows your institution to evaluate results over time.

The VOI can be increased dramatically if your enterprise-wide alert system is procured without the burden of more hardware/software purchases, and can be set up within a matter of hours. The selected vendor's customer service package should also include full redundancy for text message delivery and remote back-up facilities in case of any local system issues.

#### **A TRUSTED PARTNER**

Leveraging the proven reliability of an experienced provider may be the key best practice identified, as veteran service providers will understand your needs and offer a robust feature set with a well-designed interface and dependable service.

There are certain elements to bear in mind when selecting an emergency alert solution – functionality that matches the needs of your institution, security, reliability, VOI, multi-tasking, ease of use – and only your team can determine their value. These considerations, ultimately, help to reveal the solution that provides the highest value of your investment.

When visiting prospective colleges and universities with their children, parents carefully assess the schools' student-to-faculty ratios, average SAT scores, faculty prizes, library size, dorm facilities – and the institution's emergency communication plan.

They'll breathe easier knowing that you have a solid emergency communication strategy.

## ABOUT TIMECRUISER COMPUTING CORPORATION

Timecruiser is the leading provider of SaaS products and solutions that help higher education institutions improve campus-wide communication, nurture communities, and increase eLearning efficiencies.

CruiserAlert™, Timecruiser's high-priority messaging solution provides administrators with the ability to quickly and effectively react to urgent situations with swift and targeted communication to all campus constituents.

- Opt-in, Subscription based
- Multiple-delivery modes: mobile devices, Email, voice messaging, and RSS Feeds
- Unlimited SMTP (e-mail to text) messaging and a flexible number of emergency SMS messages
- Quick, secure channel set up and access
- Easy subscription management for users and administrators
- SaaS solution: No software to download, install or manage and no hardware to purchase or integrate
- Reporting & account information availability: Review reports on activity, subscribers and messages sent

Make CruiserAlert™ the anchor of your university emergency communication strategy.

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