



The Definitive Guide to Emergency Communication

Everything you need for an effective emergency communication program.

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Strong Communication Is Business Critical

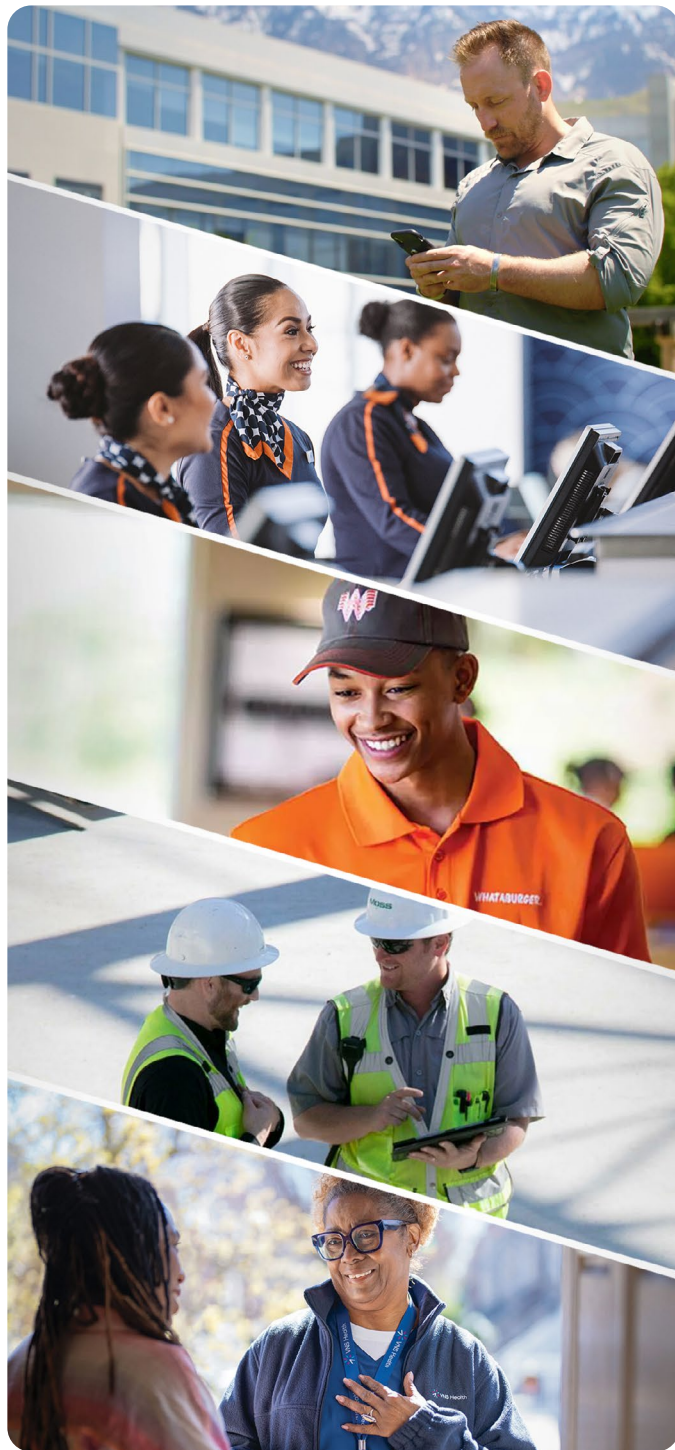
Don't let an emergency derail your operations and ability to protect your people.

Since 2013, AlertMedia has helped thousands of organizations communicate more effectively during emergencies and other critical events. With more than 3,300 customers spanning virtually every industry category—from small healthcare facilities and regional banks to large manufacturing companies and international airlines—we've spent the past decade supporting organizations' efforts to communicate effectively with millions of employees in 130+ countries around the world.

From shelter-in-place guidance to evacuation procedures to incidents response procedures and preparedness drills, our customers have been through it all—and we've been right there alongside them, offering guidance from our team and best practices from experts in the field. And now, we've gathered all that knowledge and expertise into a single resource: the Definitive Guide to Emergency Communications.

This comprehensive manual is designed to help any organization build or improve its emergency communication program, leveraging best practices, expert insights, and stories from a diverse spectrum of safety, resilience, and security professionals.

We hope you'll find the guidance within useful as you work to elevate your approach to emergency communication and ensure your people feel safe, informed, and connected, no matter the situation.



The Gold-Standard Emergency Communication Program

To build an effective emergency communication program, you need to start with a strong foundation.

We narrowed down the advice of experts in emergency preparedness and communication to create a framework for a communication program that scales.

Leading emergency communication programs build on these key tenets:

1. Good **preparation** leads to better outcomes
2. Wide-scale **adoption** results in faster response times
3. Employee **buy-in** helps mitigate risk and keeps safety front and center



Preparation

- Plan for who will send messages, when messages will go out, and what they will say
- Build communication templates ahead of time to send notifications faster
- Test your system so you know it works before you need it
- Train your team and employees so everyone knows how to perform their roles

Adoption

- Involve leadership early so they understand how your efforts support business objectives
- Build alliances across different teams to ensure cross-functional alignment
- Find ways to integrate emergency communication in every department

Buy-In

- Educate your employees on the benefits of emergency communication so they are bought in
- Run drills or exercises so they know what to expect from the real notifications
- Encourage or incentivize active participation and responses

Emergency Communication Involves Every Department

CEO/Executive	
Executive summaries, Motivational messages, Major company news	
Corporate Security	Safety protocol updates, Travel safety reminders, Security compliance training, Threat awareness
Loss Prevention	Risk assessments, Security briefings, Incident response conference calls/Cross-functional collaboration, Safety compliance updates
Crisis Management	Exercises and drills, Emergency alerts, Crisis response coordination
Facilities	Building updates, Office closures, Fire and evacuation drills, Building policies
Environmental, Health & Safety	OSHA compliance training and updates, Travel safety training, Environment impact updates, Emergency planning
Information Technology	Unplanned outages, Planned downtime or maintenance, System testing, Cyberattacks or security breaches, Escalations
Operations/Business Continuity	Logistics coordination, Power outages, Equipment malfunctions, Office closures, Travel advisories, Safety alerts, Shift scheduling
Human Resources	COVID-19 screenings, Wellness checks, Compliance training, Benefits or payroll changes, Company news, Policy updates

How to Build a First-Class Emergency Communication Program

If you’re just getting your emergency communication program off the ground, here are eight steps to make sure you are building a program with a solid foundation.

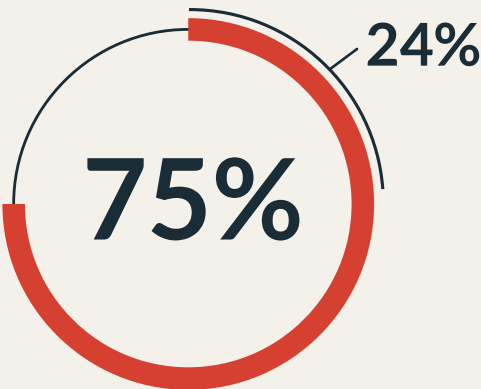
1 Assess your communication needs

Start with a business threat assessment to examine the emergencies your business may face. Then, ask yourself the following questions to determine the scope of your communication needs:

How many people do you need to communicate with?	Employees, distributors, contract workers, etc.
Where are your people located?	Location of facilities, hybrid or remote workers, overseas manufacturers, etc.
What are your expected or required use cases?	Emergency evacuation, cyberattack notifications, internal communication, etc.
What communication channels will you rely on to reach your people?	Text message, phone call, WhatsApp, email, desktop takeover, digital signage, mobile app
Do you have any special circumstances?	Manufacturing floor with no cell phone access, accessibility accommodation requirements, etc.
Which teams or departments should be involved in emergency communication?	Crisis management team, HR, corporate security, etc.

We recommend answering these questions in collaboration with department leaders across your organization. This ensures you incorporate all potential use cases and garner buy-in from all parties involved.

We surveyed 100+ safety and security professionals to learn about their emergency communications programs. Of the respondents, **75% said multiple departments are involved in emergency communications, and 24% said five or more departments are involved.**



2 Decide on your technological needs

With your use cases in mind, you can determine what features and capabilities your company will require. Here are some technological capabilities to consider when exploring available solutions.

Key objectives:

- Notify quickly during an emergency
- Eliminate delay between identifying a threat and communicating
- Codify best practices easily in the system
- Amplify the visibility of emergency communication
- Report on deliverability and response data

You need to be sure the technological solutions you implement will support these objectives because all the planning in the world isn't enough if your emergency notification never sends properly or your administrators are too confused by the system to use it. To learn more about investing in the optimal technology, head to page 16.



3 Decide how you'll access contact information and segment your audience

In emergency communication, data integrity is everything. If you take one thing away from this guide—ensure you know where your most accurate data exists and how you'll access it in an emergency.

Here's what employee data you need:

- Names
- Phone numbers (work and personal)
- Home addresses
- Relevant travel information
- Shift/schedule data (if applicable)
- Emergency contact information

Odds are, you already have much of this information in your HR database. But be sure you audit that information regularly, so you have the most up-to-date data possible.

Based on the data, segment your team into relevant groups. Some pertinent details that would inform segmentation include:

- Shifts
- Work location (e.g., in-office versus remote)
- Geographic location (e.g., city, state, country)
- Facility/primary building
- Department

Strategically grouping your audience will help you notify only those at risk or with an active role in your response efforts. During an actual crisis, sending out messages to employees in other locations will cause confusion, panic, or worse, motivate people to turn their notifications off, inhibiting your ability to reach them in the future.

With accurate data and segmented groups, you'll be able to trust that the right people are getting critical information when they need it.

4 Build Communication Templates

Your ability to quickly disseminate information during a crisis and notify those in harm's way has a significant influence on driving a positive outcome. One of the most impactful things you can do before a crisis to accelerate response times is develop communication templates.

Communication templates give you a general framework for notifications and spaces to add timely details, such as date, time, and location. Here's an example:



ALERT—There is a FIRE in [BUILDING NAME] at the [OFFICE LOCATION]. Evacuate if you are in the building. If you are not in the area, stay clear and remain in a safe area. This is NOT a drill!

Build out communication templates for any high-impact or high-likelihood risks you identified in step one, so they are ready when you need them. You can also find a full library of templates on page 13 to help you get started.

5 Build your communication team

Next, you'll assign a team responsible for managing your communication strategy, emergency response, info dissemination, and after-event briefing and analysis.

Here are some questions to consider as you identify team roles:

- *Who can send messages?*
- *Who can build notification templates?*
- *Who manages groups?*

Here are a few examples of communication team roles:

- **Group Admins** — Those in charge of messaging their specific groups of employees (i.e., department heads, individual facilities managers, etc.)
- **Emergency Responders** — Those in charge of responding to the emergency at hand and relaying information to relevant groups
- **Spokespeople** — Those responsible for communicating with the public or news media about the event

Also, consider role redundancies when building your team. There should be multiple people trained to perform each task in case the main person responsible is unavailable or unreachable.

6 Source reliable threat intelligence

Find a source of threat alerts and monitoring you can trust so you don't waste precious time double-checking or correcting misinformation. AlertMedia solutions can help by integrating reliable threat intelligence and mass notification systems all in one interface.



Tip: If your organization does not have people dedicated to emergency/crisis management, recruit people from various departments to focus on emergency preparedness and communications.

For larger organizations with dedicated teams, ensure everyone has a clear understanding of their specific role and responsibilities during a crisis.



7 Build and document your communications plan

A resilient emergency communication program relies on detailed planning and coordination across the organization. Take your time documenting what success looks like before you need to put your plans into motion.



Tip: Include key stakeholders early. Consult with your communication team and organization leaders from across departments. This ensures you have a full understanding of how communication will work throughout your organization.

Include communication protocols for various scenarios so there is less guesswork in a critical moment. Your plan will include:

- When to communicate?
- Who will send notifications?
- Who will be notified?
- What you will say before, during, and after the incident?
- Which channels you'll use to communicate?
- How you will respond if employees need help or don't respond to a survey?

Include contingency plans in case something does not go according to plan or a concurrent emergency makes the plan difficult to follow.

Once you have documented the plan, be sure to regularly review and revise it as your organization, employees, and threat landscape change.



"You can't let your emergency plans sit and collect dust. Having an active program is essential to keeping employees safe."



Penny Neferis
Director of Business Continuity,
Disaster Recovery, and Emergency Response
JetBlue Airways

8 Train your team

A well-trained crisis response team is empowered to act quickly when threats emerge to mitigate harm and organizational risk. Here are a few ways to set your people up for success:

- **Set expectations early:** Ensure your emergency response personnel have a clear understanding of what you expect from them, so they aren't second-guessing themselves during a crisis.
- **Run drills and tabletop exercises:** Make your plan feel real by running full-scale drills when you can and performing tabletop exercises to practice in a low-stakes environment.
- **Train until it becomes muscle memory:** Have your teams practice sending emergency notifications so it will feel like second nature in a crisis.
- **Test your system quarterly:** Check that your technology is working as planned and familiarize your employees with what an emergency notification looks like by sending out tests regularly.

How to Improve an Existing Emergency Communication Program

Resilient emergency communication programs are reviewed and refined on a regular basis with broad participation across the entire organization, including leadership. As issues surface, organizations that prioritize this level of scrutiny capitalize on the opportunity to identify, document, and address weak links in their procedures, which ensures up-to-date response plans and teams that are better equipped to protect employees and operations during an emergency.

Identify pain points

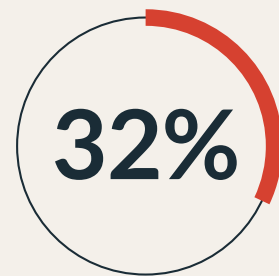
If you're working to improve a program, start by identifying the root of any communication issues rather than just symptoms.

1. Perform an after-action report for a recent emergency or drill and document:

- What procedures were effective?
- What needs to improve to ensure an effective response?

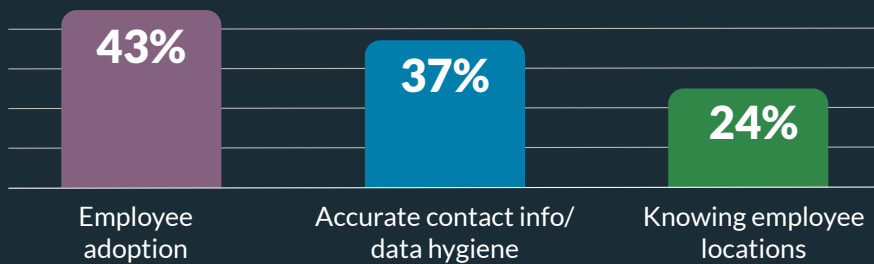
2. Run a test of your system to find any gaps in your tech or data.

Report on who is missing contact information, which admins are not regularly using the system, and any missing or poor functionality within the system itself.



evaluate the maturity of their emergency communication programs as “very good” or “excellent.”

*In our survey of emergency communication professionals, we asked what their **top communication pain points** were. Here's what they said:*



3. Survey your employees to see if they have a strong grasp of your communication program:

- Do you understand how to report an emergency or time-sensitive incident?
- Do you know how the organization will communicate with you during critical events?
- Is the contact information and home address you provided HR up-to-date and accurate?

Plan your improvements

Document the steps your team will take to implement any changes.

- Set a reasonable timeline that accounts for training in new processes
- Establish checkpoints throughout the process to ensure it's on track
- Involve leadership at every step of the improvement journey

6 Common Pitfalls in Emergency Communication

1 Poor employee engagement

Across organizations of all sizes, getting employees to participate in emergency response processes is a top challenge. In fact, **28% of crisis response leaders** we surveyed reported that their employee adoption/buy-in was poor to fair. If you're struggling to get employees to engage, try implementing these strategies:

- Integrate emergency communication into employee onboarding and compliance training
- Mandate or incentivize participation in communication system tests and trainings
- Emphasize the benefits emergency communication will have for them
- Get buy-in from tenured, influential employees and managers who influence company culture

"At our organization, we make a point of talking face-to-face with employees to discuss the benefits of being on our emergency alert system. It's not enough to send out communications asking them to sign up. These discussions really drive the point home and bump up our utilization numbers in a meaningful way."



Sage Weikel

Director of Emergency Management
Beth Israel Lahey Health

2 Bad data hygiene

Even the best emergency communication plans can be undone by inaccurate or outdated data. To ensure you can activate your response efforts efficiently, data automation is vital. Melinda Dehn, Senior Director of Professional Services for AlertMedia, explains, "Automating data syncs between your HRIS and other data sources and your emergency communication system provides peace of mind that data is going to be actionable when you need it." But automation relies on having good data to begin with. Here are some tips for how to ensure you have a "clean" dataset:

- Review data sources and eliminate conflicting data fields
- Get key contact information during employee onboarding
- Run a notification test to identify missing contact information
- Set up recurring reminders for employees missing information

"We ensure that our human resources department is keeping employee contact data up to date. After tests, we chart whose message was not received and directly reach out to those employees to ensure their contact information is accurate."

Jameson Warren

SugarCreek Packing Co.



3 Notification fatigue

Between email, mobile notifications, texts, and other communication channels, employees are constantly bombarded with messages vying for their attention. But during an emergency, you need employees to see and react to your messages as quickly as possible. This is why seasoned emergency communication leaders recommend avoiding unnecessary notifications that may result in employees tuning out what you're trying to share.

Here are some ways you can avoid notification fatigue:

- Use grouping to segment your employees and ensure relevancy
- Send notifications only to those impacted or who need to know immediately
- Use communication channels consistently so employees know where to look

4 Not enough testing

We recommend testing your system quarterly, and practicing emergency communication professionals agree: **55% of safety professionals we surveyed test their communication systems quarterly or more often, and 25% test at least annually.**

We asked, "What is the most impactful thing you do to make your emergency program successful?"

- "Test it. Running evacuation drills and testing the systems assure better performance in an emergency."
- "Training for the physical security (user) side and testing for the customer side. Each of these efforts keep our messaging in as current and effective state as possible."
- "Frequent internal testing and training so there are no issues/surprises when communication goes out to our employees"

"Too many notifications means an individual either de-sensitizes or, in some cases, unsubscribes. This is the biggest risk."



Patricia Lavergne
Director of Security & Quality
Thales, North America



5 Not knowing employee locations

Barriers such as opt-in confusion, data privacy concerns, and tracking fears can get in the way of having accurate location data when your employees are in harm's way. Here are ways to assuage concerns:

- Be transparent about what location data is used for and what it is NOT used for
- Communicate the benefit clearly: This is about keeping people safe
- Incentivize opt-in to engage those who might not be interested initially

6 Siloed communication ownership

Emergency communication shouldn't be relegated to a single department or person who "owns" it. Siloed communication can also put the program at risk of being deprioritized. The more ingrained your program is into the culture of your company, the more likely it is to receive funding, support, and staffing bandwidth—and the more likely it is to successfully protect your people and business.

1. Connect with other departments and talk through their communication needs
2. Emphasize different use cases that departments might not think about (see page 13 for ideas)
3. Set up regular meetings with executives to report on communication efforts



"Gaining alignment from internal shareholders has been the most impactful component of implementing AlertMedia and raising awareness of our overall emergency communication program."

For example, shortly after going live, we learned that a department within IT was looking for a way to alert restaurants en masse of critical system outages. After some exploration with AlertMedia and internally, we are now supporting IT's efforts to alert locations of critical outages."



Josh Phillips

Head Senior Director of Safety and Asset Protection, Chipotle

Communication Template Library

Below you'll find sample communication templates you can adapt to a wide range of emergency scenarios (e.g., *adapt the power outage template to respond to an internet outage*). Leave room for details you can fill in quickly just before sending notifications.

Annual System Test

This is an annual test of [COMPANY]'s emergency alert software. Please confirm receipt to let us know your contact information is up to date.

Maintenance Issue

We are conducting maintenance on [EQUIPMENT/STRUCTURE] in [LOCATION]. Repairs will take place on [DATE] at [TIME] to help solve [ISSUE].

Power Outage

A power outage has occurred in [BUILDING NAME] at the [OFFICE NAME]. We are currently working on getting it resolved as soon as possible. Please contact [SAFETY COORDINATOR] with any additional information or questions.

Flood Warning

A flash flood warning is in effect for the [CITY] locations. We expect severe weather to continue throughout the [MORNING/EVENING]. [OFFICE] will remain open at this time. Please check your email for more information.

Fire

ALERT—There is a FIRE in [BUILDING NAME] at the [OFFICE LOCATION], evacuate if you are in the building. If you are not in the area, stay clear and remain in a safe area. This is NOT a drill!

Winter Weather

OFFICE CLOSED—A winter storm hit [LOCATION] on [DATE] at [TIME] and therefore we are closing [LOCATION]. Please avoid going outside but use caution if you must travel.

Active Shooter

An active shooter has been reported [DISTANCE] miles away from [LOCATION] at [TIME] on [DAY]. Law enforcement has been notified. Stay alert and refer to your building's emergency action plan. Be aware of your environment and possible dangers, take note of all possible exits, and secure yourself in a room or office.

Hurricane

HURRICANE [NAME] is approaching [LOCATION] and expected to hit at [TIME] on [DATE]. We will continue to monitor its progress and [LOCATION] will be [OPEN/CLOSED] on [DATE] until further notice.

Tornado

TORNADO reported [NUMBER] miles from [LOCATION] at [TIME] on [DATE]. Shelter in place and remain indoors until the storm has passed.

Communication Templates for Additional Scenarios

For more templates on specific emergency scenarios, click the links below and download multichannel templates for all the situations related to each critical event.

Facility / Security Templates

TEMPLATE TYPE	SCENARIOS COVERED	
Active Shooter Templates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Active Shooter TrainingShooter in Office BuildingShooter Near Employee Location	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Shooter in Town/CityShooter Neutralized/All ClearActive Shooter Update
Demonstration Templates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Anticipated DemonstrationsActive DemonstrationsAdjusted Business Hours	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Safety CheckLeadership Conference CallBusiness Travel
IT & Cybersecurity Templates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">General OutageOutage ResolvedPlanned DowntimeStatus Request	<ul style="list-style-type: none">System TestSecurity BreachLeadership Conference CallSecurity Reminders
Workplace Fire Templates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Fire DrillRoll CallAlternate Workplace Notice	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Workplace Fire ReportedOffice ClosureFire Contained/Clear

Severe Weather Templates

TEMPLATE TYPE	SCENARIOS COVERED	
Hurricane Templates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Hurricane PreparednessEmergency Alert TestStorm ApproachingEvacuation Order	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Office ClosureAll-Clear NotificationEmployee AssistancePost-Hurricane Wellness Survey
Winter Weather Templates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Winter Storm ApproachingChange to Business HoursOutdoor JobsProactive Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Power OutagesSchool ClosuresRoad ClosuresCommunity Illness
Wildfire Templates	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Wildfire in the AreaOffice ClosureOffer Assistance	<ul style="list-style-type: none">EvacuationWildfire Contained/All ClearPost-Wildfire Need Survey

Best Practices for Every Communication Channel



Ensure you are sending the correct information through the most effective delivery method.

Text Messages & WhatsApp

- Use for urgent and time-sensitive notifications
- Avoid notification fatigue
- Do not exceed 160 characters
- Provide links to additional resources



Mobile App Pushes

- Keep notifications short, around twenty words
- Allow for two-way communication with a survey or reply request



Emails

- Use for a wide range of emergencies
- Use for longer messages
- Include links to additional resources



Phone Calls

- Use for urgent, short, and simple notifications
- Use for contacts with landlines unable to receive SMS



Desktop Alert

- Keep notifications brief and link to additional resources
- Use in workplaces where cell phones and email are not readily accessible
- Choose full or partial screen takeover, banner ticker notifications, read confirmations, and surveys



Digital Signage

- Use in workplaces where phones and computers are not readily accessible
- Add visibility to urgent notifications sent via other channels
- Keep messages clear and concise



Event Pages

- Use alongside other channels to keep employees up to date
- Provide more details and resources than other channels can accommodate



Accessibility and Language Barriers – Account for employees' accessibility needs. If you have vision-impaired employees, plan to use phone calls and PA system alerts. If you have hearing-impaired staff, plan to use digital signage and text messages. If your company has employees or facilities in different countries or even a large employee base that does not speak the same language, account for accurate translation needs in your messaging so no critical information is lost.



Technology Solutions for Emergency Communication

When it comes to emergency communication, the right technology can be the difference between life and death. You need a system you can trust to quickly and reliably deliver critical information without having to stumble through a clunky, outdated interface. The following checklist will help you evaluate mass notification systems.

You need a system you'll actually use

You need a user-centric system you can trust when the stakes are high. Here's what to look for:

Simplicity – Easy to navigate during an emergency for both admins and recipients

Efficiency – Quick to send a notification and straightforward to onboard employees into the system

Reliability – Consistent so you can trust your message will reach the right people every time



You need a system with the right features

Simplicity, efficiency, and reliability are possible with robust features and capabilities. With your specific needs in mind, here are some options to consider:



Real-time location & geofencing

Notify only the employees within the impact zone of the emergency



Two-way communication

Receive responses and status updates following a notification



Multichannel delivery

Reach your employees through a variety of channels



Automated data integration

Pick a system that integrates with your HR system



Full-featured mobile app

Choose an app that makes it easy to send and receive messages



Integrated threat monitoring

Monitor threats and notify employees all from one interface



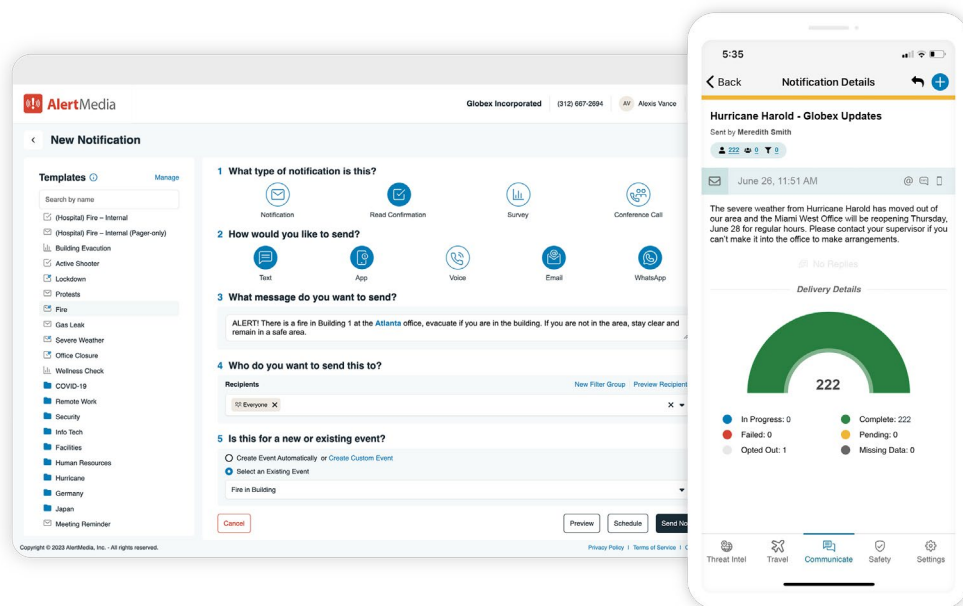
Dedicated customer support

Connect with a team that can help you 24/7



AlertMedia Supports All Your Emergency Communication Needs

Once you have a world-class emergency communication program, you want a world-class mass notification system that goes above and beyond. The AlertMedia platform helps you keep your employees safe, informed, and connected when it matters most. And with fully integrated threat intelligence and travel risk management, you'll be able to monitor, detect, and respond to threats wherever your employees are. [Schedule a demo](#) to learn why leading organizations around the world trust AlertMedia for their communication needs.



Leading organizations across all industries trust AlertMedia



LEARN HOW ALERTMEDIA CAN HELP YOU KEEP YOUR PEOPLE SAFE, INFORMED, AND CONNECTED DURING CRITICAL EVENTS.

sales@alertmedia.com // (800) 826-0777 // alertmedia.com

[SCHEDULE A DEMO](#)