Emergency Notification System Comparison Guide

+ **Discover everything you need to know about emergency notification systems**

+ **Learn how to identify which solution is right for your organization**

+ **See the features you need to have to protect your employees and organization**

Af | **AlertFind**

Table of contents

Emergency Notification Systems: Everything You Need To Know

01

What Is An Emergency Notification System?

An emergency notification system (ENS) is a platform used during an emergency to quickly spread messages to subscribed users. An ENS delivers messages via multiple various channels such as text, voice, email, etc.

When a crisis strikes, the most critical step an organization can take is to quickly alert any employees that may be affected. The quicker employees are able to respond, the greater their chance of avoiding injury and death.

What Can An Emergency Notification System Be Used For?

Emergencies can happen anywhere, at any time. And by their very nature, emergencies are unpredictable.

There is no telling how you will use your emergency notification system, just as there is no shortage of possible uses cases.

Depending on the size and location of your organization, you will face varying threats.

The most common threats for organizations today include:

+ **Active shooter events**

+ **Cyber threats and IT outages**

+ **Health and safety incidents**

> Pandemics, terrorist attacks, etc.

+ **Natural disasters**

> Earthquakes, hurricanes, tsunamis, etc.

+ **Weather-related incidents**

> Flood, snow, etc.

+ **Power outages**

+ **Facilities management incidents**

+ **Travel and office access disruption**

> Accidents, protests, etc.

The History Of Emergency Notification Systems

For as long as there have been emergencies, there have been emergency notification systems in one form or another. At the dawn of civilization, people used large bonfires as warning signals. Around the same time, wind instruments and drums served as the first primitive audible alarms.

In the middle ages, people turned to bells. Whether church bells or fire bells, they served as a means of warning an area's inhabitants of impending disasters and approaching enemies. As towns and cities grew, bells no longer sufficed. At the end of the 18th century, people turned to mechanical warning devices for the first time.

There were multiple iterations of the early-stage mechanical warning system, including devices that could respond to temperature change, tension or a specified amount of liquid. As the years passed and technology continued to advance, emergency notification systems matured and evolved.

The Modern Emergency Notification System

The first modern emergency notification system was engineered in the late 1980s. It was intended to be used in the highly regulated nuclear power industry; however, the value of such a tool was not overlooked and it quickly expanded to meet the emergency notification needs of countless public and private businesses.

The emergency notification industry reached its heyday in the early 2000s. Acts of global terrorism led to an increased emphasis on emergency preparedness, causing the demand for emergency notification systems to grow significantly. During this time, the ENS landscape was led by innovators who regularly introduced new and exciting features. However, the market quickly became oversaturated.

Providers began to focus on affordability, rather than functionality. They failed to keep pace with the ever-changing communication landscape. Most tools quickly fell behind, rendering themselves affordable, but ineffective.

Today there are countless "modern" emergency notification systems available. And, as the majority of platforms offer identical features at comparable prices, it can be extremely difficult to identify which provider is right for your organization.

In this comparison guide, we'll walk you through everything you need to know about emergency notification systems - comparing features, prices and deployment models across providers. We'll share what you should really be looking for in a system, and help you identify the tool that's right for you.

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Market Analysis:
Features, Deployment
And Pricing

02

Comparing Features Across Providers

When you begin to evaluate options, you will quickly discover how similar the feature sets are to one another.

Key features include

Multi-channel delivery

Each of your team members has their own preferred channel for communicating. While some may read their texts consistently throughout the day, others may ignore texts entirely while at work and only check their email. If your ENS only targets one or two communication channels, you risk missing a large portion of your employees.

Multi-channel delivery enables you to send notifications across numerous channels to increase the likelihood that your recipients see them. Channels include email, text, voice call, fax, mobile app push notifications, pages and more.

Multi-channel delivery also allows you to match the medium to the message. If you want to remind everyone about emergency protocol for a storm that's several days from making landfall, a lengthy email may be your best mode of communication. But if you find out at 6 a.m. that your office will be closed, a reminder on all channels, but most importantly SMS, is the best way to get the message out in time.

Two-way communication

In emergency situations, your message recipients are also often the eyes and ears at the scene of the

crisis. It is important that they have the ability to send messages and feedback to the system administrators to help both administrators and first responders better understand the situation. Additionally, two-way communication gives users the chance to request help and ask questions as needed.

Two-way communication features include read receipts, surveys, incoming messages, conference calls and "need help" requests.

Hotlines

In the midst of a chaotic situation, your employees may not be able to stop and take in messages as they are being sent. With a hotline, they can call the toll-free number whenever they are able and as often as they'd like to get the most critical and up-to-date information.

Hotlines create a centralized hub for communication in an emergency. Your employees can call into the system to listen to notifications, confirm receipt, respond to polls, join conference calls and more.

Conference bridges

Emergencies progress quickly, so the decision-makers in your organization need to be able to react just

as quickly. It is unlikely that all of your organization's critical leaders will be able to sit down together and discuss the situation in one location, but by joining a conference call they can still meet in real-time.

Conference bridges allow you to easily and quickly connect your organization's key personnel and speed up recovery time.

Geo-fencing

Many emergencies are regional events. In these instances you'll want to target users based on their location in order to only alert those that may be affected, rather than sending a disruptive, company-wide blast. Geo-fencing, or geo-targeting, is particularly useful during a natural disaster, chemical or hazardous spill, riot, protest, bomb threat, active shooter, traffic delay, etc.

Geo-fencing enables you to draw a virtual fence around any specific area of your choosing and send notifications to subscribed users within that fenced area.

Mobile apps

In many emergency situations computers will not be a viable option as they may be out-of-reach, experiencing an outage or on a compromised network. Both you and your employees need mobile access to your emergency notification system to send and receive alerts on-the-go.

Mobile apps with an easy-to-use interface bring both administrators and subscribed users incredible power right to their smartphone through in-app check-ins, push notifications, mobile messaging and more.

Reporting and analytics

Emergency notification systems are a large invest-

ment and as such should provide reporting metrics. You should be able to gauge the effectiveness of your ENS, verify that it is fulfilling its intended purpose and gain insights into how your organization responds to an emergency. Are your messages reaching the right people? How are your employees reacting to the notifications they receive?

Reporting and analytics will often include message delivery statistics, survey results, delivery performance by channel, usage statistics, progress tracking and more.

Global coverage

To succeed in today's global economy, more and more companies are relying on a geographically dispersed workforce. It is critical that your emergency notification system has the ability to send and receive messages around the world.

Global coverage allows you to keep your team members up-to-date no matter where they are, ensuring a safe and unified workforce.

Multiple administrators

An emergency situation is full of uncertainty. You can never fully predict where and when a crisis will strike, or who it will affect. That is why it is important to set your emergency notification system up with multiple administrators, and train each one to properly use it. This enables another team member to quickly step up and fill in if your emergency preparedness manager is in someway incapacitated and unable to send alerts.

Multiple administrators ensures that critical alerts make it to your employees, no matter the situation.

They also allow you to control the flow of information. You can grant each administrator a different level

of access, whether by specific locations or roles. With this level of configuration you can assign an admin for each office, without giving them company-wide reach.

Pre-built messages

The best thing you can do for your emergency preparedness is plan ahead. This is particularly true when it comes to your emergency alerts. The faster you can get relevant information to your employees, the better their chances of avoiding harm. By pre-planning your messages, you save valuable time during a crisis and guarantee that the important information is included each time, minimizing confusion for recipients.
Pre-built messages can be sent with one-click should an emergency strike. They should include updates on the situation and next steps the recipients should take.

Recipient groups

Not every employee needs to be alerted in every situation. Furthermore, the amount of information given to employees may vary depending on their role. To accommodate this, you need to build multiple recipient groups within your emergency notification system. This ensures that only the right people receive your messages, and prevents unnecessary messages cluttering up the system.

Recipient groups allow you to control the conversation and manage who has access to your information.

Notification hierarchy

A successful emergency response will often depend on key team members taking action. The implementation of notification hierarchy allows you to repeatedly remind those employees until you receive confirmation that the message has been received and acted upon.

Notification hierarchy with escalating methods of messaging ensure that every team member gets their notifications and responds in the appropriate fashion.

While multi-channel delivery, geo-fencing, mobile apps, etc. are all great features - virtually every ENS has them.

Many providers will tout them as special or unique, but the truth is that **these features come standard and they are not reason enough to choose any particular ENS over another.**

Comparing Deployment Across Providers

When you begin to evaluate options, you will learn that more than 95% of emergency notification systems are implemented through the cloud.

In many types of crises, traditional lines of communication will fail. On-site data centers frequently go down or are infiltrated by hackers and public telecommunication lines are easily damaged. A cloud-based solution is the best way to ensure continued communications. This service delivery model prevents the emergency notification system from going down, no matter what is happening on-site at your organization.

Comparing Pricing Across Providers

When you begin to evaluate options, you will encounter two standard pricing models.

The first pricing model is based on the number of users. With this option, you often get an unlimited number of messages, and you pay for each subscribed user.

The second pricing model is based on the number of messages. With this option, you often get an unlimited number of subscribed users, and you pay for each message sent.

As you start gathering price quotes, you will see that costs are pretty similar across the board. No matter which pricing model you pick, you are going to end up paying about the same thing in the long run.

So, contrary to popular belief, price **should not** be the deciding factor when choosing an ENS.

So How Do The Industry's Top Providers Compare?

Let's look at the key features:

	AlertFind	Send Word Now	Everbridge	xMatters	AlertMedia
Multi-channel	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Geo-fencing	✔	✔	✔	Unknown	✔
Two-way notification	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Global coverage	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Control center	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Advanced reporting	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Hotline	✔	Unknown	✔	✔	✔
API library	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Mobile app	✔	✔	✔	✔	✔
Conference bridge	✔	Unknown	✔	✔	✔
100% Database Accuracy	✔	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown	Unknown
SOC 1 and SOC 2 certified	✔	Unknown	✔	Unknown	Unknown
GDPR compliant	✔	Unknown	✔	Unknown	✔
24-hour support	✔	✔	✔	✔	Unknown

What Really Matters?

Three Features That Define An ENS

03

Contact Database

The most important component of your emergency notification system is your contact database. If you don't have up-to-date contact information for every single employee, you can't help them in an emergency. Period.

Most organizations admit to having less than 40% of their employees' contact information. This huge flaw is due to the 99% of emergency notification systems using an outdated data collection method. They rely on employees to feed their own contact information into the system as well as update their information when it is needed. Unfortunately, the vast majority of employees fail to do this; effectively making the ENS useless.

True state-of-the-art emergency notification systems utilize a "pull" data collection method. Rather than relying on employees to do the work, they automate it. By using API connectors, artificial intelligence, machine learning and data science, it keeps the contact database 100% up-to-date, 100% of the time.

When shopping for an ENS, it's important to choose a truly modern system that will keep your contact database fully up-to-date.

Security & Reliability

Your ENS will store personal user data and sensitive messages so ample security is a must-have. While all emergency notification system providers will advertise their security as being "enterprise-level," many do not actually have the necessary protections in place.

When choosing an ENS, look for a provider that has the certifications to back up their security claims. The ideal provider will be both SOC 1 and SOC 2 certified, demonstrating that it meets strict standards for securi-

ty, availability, processing integrity, confidentiality and privacy.

A top-level provider will also comply with the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). While this is most important for global organizations, the rigorous data protection will benefit businesses of any size.

In addition to security, the reliability of your ENS also needs to be backed by more than just words. Look for a provider that offers service level agreements which specify that 100% uptime is guaranteed. An SLA is the only way you can be sure your ENS will always be functioning when you need it.

Choosing an ENS with these contracts and certifications is the easiest way to ensure your organization's people and data are safe.

Customer Service & Support

While you want to choose an ENS with best-in-class technology, technology alone is never enough. To truly be the best, an emergency notification system must pair top technology with superior customer service.

When considering the strength of a provider's customer support, look for three key components - 24/7 availability, deep technical experience and a proactive support plan.

24/7 customer support is critical as emergencies can happen at any time. If the support is not available when you need it, it doesn't do you any good.

Next, make sure that the support team is made up of experienced specialists, not simply customer service representatives. You need to be able to talk to people that can really help resolve any issues that arise.

Finally, talk with any prospective ENS providers about their support plan. You want to choose an ENS that will assign a dedicated customer success manager to your organization. This dedicated specialist should

proactively monitor your ENS to identify and address small issues before they become serious problems.

When shopping for an ENS, make sure to give customer service considerable weight in your decision-making process. The day will come when you do need support, and you'll be glad you made it a priority.
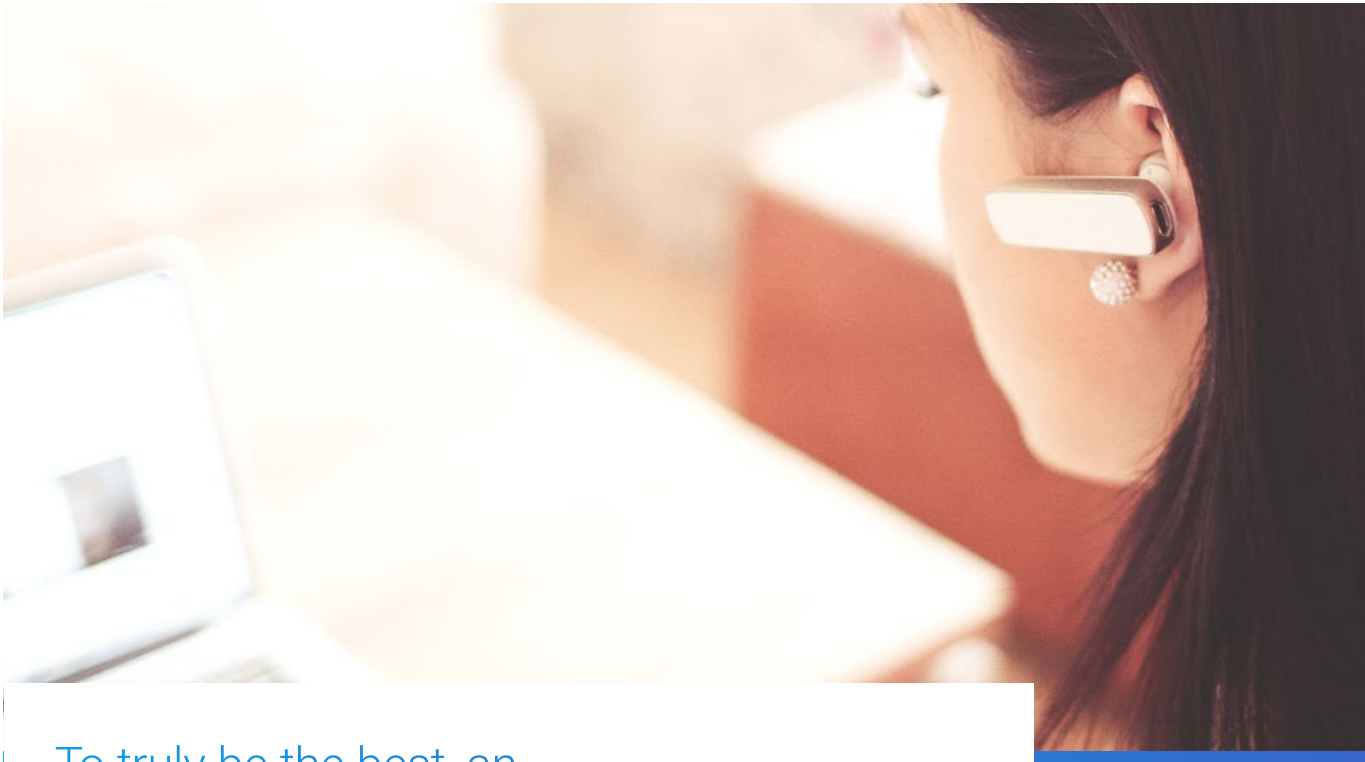
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Is An ENS Right For Me?

Deciding Factors

04

Who Needs An Emergency Notification System?

Emergency notification systems are ideal for any organization, big or small, that needs a uniformed communication platform.

An ENS is ideal for businesses, healthcare facilities, schools, nonprofits, hospitals, churches, member organizations and more.

Are You Ready To Get Started?

As you're comparing ENS providers, use the grid below to take notes and see how all the different companies stack up.

	AlertFind	Provider 2	Provider 3	Provider 4
Key Features	SmartContact updates your contact list effortlessly; 24-7 support and SOC 1, SOC 2 and GDPR certified			
Benefits	Library of API connectors for easy integration			
Gaps	We'll work with you to address any industry- or company-specific needs			
Pricing	Three tiers make pricing affordable for any size organization			
Notes	Ready to see AlertFind in action? Get a Demo			

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Give your organization an easy-to-use, multi-channel platform for emergency communications

Get started with AlertFind today.

Get A Demo