Case Study: California State University San Marcos

Location: San Marcos, CA
Campus Type: suburban
Enrollment: 13,000
Faculty/Staff: 1,900
Campus Size: 340 acres
Number of buildings: 20

In 2014, California State University San Marcos handled two emergency situations—a wildfire that resulted in a campus evacuation and a possible gunman threat that led to a campus-wide lockdown. Both events required immediate action and the ability to dispatch an emergency alert to all faculty, staff, and students to evacuate and lockdown the campus respectively.

Challenge

California State University San Marcos needed an emergency notification system to replace its antiquated system. The university required a system that could expand functionality and easily integrate with its existing process for sending our text, email, and phone alerts. Finding a system that could integrate with the university's door locking system was also key to ensure an immediate campus lockdown in the event of an emergency. Also constantly plagued by the threat of wildfires, the university needed a comprehensive, unified facility notification system that could alert faculty, staff, and students immediately during a campus evacuation.

Robert Williams, emergency manager at California State University San Marcos, discusses the university's unique challenge and solution.

Integrated Emergency Notification System

After taking over as emergency manager, one of the first things I did was complete a campus-wide test of our old notification system Visiplex, which integrated our campus speaker, door lock, and MIR3 systems. It didn't do well. All we got was white noise every time we tried our campus-wide speaker system, and the door locks worked intermittently. The Visiplex system was old and antiquated; it did not meet our growing needs.

Working with our campus IT team, we started exploring possible changes to our mass notification system. It was going to be a huge cost for a company to come in and do it all for us, so we made the decision to take on this project in house. During our research we came across Alertus at a conference. We knew we needed to get new speakers, and we knew we wanted to do something different in the way of getting the message out to computers, so Alertus Desktop Notification was perfect. We wanted something that would integrate with our digital signage, door lock system, desktop alerts, and interface with MIR3 to send out text, email, and phone calls.

After months of research and working closely with Alertus technical staff, we were confident that we had found our solution. We bought loudspeakers from an integrator, and we tied those in to an Alert Beacon and text-to-speech module. We now have three speaker banks throughout the campus, desktop alert, digital signage, door locks, a campus phone system, and MIR3 (email, phone, and text) tied together under one solution.

San Marcos Wildfires, Campus Evacuation

Out here in California we have these winds called Santa Anas. They're really hot, dry winds that come off the desert and blow toward the coast. And when those come in, you get 3% humidity, temperatures around 100 degrees, and potential 50–60mph winds. So when you get a spark that starts a wildfire, it can spread miles in a matter of minutes.

We had been watching the news all afternoon because there were wildfires popping up all over the county. We have a huge hillside on the backside of our campus, just brush, so we were mindful that that could go up in flames very easily. We had a wildfire spark up in a residential area behind the university. San Marcos Fire was able to respond quickly and put it out, but shortly after that call we started receiving calls of smoke coming from the backside of the campus. Sure enough, that hillside was on fire; you could see the flames start coming over the hill. After assessing the situation, our chief of police ordered a campus evacuation. We launched a full emergency alert and started evacuating the campus. Some of the areas around us were also being evacuated, so roads around us were totally impacted; it took us about an hour to get everyone off campus. The entire hillside was torched, and the campus was closed for a week.

Possible Gunman Threat, Campus Lockdown

Our dispatch center received a call that there was a man on campus with a weapon. Officers were dispatched to campus and started searching the last location of where the person was reported. The decision was made to lockdown the campus, and the emergency notification was sent to the campus using our emergency alert button in dispatch. When we installed our new emergency notification system we wanted a system that could be easily deployed in case of emergency. One of the functions of that was to install an emergency alert button for active shooter situations. One push of the button and all of our emergency alert devices activate. All the emergency alerting components happened very quickly. The speakers fired off and started relaying the message, the doors locked down, the desktop alert, and phones went off, the digital signage is going, and the system activated MIR3, which began sending messages out via call, text, and email.

Officers were unable to locate the subject. So we sent out the first alert to lockdown the campus—lockdown and shelter in place. The second alert went out about 8 minutes after that— remain locked down, law enforcement is on campus, and a subject description. About 10 minutes after that we sent out another alert—remain locked down, law enforcement entering last known area where subject was seen. Within the next 20 minutes or so, we sent an all clear

notification. [The potential gunman was a employee of the university and was carrying a long umbrella that someone mistook for a rifle.]

The Importance of Timely, Immediate Notification

People were saying that while they were locked down, it was nice to continue receiving timely updates. Depending on where they were in lockdown, some said they had access to digital signage, some desktop alerts, some could hear the phone notifications, and most were getting the information via their cell phones (call, text, and email). It was extremely beneficial to have so many options for getting information out to our campus community. Since the event we have received a lot of good feedback about the accurate and timely information they were getting.

With our old system we had to go into Visiplex, type up the message and send it, go into MIR3, type up the message and send it. So you're talking about a lot of different steps—at least 3–4 minutes of work just to send the message out versus 3 seconds to push that panic button. Now in an active shooter situation you're talking about the difference between people getting notified in a matter of 20 seconds or less versus 4 minutes when, according to statistics, most active shooter incidents are over in 12 minutes.

Alertus Technologies

Alertus Technologies® leads the industry in unified facility notification. For more than a decade, Alertus has engineered innovative emergency alert systems for colleges and universities, K–12 schools, corporations, medical centers, military bases, and government organizations—some of our customers include Virginia Commonwealth University, Boston University Medical Campus, and the US Department of Defense. The Alertus system is a customizable array of emergency notification products, including the wall-mounted Alert Beacon®, computer desktop alerting, USB panic button, LED marquee display, text-to-speech interface for public address and giant outdoor speaker systems, fire alarm interface, VoIP phone alerting, and digital signage and cable television override.