



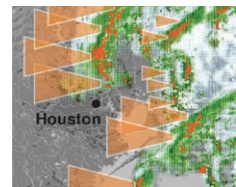
## Mass Notification Buyer's Guide

**This Buyer's Guide is intended to help you to ask the right questions about prospective MNS vendors to ensure you select the provider that is best for you and your community.**

### Use This Guide To:

- › Explore the state of the industry
- › Understand required technology and redundancy
- › Set your own expectations of service
- › Hone your data management expertise
- › Make the process of selecting a vendor easier
- › Learn the important questions to ask your potential MNS providers

There are a wide variety of mass notification service (MNS) providers out there, many of them claiming to be the best, or able to do everything you need. To inform your purchase decision, it is critical to do your due diligence when selecting a service that will be used during urgent and emergency situations. No one can predict what the next emergency event might be or when it will happen. That is why choosing a mass notification service with proven speed, capacity, reliability, and experience is not a luxury, but a requirement.



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## Introduction

The rise of notification technology has coincided with an increase in citizen demands for transparent communications from their leaders. Residents expect immediate and accurate information about the events and issues that affect their community. Did you know 86 percent of residents feel more connected with their community when receiving regular non-emergency messages from their community leaders?<sup>1</sup> Mass notification is about more than just emergencies. Your chosen MNS should provide tools to help you better lead and engage.

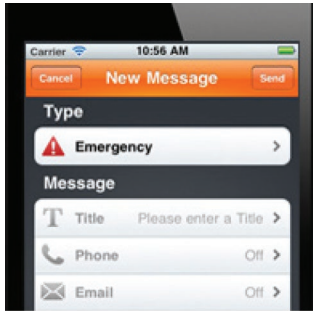
**Ask yourself:** Can I quickly, easily and confidently keep my entire community informed? Whether you are considering an upgrade to a legacy system or searching for your first solution, carefully review prospective vendors' claims regarding performance in the key categories below. If they cannot provide verifiable evidence of performance that meets your organization's requirements, look for others that can.



### Key MNS Criteria:

- › Speed, Capacity and Reliability
- › Data Management and Security
- › Implementation and Launch
- › Ease of Use
- › Customer Service and Support
- › Automated Weather Alerts





## Speed, Capacity and Reliability

Many MNS vendors claim “superior” or “leading” messaging capacity. Make them prove it. What happens if you send message and it doesn’t reach recipients for an hour or more?

In an article for Emergency Management magazine, Rick Wimberly, President of Galain Solutions, recommends organizations ask themselves, “Can the solution handle my load?” The ability to answer ‘yes’ rests in a system’s speed and reliability.

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### Three main factors affect the speed and reliability of a mass notification system and deserve careful consideration:

#### 1 | CAPACITY

Timeliness is a key factor of successful message delivery. In order for a rapid notification system to deliver messages in a timely manner, system capacity and call speed must be at optimal levels. For purposes of comparison, a locally hosted, hardware-based auto-dialer can take hours to deliver a message to just a few thousand recipients. If power is unavailable, such systems may fail to function at all. Particularly in urgent situations, today’s citizens and employees expect prompt notification, which cannot be provided by legacy technology. The status quo is insufficient. Ideally, a mass notification system should have sufficient capacity and speed to deliver millions of voice and email messages per hour.

#### 2 | MESSAGE DELIVERY OPTIONS

No community can rely on just one channel to communicate important information. Local government entities must deploy a multi-channel approach to ensure the broadest and most timely dissemination and receipt of information when it matters most. An ideal mass notification system should support many channels—voice (both landline and mobile phone), email, text messages, as well as social media and other devices—through one single system.

The growing importance of social media channels should not be underestimated. Residents are increasingly abandoning landlines in favor of relying on their mobile devices and social media tools to stay in touch and informed.

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### 3 | REDUNDANCY

To be most effective, a mass notification service must be available at all times.

The following are critical factors that make up a successful, redundant backup system:



**Multiple Data Centers:** In order to provide uninterrupted data access, a reliable notification system should distribute its data across multiple data centers. Within these data centers, applications and data should be housed across redundant load-balanced servers, with redundant backup systems, network firewalls and Internet uplinks. Likewise, all personal contact data should be stored and transmitted at 128-bit Secure Socket Layer (SSL) encryption, to minimize the possibility of security breaches.

**Multiple Network Providers:** To keep voice and data messages flowing, a redundant system of telecommunication and Internet service providers is necessary. Avoiding single points of failure is imperative; in crisis situations, one facility or network could be impaired, and the ability to re-route message traffic is vital. MNS providers that rely only on their own facilities are particularly at risk. Instead, the best practice for MNS companies is to use multiple outside vendors for voice and data transmission, ensuring redundancy and uninterrupted message delivery, even in the event of a significant service interruption to one or more providers.

**Network Monitoring:** Even with sufficient capacity and redundancy, network traffic on the country's long-distance, wireless and local switch networks can impede important messages. The best MNS providers employ sophisticated algorithms to analyze network congestion at regional and national levels to maximize delivery speed and reliability at every given point of each message delivery.

**Throttling and Load Balancing:** Large numbers of alert notifications can overwhelm local telephone switches. MNS providers need to manage message delivery in urgent situations with message routing, throttling and load balancing expertise. It's also important to blend message delivery via standard telephone lines and VoIP to help disperse the load placed upon all of the various pipelines available.

These steps maximize speed of delivery in the face of extreme traffic at either the local or national level.

**Continuous Business Continuity Planning:** MNS providers should routinely evaluate and practice business continuity plans to ensure their teams are capable of responding quickly and maintaining operability in the unlikely event of an outage or other disruption.



## Data Management and Security

Residents expect immediate and accurate information about the events and issues that affect their community. As local governments seek to be more transparent, they must also utilize innovative means to collect citizen data while also carefully assessing their methods for protecting sensitive citizen information.

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### Data Management

A government's ability to effectively communicate with its constituents largely depends on the quality of citizen data. There are a number of data sources available, each with their strengths and weaknesses.

#### E911 Data

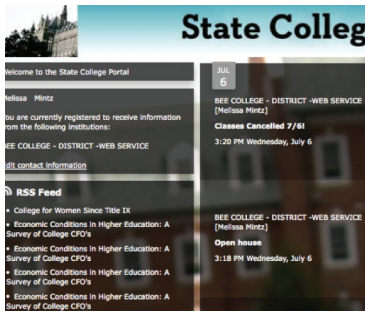
Telephone companies such as AT&T and Verizon provide E911 data, which provide the phone number and address for residents and businesses in a given county, city or municipality. This is an effective means of collecting a large amount of your community's data. However, by law, this data can only be used in emergencies. This information is also limited to landline phones and ignores the growing preference for mobile phones as a primary contact option among residents. If using E911 data, it should be updated monthly to account for household status changes.

#### Employee Data

Mass notification is an effective tool for communicating workplace updates, facility closings, event changes and overtime announcements. Most organizations maintain employee data in some sort of human resources database or information system. A mass notification vendor must be able to support the quick and easy importing - and continuous updating - of employee information for your internal communication needs.

#### Citizen-Provided Data

Ideally a government collects and maintains data provided directly from its citizenry. As more and more families opt to rely upon cell phones, collecting and maintaining up-to-date resident-provided data is critical for successful communications. Mass notification providers should help you meet that goal by including custom community portals with their service offering. Look for a community portals that can be customized to reflect the branding of your existing website. You will find some vendors direct your citizens to their own websites to register on a portal with the branding of the vendor itself.



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## A mass notification vendor should be your partner and help you better connect with your constituent community by providing you your own portal.

Residents and businesses are more likely to offer you contact data if you can ensure they will only receive messages that are relevant to them. To this end, make sure the vendor you choose allows residents to subscribe to portal groups that empower registrants to select the types of messages they wish to receive, e.g. Road Closures, Police Updates or Parks and Recreation notifications. Within your custom portal and portal groups, registrants should also be able to set their explicit communications preferences. For example, an individual can specify that he wants to receive Road Closure updates via telephone, email and text message, but only receive text messages regarding Parks and Rec related announcements.

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### Custom Data

A community may maintain separate lists of citizen data for various reasons. Local volunteers, community leaders, and SWAT teams are a few good examples. A vendor must provide an easy-to-use interface for data file imports whenever needed. A system should enable the creation of individual contacts on an ad hoc basis as well. Finally, explore how each vendor allows for the creation of custom groups because the more targeted and relevant your messages, the more effective your communications strategy will likely be. The more accurate and up-to-date your data, the better you can communicate. Evaluate the abilities of any vendor by asking for demonstrations of the above capabilities.

### Data Security

Disclosure of contact data through a breach can have a long-term negative impact, for both impacted citizens and government agencies. The immediate consequences can be costly and time-consuming

to repair – and the harm to your reputation as an agency may be irreparable. Worse, a data breach can ultimately result in diminished communications effectiveness for your institution, as participants lose faith in the system itself.

Several factors affect the ability of a mass notification system to protect citizen contact data and deserve careful consideration when reviewing your security measures. These include physical data sites, data transmission, application security, backup policies, audits, and personnel. By asking the right questions, municipalities can determine which mass notification system offers the highest level of personal data protection.

To ensure confidence in an MNS vendor's security posture, regular third-party audits of the provider's data infrastructure and security practices, including personnel training and screening. Reputable providers conduct annual audits and provide the results of those surveys to prospective clients.



## Implementation and Launch

The top priority of a mass notification service is to support your safety and security communication needs. After selecting a provider, you should expect your service to be operational within 30 days. When implementing, two things must be executed quickly: data imports and training. Within a couple of days of signing a contract with a new vendor, expect your data to be loaded into its database. Even if you are not trained to send messages yourself immediately, the vendor's customer support team should be able to help you initiate an urgent message. In effect, you should be able to broadcast time-sensitive information to your community within 48 hours of signing with your vendor.

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Prior to officially launching the system in your community, your users will be trained, again within 30 days of final selection. Given the importance of effective communication, introductory seminars should be offered in person and/or via web conference to best meet the training needs of your users. Training is not a one-time occurrence. Expect regular or as-needed sessions from your provider to ensure your users are always ready to send messages when it matters most.

Carefully plan the launch of a new service in your community. Citizens will want to know about the new system that will be contacting them and about their new, custom portal where each registrant can set communication preferences. Use a vendor's professional public relations team to successfully introduce your mass notification service to your community. Consider press releases and announcements in newspapers, bus stop ads and local news stories to get the message out. Provide obvious links to your registration portal on your public web sites as well. Selecting a mass notification provider often represents a major shift in local communications strategy. You should expect a vendor to have experience assisting clients with successful launch campaigns.



## Ease of Use

For mass notification services, a quality experience for users is a vital matter of safety and security. If a service is not easy to use, and if it does not offer round-the-clock support, then you cannot truly rely upon it in a crisis. Ease of use is a critical, yet often overlooked factor when selecting a notification service. A simple user experience means urgent messages are sent more quickly.

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An intuitive web interface will provide a single-screen message workflow that mimics the navigation of frequently used web properties such as email or web browsers. A vendor should enable your users to pre-set message scenario templates so messages can be sent in as little as three clicks.

In addition to a standard, easy to use web interface, does the vendor offer other means of sending a message? Strongly consider services that offer free smartphone applications and a toll-free dial-in numbers with which to send messages – just in case users can't be at their desk or computer. By selecting a system that is easy to use, you will spend less time training staff and can pay more attention to the content and audience for your message rather than the process of sending it.







## Customer Service & Support

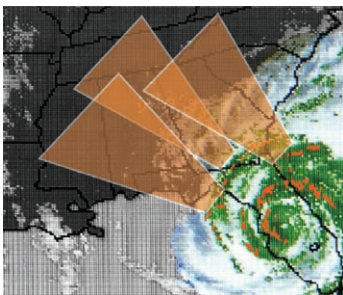
While the technology and infrastructure offered by potential MNS providers are critical, customer support cannot be overlooked. Given the nature and importance of alert and notifications to public safety, mass notification provider customer support must exceed the standard of general technical support. In an urgent situation, you need a partner in communications, someone who knows your challenges and needs, and a team of people with the experience and expertise to help you when it matters most.



## Follow Up & Maintenance

The relationship with a mass notification provider just begins at service launch. Quality customer service providers will assign you a dedicated client manager. This person should serve as your primary point of contact with the chosen vendor and offer proactive support - delivering informational updates about product enhancements, government-specific communications expertise, sharing best practices and message creation coaching and personal attention. You can and should expect a dedicated commitment from your mass notification provider, no matter how large or small your community may be.

The most widely distributed messages sent to constituents are done so during urgent, time-sensitive situations. Year-round, 24/7 support is critical for you and your users. Whether you simply need help remembering how to create a custom group or need immediate support creating and sending a message in an emergency, your support team should always be available. To ensure support redundancy, mass notifications vendors must house multiple support center locations and have support available in your local time zone.



## Automated Weather Alerts

Made evident everyday, severe weather is occurring more frequently around the globe. Given erratic weather patterns and its human and economic impacts, emergency managers and city leadership need a tool to keep their communities safer and better informed.

Systems, such as tornado sirens require manual intervention and are not sufficiently effective at reaching citizens already at home, indoors or out of system range. A mass notification service can help eliminate slower, manual processes of informing your community about dangerous weather with geographically

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targeted, automated weather alerts. The National Weather Service/NOAA continuously posts weather notices, and an MNS vendor can save critical time for emergency and city/county managers who have historically scanned those weather advisories in order to warn citizens about impending danger.

While concerns regarding over-communication can be valid, there are several steps leadership can take to ensure their messages remain relevant and are acknowledged. First, they should select notification tools that allow residents and businesses to sign up for specific types of messages, including individual weather alerts. Second, with voice communication becoming just one of many modes citizen’s use these days, options should be provided so that they can choose the modes most appropriate for themselves such as, text, email or social networks. An MNS vendor should provide sufficient flexibility to afford citizens the option to have tornado warnings delivered to their home or cell phones, as well as any other devices they typically communicate

with. In an emergency situation, the best safety precaution is to notify recipients in each way they are mostly likely to respond to.

If you are responsible for a large or geographically disparate community it’s important to select an MNS vendor that offers geographically targeted weather alerts. Less specific weather alert services may only address county-level alerts (using FIPS codes), resulting in warnings that are less accurate and meaningful to citizens.. When selecting an MNS vendor, confirm that their weather alerts are delivered within specific latitude and longitude coordinates so that only those most likely to be impacted by impending weather will be notified. If community members can choose which weather alerts they wish to receive on which device, or mode they prefer – receiving only those messages which directly impact them, then government leaders can remain confident that other targeted messages will continue to inform and not overwhelm community members.

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## Conclusion

Choosing a mass notification service is an important decision requiring considerable due diligence. Remember the old saying, “you get what you pay for,” because while price is an important factor in any buying decision, Speed, Capacity and Reliability; Data Management and Security; Customer Service and Support; and Ease of Use are critical factors when choosing your mass notification provider. You should be able to confidently respond to the question, “can you quickly, reliably, and easily deliver time-sensitive information to your community?” When that answer is “yes”, you’ll know that you’ve selected the best MNS partner for you and your community.



**86% of residents feel more connected with their community when receiving regular non-emergency messages from their community leaders<sup>2</sup>**

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There are a number of service providers available to local governments, but the one you settle on should be able to answer the following questions to your complete satisfaction:

### Speed, Reliability, Capacity and Experience

- › How many calls, emails and text messages can you send in an hour?
- › How much of that capacity is in use on a typical day?
- › What's the largest single message by volume ever sent?
- › How many messages has the MNS vendor sent in one day?
- › How many messages did the MNS vendor send in the last year?
- › Does the MNS vendor have redundant servers?
- › Does the MNS vendor own all of its phone lines?
- › Can the MNS vendor's system support multiple delivery options – phone, email, text message, and social media?
- › How does the MNS vendor monitor telecom network traffic and response to spikes?
- › Can the MNS vendor throttle calls dynamically to avoid bottlenecks at the local telco infrastructure?
- › What is the MNS vendor's backup plan in the event of an outage?
- › Including scheduled maintenance, what was the MNS vendor's service uptime last year?

### Data Management and Security

- › Can the MNS vendor import E911 data on regular basis – monthly, quarterly, yearly?
- › How does the MNS vendor verify the data accuracy?
- › What protocols are followed for reviewing rejections?
- › How can the geocoding of E911 data be validated?
- › Can employee data be regularly and automatically updated?
- › Does the system support the creation of custom employee groups?
- › Can the system support multiple phone numbers and email addresses for each employee record?
- › Can the MNS vendor provide a community portal for our residents to provide their own data including mobile phone numbers and street addresses?
- › Can the portal be customized to reflect the look and feel of other community outlets like our website, Twitter or Facebook page?
- › Can the MNS vendor provide multiple custom portals, one each for residents, businesses and employees?
- › Does the portal allow for display of community RSS feeds?
- › Can registrants subscribe to custom portal groups?
- › Can registrants set their communication preferences by message theme, e.g. only receive text messages from Parks and Recreation?
- › After registration, who owns the data – the vendor or the community?
- › Will that data remain protected from re-sale and/or misuse?
- › Can the MNS vendor import custom groups and contacts easily?
- › Can individual contacts be created at the point of need?
- › Does the system allow for the creation of custom groups?
- › What measures does the MNS vendor implement to support physical data security?

**A simple user experience means urgent messages are sent more quickly.**

- › How does the MNS vendor secure transmission for all data transferred to and from clients' sites?
- › Does the vendor use 128-bit SSL encryption for data – both at rest and in transit?
- › How does the MNS vendor ensure application access remains secure?
- › What are the MNS vendor's backup policies?
- › What risk assessment tools and process does the MNS vendor have in place?
- › What types of qualifications and certifications do the MNS vendor's security personnel hold?

### Implementation and Launch

- › How long does a usual implementation take?
- › How long before we can an initial message to our constituents?
- › What is the MNS vendor's training process like?
- › Are trainings offered onsite and via the Internet?
- › Does the MNS vendor offer professional PR support for launch campaigns or press releases?

### Ease of Use

- › Is the MNS vendor's message workflow on one screen?
- › How many steps or clicks are required to send a message?
- › Does the MNS vendor have free smartphone applications for users to send messages?
- › Can a message be initiated simply by dialing a toll-free phone number?

### CustomerCare and Support

- › Does the MNS vendor offer ongoing training options after initial implementation and launch?
- › Will we receive a dedicated client manager with experience in government communications practices?
- › How many support team members does the MNS vendor employ?
- › Does the MNS vendor have multiple support centers in each time zone?
- › Does the MNS vendor offer 24/7 user support by phone and email?
- › Can the MNS vendor's support staff initiate a message for me upon request?
- › Does the MNS vendor outsource user support?

### Automated Weather Alerts

- › Does the MNS vendor offer automated weather alerts?
- › How many weather alerts are offered? What are they?
- › Can the vendor's weather alerts be sent to different communication modes?
- › Does the MNS vendor allow citizens to sign up for specific alerts?
- › Does the MNS vendor allow each citizen to indicate which phone numbers, email addresses, or text message addresses to send messages?
- › Are the weather alerts geographically targeted – by FIPS code or via latitude and longitude coordinates?

### Vendor Stability and Experience

- › How long has the MNS vendor been in business?
- › Who are some of the vendor's clients?

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support is  
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