



Using Social Networking Technology for Public Safety Notifications

Introduction

In recent months, there have been several local and national news articles regarding public safety agencies attempting to adapt existing social networking sites (Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, etc) to be used as public safety notification portals for citizens. There is also free social networking technology now being offered that utilizes a specific public safety front end to adapt to an existing social networking infrastructure on the backend. While each application is unique in its design and function, they all operate on the same basic principle of sending information to subscribers in a "community" via a "community-based" email/SMS process. As a result of the recent media coverage, we have been asked by several users if we intend to add this type of technology to our products.

While social networking technology is very useful and efficient for "socializing", we do not see it as an effective method of distributing critical public safety information. We have listed several points below to consider when determining the approach your agency will take regarding public safety notification. The items below are not intended to be critical of all social networking applications as a whole, but rather to present specific items of concern to allow law enforcement executives to make the best choice regarding citizen notification.

Thank you again for being a Citizen Notification Service customer. We hope you will continue to put your trust in us to provide this important service to your community.

Citizen Registration

The process for registration on some social networking sites is often cumbersome and overly complicated. If a citizen has a desire to register to receive information about public safety events in their area, they are often quickly frustrated by the steps necessary to establish a social network profile. The typical site will ask the citizen questions related to their sex, age, hobbies and occupation. Several go as far as to include choices such as "married", "single" or even "straight", "gay" or "bi-sexual". The nature of questions (particularly those related to the school you attend and your dating status) serve as reminder that these sites are primarily geared toward teenagers and college students.

Demographics

Several years ago, Citizen Notification Service conducted an online survey and found that most people who register for notifications are female, married and between the ages of 35 and 55. This demographic group would not be expected to be comfortable establishing accounts on many social networking sites, which results in very few citizen registrations being completed.

As an example, a major city in the Southwest with a population of over 250,000 recently created three accounts on three separate social networking sites to be used for citizen notification. The sites were Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. After several weeks, a total of less than 100 citizens have registered on all three sites COMBINED. Also, under this model, the city will now need to post information on three separate sites, and after doing so only very few citizens would actually receive the notification. Obviously, this is an extremely ineffective method to communicate information.

In comparison, it is interesting to note that that same city currently has over 9,000 households registered on CrimeWeb to receive information, even though they are not a subscribing agency. This is largely attributable to the straightforward registration process and singular purpose of the site.

Distribution Priority

All notifications entered into CrimeWeb.Net or any products offered by Citizen Notification Service are immediately distributed via our dedicated servers using our proprietary email system. Our email servers independently check for new notifications placed in our "pick-up" directory every three seconds. When emails are placed in the directory, the email system divides the emails equally among our server farm and begins "pumping out" the emails immediately.

Our system is monitored by on-site personnel 24 hours a day/seven days a week and any server failure is immediately reported to an on-site Network Operations Center staff who work to rectify the problem. In comparison, anyone who uses a public social networking site has no doubt experience the frequent "we are currently performing system updates" messages that appear.

Our products are built and maintained for the purpose of citizen notification. Social networking sites are built for the purpose of allowing social interaction, primarily between teenagers and young adults. The emphasis on keeping the system online and available to users is not as urgent for social networking administrators as it is for Citizen Notification Service.

The basic question when considering social networking sites as a means of emergency communication is "Do I want my agencies public safety information being distributed via the same network used by millions of teenagers and young adults for activities related to socializing and dating?" As one police administrator put it, "Using a social networking site for my urgent communications to citizens, would be like selling our patrol vehicles and having our officers ride the bus to answer calls. We can tell the bus driver that it is an emergency, but the bottom line is, he's the driver and we go where he wants us to, at the speed he wants us to".

Customization

The amount of information that can be included in a communication from a social networking site is often VERY limited. Some allow a single image to be uploaded and almost universally allow only a few lines of text to describe what may be a major public safety event, such as a child abduction.

In comparison, CrimeWeb and other products offered by Citizen Notification Service allow nearly 25,000 characters of information per notification (on average) as well as the ability to add additional posters, fliers or documents. Also, each notification may contain some or all of the following:

- Language conversion
- Multiple image attachments
- Multiple document attachment
- PowerPoint presentation attachment
- Embedded video
- Integrated mapping
- Configurable feedback link
- HTML to allow direct linking to external website

IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TO COMPARE FEATURES WHEN OFFERED A "FREE" NOTIFICATION SYSTEM.

Data Storage

Citizens who register for information place their trust in your agency to safeguard their data. Social networking sites policies for safeguarding and releasing data vary greatly. After registering on some social networking sites, your citizens may immediately begin receiving SPAM emails as a result of completing the registration process.

CrimeWeb and Citizen Notification Service maintain its data behind one of the most security data networks in the country (see www.ThePlanet.com for more information). We deploy several layers of high level security with encrypted data transfer protocol. We NEVER release or sell subscriber data.

In addition, most open records laws exempt subscriber information that is provided to a government agency for the sole purpose of receiving information from that agency from disclosure. Since all subscriber information contained in our database is for that sole purpose, our data is not subject to release in those jurisdictions.

Distribution Methods

Notification systems that are adapted to existing social networking technologies usually offer very limited choices as to how to best target and distribute information. The options are usually determined by the demographics of those using the site and the level of sophistication they desire. For MySpace, Facebook and other sites, those demographics comprise primarily teenagers and college students. CrimeWeb and other technologies deployed by Citizen Notification Service allow alerts to be distributed by any combination of the following:

- Specific Zip Code
- Radius Around A Zip Code
- All users located geographically between any two zip codes
- Groups (Individual preconfigured email grouping)
- Police Beats / Sectors