

A look at Community Messaging Systems

Purpose

This document was undertaken to:

- Provide an insight into messaging systems
- Provide a focus for discussion and debate
- Provide an overview of various systems on the market

Introduction

The need to deliver to and receive messages from all the various forms of media format/devices (phone, voice mail, e-mail, fax, Mobile phone SMS/text) has driven the development of unified and integrated messaging systems to handle these formats. The technology now exists to meet the requirements of both the sender and recipient to have a single interface ie a one system that can handle all the various media formats.

The basis of all Community Messaging Systems involves a distribution list i.e. a database of subscribers contacts. With this integrated system of communication the message can be recorded in voice mail and or in text format. Using the distribution list, messages can then be sent to a large number of people rapidly by phone, e-mail, faxed or Mobile phone SMS/text. The voice recording can also be e-mailed i.e. voice mail. Subscribers on a distribution list, have a choice of ways of receiving the message e.g. phone, fax, e-mail, or SMS/Text to a mobile phone. They also have the ability to determine the best time to be contacted to receive messages. Community messaging helps people communicate better. A phone number can also be published where people can ring and hear a pre-recorded message.

Application of Community Messaging

We all now live and work in an information rich society. It has been realised that the faster you can communicate information the more likely it is you will get a quicker response. The mobile phone is a testament to this. The business world deployed broad casting / messaging system as a means to ensure all staff could be notified quickly, effortlessly and efficiently. The concept of neighbourhood / home watch is based on the premise that you have many eyes and ears based locally. The Police realised that implementing this kind of messaging system mean they could broadcast information to watch members quickly. Information is only useful if it is current and relevant. The ability to inform watch members quickly of developments meant the chance of success in dealing with and solving crime improved.

Overview of Systems

Below is a table of systems that are currently available on the market. Some have evolved over the years and have been developed to meet users demands. It is not intended to be an in-depth review, but a simple summary of the features that each system has. It must be noted that it is not the intention to endorse or promote any of the products but simply give a flavour of what exists.

Feature	Voice Connect Relay	Ring Master Community Messaging Portal	Community Alert
Manufacturer	Voice Connect	IV Developments	Community Alert Ltd
Location	Leicestershire	Caerphilly	Sussex
Company set up	1991 (14yrs)	1990 (15yrs)	
Platform			
O/S	Win 2000 Server	Win 200 Server	Windows
Host Platform	Network Server	Web based	Web based
Admin access	Web browser	Web browser	Web browser
User Access			
Special user sw needed for access	Not required	None – Web	Not required
User access	n/a	Web browser	Web browser
Auto Attendant			
	Built in	Built in	No
Personalised greetings	Y	Y	N
Message creation modes	Text & Voice	Text & Voice	N
Database			
No. of User records	Unlimited	Unlimited	Unlimited ?
Web user self registration	N	Y	Y
Multiple destinations for a user	Y	Y	
Customisable Database	Y	Y	
Specify message delivery time	Y	Y	
Selection of recipients from Map	N	Y	No
Voice Mail			
	Built in	Built in	No
Delivery to user phone	Y	Y	N
Pin code security for retrieval	Y	Y	N
Retry if fail	Y	Y	N
Dial in Voice message retrieval	Y	Y	N
Fax			
	Built in	Built in	No
Deliver to fax	Y	Y	
Text to Speech	Optional		
E-Mail			
	Built in	Built in	No
Delivery to user e-mail	Y	Y	
SMS - Text			
	Built in	Built in	No
SMS Module	Optional	Optional	
SMS Text Delivery	Y	Y	
Two way	Optional		
Reporting			
Delivery confirmation log	Y	Y	?
Data Protection Log	Y		?
User Web facility			
	No	Built in	?
Events Diary / Photo Gallery	No	Y	No
Discussion Forum	No	Y	No
Web usage reporting	No	Y	?

Voice Connect II has its origins in the widely used voice mail system. In response to customer needs Voice Connect Relay was developed. It is an intranet i.e. network based windows system with wide usage.

Community Messaging Portal has developed from the Ring Master 2000 system which has wide police use. It is a web based system with Kent, Warwickshire and North Yorkshire Police trialling this latest new system.

Community Alerts is being developed initially as internet web based system with mapping technology to register and find watch groups. The organisation has previously developed the Child Rescue Alert initiative.

Summary

Community messaging involves a distribution list i.e. a database of contacts. With a distribution list, the message can be recorded in voice mail and or in text format. This can then be by e-mail, faxed or mobile phone SMS/text and be sent to a large number of people rapidly. On most systems subscribers have a choice of ways of receiving the message. Information is only useful if it is current and relevant. The ability to inform watch members quickly of developments means the chance of success in dealing with and solving crime improves.

Thoughts for group deliberation

The steering group is asked to consider the following:

- What are the anticipated information requirements?
- What benefits would a messaging system give?
- What features would be useful if a system was required?

What further information would the group require to assist debate?

Notes

Voice Connect provided a leaflet on the VC Relay system.

IV Developments Provide the handbook for the Community Messaging Portal

Community Alerts were to send information. In its absence it has been based on notes from a presentation they previously gave.

History of Community Messaging Systems

The essence of communication is breaking down barriers. The telephone, for instance, breaks distance and time barriers so that people can communicate in real time or near-real time when they are not in the same place. But as communications evolve, there are new barriers to be overcome. New forms of communication emerge, such as e-mail, voice mail, fax machines, pagers and mobile phones and people using different devices for each of these.

The need to deliver to and receive messages from all these various forms of media devices in single system has spawned the development of unified and integrated messaging systems with a single interface. The technology now exists to meet the requirements of both the sender and recipient to have a single interface ie a one system that can handle all the various media formats. The new generation of mobile phones with multimedia messaging capabilities is an example of this evolving this technology. The merger of Wireless phone technology and PDA (Personal Digital Assistance) ie a portable handheld computer capable of acting as an electronic diary has meant a new breed of pf communication assistants. The XDA and Blackberry phones are wireless mobile phones that have the ability to send and receive email or faxes, built in answering machines, take and send pictures with built in internet web browsers, as well as acting as PDAs.

This document focuses on the single interface system for sending messages ie broadcasting, for use in transmitting messages to subscribers ie a target group.

Evolution of systems.

The concept of community messaging began in America with the need for schoolteachers to reach parents. At first it involved the use of a phone tree (Pyramid) to convey information. One person would call four parents, and then each of the four parents would call four more parents, and so on until everyone had been reached. This concept is a great technique for communication in the absence of better technology. However, the phone tree can break down. If one of the parents reaches an answering machine instead of a real person, the next four people will not receive the message. A delay will occur some time making the relevance and urgency redundant.

The early forms involved subscribers calling a known phone number and listening to a pre-recorded message. This had the limitation of people remembering to phone in. It did not have the ability to notify people a new message was available. The next generation involved setting up a list of contacts and a machine dialling each one in turn to deliver the message. Speed was dependent on the system capabilities and resources. The smaller the system i.e. the smaller the number of phone lines meant the longer it took to contact all on the list.

The next generation added fax and e-mail capability and more recently SMS/text services to the repertoire/forms of media that can be used to contact people.

The concept of notification is becoming a large part of messaging. Some people want to be reached at all costs, anywhere, at any time. Whether they are at home or on vacation, they want to be notified of messages. Others are more protective about their privacy. They do

not want to be reached, for example, they are sleeping or having dinner. Messaging technology provides the power to reach people almost anywhere, at any time and the flexibility to allow people to control when they can be reached. This is based on a concept of "your time" communications, where subscribers can interface with messages how and when they want.

The latest generation incorporates all the above (ie message box, phone, voice mail, fax, e-mail, SMS/text) but also publishes the information on the web/ Internet. Thus, achieving the concept of "your time" communications.

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