



Evaluating Mass Notification Systems



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Does your organization need to notify employees, clients, or large groups of people in an emergency? There are dozens of notification systems through software platforms and apps to help you send messages. Some are free. Some are robust. How do you know which one will work best for you?

Choosing the right notification system is an important decision. But how do you know if the leading software will work for what you need? This evaluation tool will help you discover your organizational needs. You can further use this tool when you talk to vendors so they understand what matters most.

How do you know what you need?

Unless you send mass notifications for a living, you probably don't know where to start with an evaluation. The system you choose should fit into your existing activities without too much of a hassle. The following pages contain checklists and forms you can use to determine your system needs.

How easy is a mass notification system to use?

While it seems obvious, your mass notification system must be easy to use – especially under stress. But your system also has to be easy for your message recipients to use. Ease of use is first on the list because no other factor can compensate against a difficult or complicated system.

Remember: *Bigger is not always better. Having more features is not always a good thing.
What good is a hefty system with all the bells and whistles if it's impossible to figure out how to use it?*

Your mass notification system must be quick and easy to learn. A system that uses a simple, intuitive interface will provide you with greater functionality than a complicated system. If sending messages is not your day job, keep in mind how much time it will take to manage the database of message recipients and to consistently train or exercise the message senders in addition to the time it takes to send messages. If you have a full-time and dedicated staff, your organization could properly manage a large or complicated messaging system. If you're a small organization, keep it simple.

Mass Notification System Basics

Number of message recipients

- ☐ Less than 100
- ☐ 101 to 1,000
- ☐ 1,001 to 10,000
- ☐ More than 10,000

Type of messages

- ☐ Email
- ☐ SMS text messages
- ☐ Voice
- ☐ App push notification
- ☐ Social media cross-posts

Type of message recipients

- ☐ Employees or volunteers
- ☐ Interested community members (opt-in)
- ☐ General public

Nature of messages

- ☐ General interests
- ☐ Business operations
- ☐ Emergency situations

Number of system administrator accounts

- ☐ 1
- ☐ 2 to 5
- ☐ 6 to 10
- ☐ More than 10

Number of message senders

- ☐ 1 to 10
- ☐ 11 to 25
- ☐ 26 to 50
- ☐ More than 50

Number of messages sent (message x recipient x method) in given time period

- ☐ Fewer than 100 messages weekly
- ☐ 1,000 messages per week
- ☐ More than 10,000 messages per week

Cost structure

- ☐ Pay per message
- ☐ Pay per message per recipient
- ☐ Flat rate, unlimited recipients, unlimited messages

Customer Service

Availability of customer service

- Business hours
- After hours, included
- After hours, for additional cost

Customer service methods

- Telephone
- Email
- Chat
- In-person

Skills of customer service

- Accounting (invoices, billing questions)
- Technical platform implementation and database management
- Business development, able to assist with pre-scripted messages

Customer service, other

- Existing and prior customers' positive feedback
- Company is represented in industry activities (business associations, professional associations, conferences, magazines)

Reliability and Security

System reliability

- System has not reported outages or issues with use, management, or message delivery
- Vendor can provide system reliability information and technical specifications
- System guards against message send failure with backups or alternate procedures

System security

- Customer information is protected
- System information is protected
- Vendor can provide system security information and technical specifications
- Vendor servers and networking information is protected against hacking or data loss

System Capabilities

Messaging

- Sending simultaneous messages in multiple formats (SMS, email, voice, app push notification)
 - Availability of alternate text (second language option)
 - Ability to confirm message delivery or failure
 - Messages automatically re-send if failed or not confirmed by the recipient
 - Test message capability not counted toward total number of messages
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 - Test message capability not counted toward total number of messages
 - Ability to create and store pre-scripted messages
 - Organizing pre-scripted message templates by event type
 - Saving sent messages by event
 - Saving and reporting post-event data (number of messages sent, number of messages received, number of recipients reached, copies of the sent message content)

Events and Reports

- Ability to create and store pre-scripted messages
- Organizing pre-scripted message templates by event type
- Saving sent messages by event
- Saving and reporting post-event data (number of messages sent, number of messages received, number of recipients reached, copies of the sent message content)

Database Management

- Ability to import and export recipient account information
- Ability to interface via API with existing software or databases
- Ability to access the system management tools via internet
- Ability to access the system management tools via compatible mobile app

Recipient Capabilities

- Ability of recipients to access and change their preferences (change their phone number, update their email address, unsubscribe)
- Ability for people to self-register for messages (e.g., via web form sign up)
- Ability to automatically remove nonworking contact information (phone number out of service, email address rejected) and notify the system administrators

Evaluation Factors

Industry Use and Credibility

- I know other businesses or organizations that use the vendor
- The vendor has practical application and research in my sector (public/government, private, financial/banking, education/colleges, etc)

Getting to Know the System, Usability

- Vendor offers free and periodic webinars, manuals, and training courses to learn the platform
- Vendor provides dedicated customer service to introduce new users and help set up new systems
- System is easy to install and use without external assistance or coordination
- User interface text icons include descriptive text
- After initial training, system users are able to retain information on how to use the product without additional or re-training

Value and Contract Provisions

- Cost is in a desirable or acceptable range
- Payment options meet organizational needs
- Vendor requires annual contract
- Vendor requires pre-payment for services
- Vendor provides guarantees against service outages, security issues, or system failure

System Usefulness

- Products meet the organizational needs for mass notification system functionality
- System can provide basic and advanced requirements

Accessibility

- System meets accessible needs for message senders and message receivers
- System does not require additional technology or systems in order to be functional

Look for vendors that will:

- Get to know your unique business operation and needs
 - Demonstrate their products being set up, used, and tailored to your organization
 - Provide samples and show you other organizations' systems
 - Let you set the timeline or deadline for choosing a product or implementing the system
 - Provide ongoing and helpful customer service throughout your implementation
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Be Cautious:

- The system interface uses small text, jargon, buttons or icons without descriptions
- Vendors that force pre-payment and annual contract requirements
- Systems that require additional connectivity or individual servers/networking
- Customer service for additional fees

Red Flags:

- No training included in the cost
- App crashing or webpage loading issues
- Poor user reviews
- New vendors without tested experience
- Lack of security protocols or won't describe how their systems are protected
- Vendors that impose arbitrary make-or-break "deal" deadlines

A Note on Cost

The cost of any mass notification system should not be your single guiding requirement. Organizations should weigh cost against available financial resources but understand the negative impacts of not having a mass notification system. In other words, what is the cost to your business or organization if you do not have or use a mass notification system? Expensive systems may not meet your technical needs. Free or very low-cost systems likely do not have as high standards for data security and reliability. Factor the cost of your organizational reputation and your stakeholders' trust if you fail to send notifications or messages.

	System 1	System 2	System 3
Vendor			
Brand/Name			
Contact Person			
Contact Information			
Website			
Functionality			
Basic Needs			
Customer Service			
Reliability and Security			
Messaging Capabilities			
Events and Reports			
Database Management			
Recipient Capabilities			
Cost Evaluation			
Cost per message			
Cost per subscriber			
Cost of customer service			
Cost of training			
Implementation cost			
Ongoing maintenance cost			
Quality			
Reviews and Testimonials			
Industry Reputation			