



Not just a pretty picture –

How a centralized digital signage network across the campus can save lives

The aftermath of the shootings at Virginia Tech in 2007 renewed attention on how colleges and universities deal with campus safety and security issues. The recent National Campus Safety and Security Project survey finds that in the event of an emergency, electronic communications are now an important way to disseminate safety information to staff and students campus-wide.

Blake Reeves, Education Broadcast Media specialist, Capital Networks Limited, looks at how a new generation of digital signage solutions can be used to provide an integrated and immediate single point of contact in such emergencies

Safety has become a top priority for all educational institutions: parents, students, staff and national safety groups all try to evaluate the extent to which they are able to prepare, prevent, respond and recover from 'mass casualty events'. To make matters even more complex, these 'events' cover a wide spectrum of possible emergency situations, such as acts of violence, natural disasters, manmade disasters, mass casualties/medical emergencies and pandemics. A major new report has just been published that examines how far these institutions have come in the past two years in terms of their emergency

preparedness. The National Campus Safety and Security Project survey reveals that most colleges have campus-wide emergency plans that meet minimum standards set by national safety groups. Not surprisingly, there is a real need for improvement.

The importance of electronic communication

There is never going to be a single solution to address the enormous safety challenges that institutions face, but the report does highlight the importance of electronic communication to inform students and staff about emergencies. According to the report, nearly 60 per cent of campuses reported that they had developed "templates" for communicating with students and staff in emergencies, while 28 per cent said they were developing such systems. The technologies employed cover email, web pages, text/instant messaging, public address systems and other new forms, which will include digital signage.

Many establishments have already embraced digital signage as a way to communicate information across the university community. For the most part, it is used to display day to day information in a modern, attention grabbing way - through a network of plasma or LCD TVs broadcasting the latest news. The majority of campus broadcasts consist of two types of information: universal campus-wide content, applicable to everyone, and hyper-local information, specifically created for a department or screen. These might be the date and time of the next football game showing in the sports hall, special offers in the campus cafeteria, changes in room scheduling for a faculty, streamed videos of bands playing in the Student's Union, community bulletin boards.....to give just a few examples of the dynamic content screens display.

Digital signage should be part of a university's emergency planning

One of the most important ways that digital signage can be used in universities and colleges, is as part of the campus emergency notification system. Screens appear in prominent public places and residences right across the campus. They are an effective way to alert students – over a wide geographic area – of a

potentially dangerous situation using audible tones, flashing screens, sirens and verbal warnings on the large LCD displays to deliver emergency broadcasts, which can also be integrated with other campus alert systems. They can display vital information that tells people where to assemble, and where not to go. Indeed, a growing number of institutions are turning to digital signage as part of their campus emergency notification system. Many universities have already embraced digital signage as a way to place critical and time-sensitive information before students, faculty, and other members of the university community.

Consistent, centralized messaging

Digital signs allow schools to communicate information in a modern, attention-grabbing way that reaches its audience immediately. Or at least, they should. All too often though, a university's digital signage system runs off a number of networks which makes it impossible to update every screen, wherever it is in the campus – the student union, the engineering department, the canteen, the sports hall – with live, consistent, emergency feeds. In an emergency situation, students and staff need to be notified rapidly and told where to go, and where not to go, no matter where they are. Universities that operate disparate networks could waste precious minutes updating separate networks, and this could be a matter of life or death.

Yet this can only work if the system broadcasts real-time information about where staff and students should go. In an emergency situation, events change second-by-second and any alert system has to be able to reflect those changes in an instant. It also has to give out consistent messages, so all members of the university community, no matter which department or building they are in, have accurate up-to-the-minute instructions that will ensure their safety.

At present, a large number of universities and colleges with digital signage systems in place operate them through several different networks. Education institutions are often large, complex organisations with any number of

departments. Each has its own budget, its own management that wants to protect and promote its autonomy – not surprisingly then, they want to control the content of their broadcasts. Sometimes, individual faculties embark on a digital signage project independently, so subsequent projects aren't compatible.

As a result, there are silo issues in the university's broadcast network. The screens spread across the campus are controlled by separate administrators and networks so they cannot be updated immediately with consistent, real-time safety instructions – and the consequences could be disastrous.

Centralization is the key to effective and timely emergency messaging. While individual departments demand their own signage control and programming, emergency messaging must be able to pre-empt or over-ride departmental messages. It is for this reason many campuses are now looking to standardize on a single digital signage vendor to synchronize emergency messaging.

A digital signage solution tailored for the education market

At CNL, we are working with a number of colleges and universities across North America and Canada to give them a single, centralized platform for their digital signage and emergency notification system. They include Purdue University, Columbia University, UCLA, Case Western Reserve University, University of Regina, Boston College and NAIT – Northern Alberta Institute of Technology. We developed our Audience.Campus™ dynamic digital signage network system specifically for education installations, to enable high schools, colleges and universities to improve communication with students across multi-site campuses, as well as within individual faculties or departments. The solution can run up to 100 channels simultaneously through a single deployment – which ensures that individual departments can control the content on their broadcasts and deliver hyper-local information like room schedules, or class notifications – all of which can be uploaded easily by staff or students.

Critically, the centralized systems's emergency messaging issues security alerts in seconds. These alerts can be pre-loaded and ready to go at the touch of a button, giving students and staff crucial evacuation information, or other safety instructions. All screens across the network can be updated instantly, over-riding existing broadcasts.

Turning again to the National Campus Safety and Security Project survey, we know that 57 per cent of universities and colleges have posted instructions on what to do in case of emergencies in all residence halls, and 55 percent said all labs had such notices. But warnings were less likely in other campus settings, such as dining halls, student unions, administrative buildings and athletic venues.

With a centralized digital signage network, like Audience.Campus™, these popular public places would have live, dynamic emergency information, in-line with the rest of the campus.

Parents and students expect a safe, secure environment as part of their campus experience. A digital signage network should be an important part of an effective on-campus alert notification system. When combined with other alert methods, such as sirens and mobile phone notifications, digital signage provides school administrators with the ability to reach students to warn them of any kind of crisis. If the network operates on an open platform, like Audience.Campus™, it can integrate with external sources, such as national and weather news to trigger alerts for weather-related emergencies and can also be linked into existing safety systems, such as fire alarms.

Because the software that powers Audience.Campus™ is open, we are able to work with the universities and colleges that have already invested in a digital signage system and help them unify their multiple systems into a single network. These institutions don't have the budgets to 'rip and replace' their existing technology, but they want to ensure that they get the most out of it. They want to

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know that, in the event of an emergency situation, they have in place a system that will work along side their other emergency systems to help ensure the safety of staff and students, no matter where they are.

The National Campus Safety and Security Project survey – www.nacubo.org/Documents/Initiatives/CSSPSurveyResults.pdf -published last month, is a major new report that focuses on safety within the campus and how well prepared colleges and universities are to deal with 'mass casualty events' and the kinds of strategies they have in place.

Additional information about Capital Networks Limited:

CAP001us ...

Morgan Henderson
Capital Networks Ltd
Tel: +1 905 946 1122 Ext. 249
Email:
mhenderson@capitalnetworks.com

Caroline Addy
ThePressOffice – PR for Capital Networks Ltd
Tel: +44 (0) 1780 721433
Email: caddy@pressoffice.targetwire.com