

As SMS grows in popularity is Paging the white elephant?

With the growing use of SMS messaging across enterprise, many may view paging systems as obsolete in the face of mobile phone technology. However, lessons have been learnt from the July 7 bombings and it is likely that pagers will remain a reliable and cost effective means of communication, particularly within mission critical services and the public sector. Indeed, paging combined with SMS is quite a powerful force; it can save lives, as Chris Jones from PageOne explains.

The UK's public sector is under growing pressure to improve efficiency levels whilst also raising its quality and reach with regards to communications. This was highlighted in the transformational Government strategy published in November 2005 that set out the Government's overall aims of greater personalisation, choice, speed, access around the clock, and efficacy in public services. It is clear that in any emergency, rapid communication with those affected can do much to limit the damage. And yet many companies overlook this point and tend to rely on a single technology or method to get the message out. But as we know, landlines can be damaged and mobile networks can be overloaded.

Paging has evolved in sophistication and today millions of messages are transmitted to people needing fast, reliable messaging communications. Indeed, post the tragic events of 7 July 2005, the efficacy of paging and SMS messaging services was brought to the foreground in the subsequent review that highlighted the success of the service provided by PageOne.

It is important to have a number of communications options available so that if one fails, the plan does not collapse. When notifying rescue teams or organising mass evacuation, a rapid response is vital. Often small changes to the communications plan can offer significant improvements to how organisations communicate events to their



key stakeholders. A combination of paging and SMS could create a more resilient solution. This is a point that is confirmed by the London Regional Resilience Forum which said in its report on the lessons learned from the July 7th 2005 bombings that people should consider using pagers for alerting and mobilization including preset pager groups where this function is critical. They can even enable messages to get through when networks are congested.

It is crucial that businesses ensure that they have effective plans for managing and responding to emergency, disaster or even system failure. The Maritime and Coastguard Agency (MCA) Maritime Coast Association which helps with shipping emergencies, mountain and cliff rescues and flooding and searches use PageOne's Connect SMS and paging service which enables them to get messages about the type of rescue incident to the right volunteers, and it allows the volunteers to quickly notify the MCA of their availability without tying up communication channels. The Connect system links message pagers with mobile phones, which make it easier to contact volunteers across different networks.

It is important to just take a brief look at the history of paging and the reasons for its fall in public consciousness. Belt-slung pagers were once the communications product of choice for a wide spectrum of users from doctors, engineers and staff on-call to businessmen needing day-to-day information and even teenagers being told to come home.

Using VHF frequencies and based on narrow band broadcast technology, paging is based on a worldwide standard from 1984, and with little to go wrong has consistently paid its way. Pagers were never subject to the WAP or MMS phenomena of being a technology before its time, or a solution looking for a problem. Paging did what it said



on the box, delivered one way alphanumeric messages with an extremely high degree of coverage and probability that the message would arrive.

However the consumer market changed. Mobile phones presented a glamorous alternative, a lifestyle step change that proved so seductive it swept all before it. In one beautifully presented small device the consumer got two-way voice and text messaging plus a host of add-ons and services which suddenly made the faithful pager a little pedestrian and certainly not something you would get out in front of your friends. But the consumer also got a big bill at the end of the month, which for a lifestyle accessory was acceptable but for business presented a problem.

To bring this up to date, the paging market did show steady decline in the face of the consumer's love affair with mobile phones, but for those paging companies who remained in the market, it reached a point of stability much earlier than forecast and in fact showed a slight increase as the market stabilised.

The answer lies in the fundamentals of the technology: pagers are simple, use little energy and need very few transmitters; the technology is low cost and reliable; receive one message or receive a million, the cost is the same. Moreover, coverage far exceeds that of mobile technology and most importantly, if the application involves receiving alphanumeric content that is critical to the task, there is no better vehicle than paging.

In the public sector countless pagers, independent of SMS, are in daily, critical, use. The most obvious of these applications is within the emergency services.

For example, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service know that getting the right people to the right place at the right time is vital. The service uses PageOne's paging and critical messaging services to ensure that 280 key operational and support workers



such as fire officers, administrators and specialist teams are easily contactable from the control room. The Essex service has used PageOne for paging services since December 2004 and uses the system to call out various specialist groups to incidents across the county. These include the British Red Cross fire-victims support service, and the urban search and rescue team that was set up in the wake of September 11. The system can also be used to mobilise specialist search and rescue teams in response to an emergency abroad.

The South East Coast's Ambulance Service is another example of how paging is used within the public sector. PageOne's messaging system is linked directly to the service's new command and control system. This means that emergency call out messages can be routed not only to ambulance crew, but also to the teams of co-responder volunteers. They are able to respond quickly to an incident and administer what could be life saving first aid until the ambulance crews arrive.

However, pagers are not just used for the emergency services. They have become one of the primary methods of communication for staff involved in real time messaging environments. A high degree of coverage, resilience and speed of message delivery has meant that organisations such as hospitals, councils, local and central government rely on pagers to deliver real time information cost effectively to their staff.

As you can see, Paging is certainly still alive and kicking in the public sector and is an extremely adequate technology within its own right. But, as the tragic events on the 7th July 2005 portrayed, there is no doubt that a combination of paging and SMS offers a very resilient solution, and a solution that no business should choose to ignore.

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