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Voice-alert system warns communities of trouble

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When trouble is coming, you want to know — in advance.

Last year, Westerville-based Leader Technologies Inc. developed a voice alert system to do just that.

Through Leader Alert, dozens, hundreds or even thousands of participants can be tipped off to potential emergencies through their cell phones or handheld devices.

A variation on the system also can be used to check in on a single person, too. After the Sept. 11, 2001 attack, more communities have sought quick-alert systems like it, Leader CEO Keith Voigts said.

"One main issue that came out of 9/11 was that the communications failed to keep agencies up to date," he said.

As a result, municipalities such as Dublin have been using systems like Indiana-based Sigma Communications' Reverse 911, which permits police there to caution residents about thefts in the area.

Reverse 911 costs from \$20,000 to \$40,000 in installation. Users also must install hardware on their computer and get extra phone lines for the calls. An eight-phone line system can make 960 30-second calls an hour.

The technology costs more initially, company spokeswoman Anissa Benich said. But users don't have to pay per call, and they can use it whenever they want once the system is set up. She added that more expenses can be incurred with off-site systems.

Leader Alert, an offsite company, charges \$500 to \$25,000 and more, depending on usage, criticality, and how many numbers are on the call list, plus 9½ cents per minute. Leader Alert can also dial 10,000 households or more in an hour.

Both systems permit administrators to know who's heard an alert and who has yet to be informed.

Gahanna resident Katherine Harris is one who'd like to have it serve her community.

"It would be efficient and convenient if weather or terror alerts were provided by a recorded call."



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Michael McKibben, left, chairman and founder of Leader Technologies, and Keith Voigts, CEO, display the company's Leader Alert program in their Westerville office.

How it works

- ▶ Leader Technologies sets up a customer's contact list on a Web server.
- ▶ When alerts are needed, a list administrator calls a number at Leader, which offers him a list to work with and a moment to make a recorded message.
- ▶ Leader puts the calls through to individuals on the list.
- ▶ If a resident is unavailable, the message is left or the call is repeated.
- ▶ Software records whether the alert has been received.

Voigts, of Leader Technologies, said his product was developed to help law-enforcement and emergency-response officials disseminate information quickly to as many people as possible in the event of a tornado, fire, toxic spills, terror alerts and weather and water issues. Leader Technologies is in talks with schools, law firms and several high-rise office buildings in Ohio to install its technology.

Pass Christian, a town in Mississippi, was the first to use Leader Alert. Its system initially was adopted to alert boat owners at the harbor if they needed to evacuate the pier because of bad weather.

"Instead of sending out letters to each and every person in the city, this is much more convenient," harbormaster Willie Davis said.

Lisa Henderson, a Pass Christian boat owner, called Leader Alert "an excellent way of informing people."

Now the system is being set up for all of Pass Christian so residents might be alerted to more widespread emergencies.

"This system is totally worth it," Davis said. "It has saved us a lot of time and money."

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