



Getting the Message Out On Campus

By Michael Pollick

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As a nation seeks to avoid replays of Monday's slow-motion massacre at Virginia Tech, "getting the message out" has become a recurring theme.

With companies that specialize in broadcast text messaging within campus settings, a couple of Sarasota entrepreneurs suddenly find themselves at the center of educational institutions nationwide trying to grapple with the communication issue presented by Virginia Tech's tragedy.

Paul Gilroy, founder of Sarasota based TranSendED, teamed up last year with Dan Miller of Neighborhood America to help colleges and universities to communicate with students and others through text messaging, mostly with marketing messages.

Now, though, schools are calling them for another reason -- the ability of text messaging to communicate a problem quickly and precisely to anybody carrying a cell phone or other handheld wireless gizmo.

Florida Southern College in Lakeland has been using the Neighborhood America system to announce upcoming events to top prospects at high schools in the region.

The school is now considering a more comprehensive system that would include emergency text messages.

"We have an upcoming cabinet meeting and it is on the agenda," said Barry Ward, the vice president in charge of enrollment at Florida Southern. "You do have to reach out as quickly as possible in a situation like that."

Gilroy and Miller started their effort a year ago, but the attention that the shootings at Virginia Tech brought to the issue is like nothing they have seen.

"We've been getting inquiries in the last 48 hours from many colleges, so we have a bunch of discussions going on right now," Miller said.

Virtually every cell phone being sold today is capable of text messaging, tucked away as an application even though many consumers choose not to use it.

Text messaging sounds simple to implement, but the Neighborhood America mobile solution, developed by Miller and his colleagues in Sarasota, is quite sophisticated.



Paul Gilroy of TranSendED shows the introductory message that is posted after activating the initial subscription to his company's emergency messaging technology.

The company uses high-level dedicated servers run by AT&T to host its mobile solution.

A campus administrator simply logs on to the system through any Web-connected computer.

Through Neighborhood America's software and its arrangements with major cell phone carriers, the administrator can write and then broadcast a one-way alert instantaneously to thousands of cell phones, if desired.

Or, the campus police could use it to up a two-way message sequence with all those cell phones in its directory, asking campus students, faculty and staffers to report activities that fit a scenario they are watching.

"By having two-way communications, if they happen to see what is going on, they can report that back," Gilroy said.

"So that is very powerful. Instead of just the policemen on the lookout you have hundreds of eyes that can feed back information. We can do all that."

Besides the Florida Southern deal, Gilroy said he is close to a deal with a major school in Philadelphia.

He also was talking with St. Leo University, north of Tampa, but it went with a competing system.

"With employees and faculty tossed in there, I think our population is in the 1,800-1,900 area, so it is literally a small village," said Ward, who added that, though he is not second-guessing Virginia Tech administrators, the incident there has made him more of a believer.

"Given the tragedy of what happened at Virginia Tech and the lapse in time between the first murder and the second group of murders, the institution might have been well served by reaching their student population by text messaging," he said.

Providing digital security on campus already was a fast-growing field even before Monday's incident, in which an enraged student killed 32 fellow students and teachers in Blacksburg, Va.

New York-based Rave Wireless is specifically targeting college administrators on its Web site.

A link on its site urges administrators to "Deliver emergency messages directly to students' mobile phones."

Working with Nextel, Rave offers add-on services such as Rave Guardian.

Students can activate a timer on their mobile home "whenever they feel unsafe" and then "deactivate the timer when they reach their destination safely."

In the interim, campus police are able to see a photo ID of the student along with an interactive map showing exactly where that cell phone is located.

Of course, any digital communications system only works if the community it serves buys in.

St. Leo's has surveyed its students and found that they have an average of six e-mail accounts.

"We also know students will carry multiple cell phones," said Steve Burrell, the school's chief technology official.

"There is the one mom and dad gave them to take to college, and then there is the one they paid for themselves," Burrell said.

"The reason is, they want their privacy, and cell phones generate bills that say what calls were made from where and when. They do not want to subject themselves to inquisitions from mom and dad, such as 'Why were you in Ybor City at 4 o'clock in the morning?'"

Earlier this year, St. Leo signed up for a comprehensive communications network provided by one of Neighborhood America's competitors, ConnectEd.

The school, with 3,000 students at its campus, sent out one of its first important broadcast messages this week: a reminder from the administration that the school would be using this system to notify students and faculty in the event of an emergency situation such as the one at Virginia Tech.

Seven percent of the phones dialed came back as "bad phone number," Burrell said. "On the other hand, 93 percent of the numbers were good."

Back at Florida Southern, Ward has similar concerns.

"You have to get the students to buy into it. They could put us into a spam file very easily."