



INFORMACAST EMERGENCY BROADCASTING

Case Study



Gary Comer Youth Center

When the late Gary Comer, founder of Land's End, sponsored a youth center on Chicago's south side near the school he attended as a child, he didn't hold back. The building supports a roof garden where students of a culinary-arts class grow fresh vegetables. A cheery exterior welcomes school children while providing a secure haven in a neighborhood known for urban blight and a high crime rate. Inside, a bright gymnasium provides practice space for the renowned South Shore Drill Team and converts to an auditorium that hosts, among other things, some of the drill team's local performances. A dance room, cafeteria, computer lab, recording studio, and homework areas round out the award-winning multi-use structure. The building, designed by architect John Ronan, has become a center of community as well as one of Chicago's architectural masterpieces.



The center provides programs for education, physical fitness, community building, and arts. It provides expansion space for nearby schools, including the Gary Comer College Prep (GCCP) high school. Included among the building's features was a standard analog paging system, which was functional for the center's public areas and classrooms but unremarkable. The administration considered upgrading it to a digital system, but that would have been expensive and a waste of relatively new equipment.

A creative, all-in-one solution

GCYC's IT consultant offered an alternative to discarding the old system: a software program, from Singlewire Software, could integrate phones with the analog speaker system to provide paging, messaging, and school bell scheduling. The system could even be expanded to send automatic notifications via email, text message, and voice mail to computers and mobile phones anywhere, not just within the building. This notification system could more than match the versatility of the building itself.

IT Resource, based in Coopersville, MI, installed and provides maintenance for the center's network. Todd Hekema, IT Resource's technical lead for GCYC, praises the flexibility of Singlewire's InformaCast® system. "There's nothing else like InformaCast," he says. "There are other paging systems, but they don't have software. And there are messaging systems, but they aren't integrated with a paging system." IT Resource, which has a motto as well as a reputation for "Putting IT all together," considers InformaCast an important component in putting together a solution for a facility that needs both messaging and paging.

Alex Requena, IT Director for GCYC and for the nearby GCCP, says InformaCast is easy to manage. The primary use at GCYC is still as a paging system. "We are able to broadcast through the phones to speakers in the halls," says Requena. "You can pick up a phone, dial a number, and page." He was able to add IP speakers to the existing analog system. InformaCast integrates both types of speakers. Messages can be broadcast throughout the entire building or to one or more speaker zones. In addition, messages can go to the phones of a particular group of recipients. Zones and recipient groups can be configured and modified through a simple computer user interface.

InformaCast accommodates prerecorded messages so that school administrators do not have to make regular announcements, although they can if that best suits their situation. Messages can be prerecorded for any number of occasions or potential emergencies. An administrator can select the correct message, push a button, and make the announcement. This ensures that important information is not dependent on someone's memory during an emergency situation. If information in addition to the prerecorded message needs to be broadcast, it is easily done through the phone system. A supervisor can even activate a page via email or a phone call when away from campus.

Not just a paging system

InformaCast offers more than paging, however. It allows the center to adjust to the needs of the day. GCYC does not have just a single function. It exists to help children in the community through a variety of means. Gary Comer is quoted on the home page of the GCYC website: "The Youth Center is dedicated to providing a greater opportunity for young people in this neighborhood to practice, to learn, to study, and to sharpen their skills and intellect. This Youth Center is for the children. May they use it well."



One role the center has adopted that enables local young people to "use it well" is to host school activities. "The high school [GCCP] is a separate entity, and they also have InformaCast," says Requena. "They use the bell system. We don't here. We did use the bells last year, though, because we were hosting some high school classes. And we will use it next year, because we'll be hosting a middle school." This flexibility fits well with GCYC programs. When the center needed a bell system, it was conveniently available through the InformaCast software and the notification system.

Bells at the school (or the center) are no longer limited to simple ringing. The "bell" can be a traditional ring, or it can be an audio file of just about anything. The first bell might be a welcome message, a bird song, or the school's anthem. The last bell might be a favorite song of the week, or a reminder to study for upcoming exams. "You can easily create messages and send them out," says Requena. Nor are the bells limited to a single schedule. A calendar function allows for complex bell-ringing schedules on different days of the week.

Easy integration

Requena sees a variety of possibilities for the InformaCast system. InformaCast has a plugin called School-Messenger, which is a mass notifier. "If you want to notify 3000 people at one time with the same message, it generates the message, sends it out, and reports back to you who were contacted. We can use it for notifying families." For example, if there were a water leak or a storm that prompted a school closure, the center would need to inform families. "We could use it for reminders about events at the center. We could notify multiple people via SMS, voice mail, or email if something happened."

IT Resource's Hekkema explains the breadth and flexibility of InformaCast's notification capabilities. "There are

even plug-ins that work with Facebook and Twitter. Everyone who is a friend of the Facebook page can get a notification. Or you can follow a Twitter account and get notified that way.”

Another Singlewire product that integrates with InformaCast is an alerting utility, called DORA, that can send a message based on contact closures. So if that water leak occurred during the night when no one was at the center, key people could be alerted immediately with a phone call. “Sensors can be for different environmental factors: water, smoke, temperature,” Requena says. “It would be nice to receive a phone call: ‘Hey, the temperature in this room is above normal; someone should check it out.’”

Hekkema admires Singlewire’s commitment to quality. “InformaCast goes through 2 million simulations and through months of testing before they send out an update,” he says. “As a result, we rarely have an issue.” Because a primary function of InformaCast is emergency notification, they want to be certain that it works as expected.

When it comes to emergency situations, GCYC and GCCP hope the notification system is not needed. But they are prepared: with InformaCast, they can broadcast through the paging and phone system or through voice and text messaging. And in non-emergency, day-to-day activities, the same system distributes information for a broad variety of needs.

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Singlewire Software develops and supports innovative voice applications centered around secure, fast, and reliable mass notification capabilities. You can learn more about their product InformaCast at www.singlewire.com.



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