



The Importance of Multi-Channel Communication in an Emergency

Over the past few months, COVID-19 has tested the strength of schools' emergency communications. School leaders have been called upon to act quickly, making strong decisions to protect students and families. Now there's time to reflect on the initial response. At this point in the COVID-19 pandemic, we aren't sure how the next few months or even years will look—but we can look back on what we've done so far and learn how to better cope with further disruptions. "The right message at the right time from the right person can save lives," says emergency communications expert Dr. Barbara Reynolds in the CDC's crisis communications guide.

For school districts, however, reaching all families can be a challenge—even in everyday life. Families move, parents change jobs, phone lines are disconnected. Plus, different stakeholder groups prefer different channels of communication.

Unfortunately, emergency situations only exacerbate these gaps. As the power goes out or students lose access to district laptops in a hurricane, parents who rely on those channels miss valuable information; the most at-risk families fall through the cracks.

One solution to this challenge is to implement a multi-channel approach to communication. "It is critical that we broadcast utilizing multiple media platforms, so you reach as broad a range of the population as humanly possible," says Dr. Curtis Harris, Director of the University of Georgia's Institute for

Disaster Management, in an interview with SchoolCEO. "A disaster doesn't affect a single entity," he says. "It affects an entire community."

What is multi-channel communication?

If you ask your district's stakeholders how they prefer to be contacted, you'll get a myriad of answers. Some parents might prefer a phone call, but others' voicemail box hasn't yet been set up. Instead, they are checking Facebook, where they can scroll through the district's page to find updates all in one place. Meanwhile, Twitter has turned into a professional development hub for educators, while senior citizens in your community might tune into the local news for updates from the district.

Put plainly, you don't get to decide how your audience consumes information—they do.

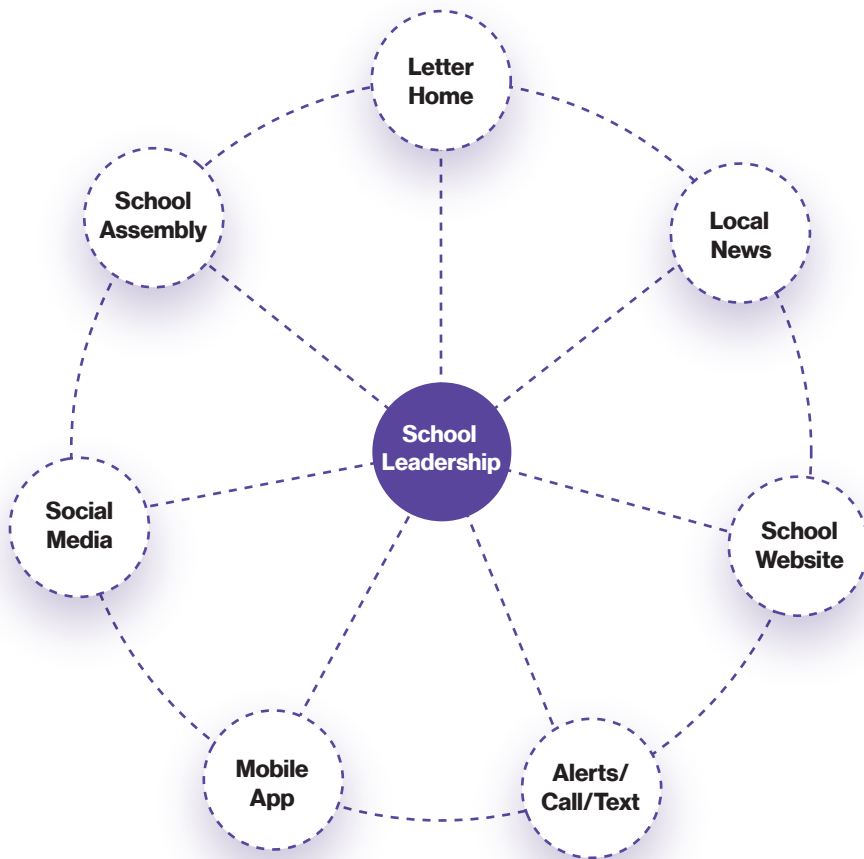
If you want to reach a broad audience, you need to use a variety of communication tools to make sure your message lands. It's about covering your bases, increasing the chances that your schools stay top of mind—and that updates make it home.

Multi-channel communication means incorporating every communication tool available to spread your message to a large audience—it's an avenue to loop your entire community into your district's story.

Single Channel Communication



Multi-Channel Communication



Reaching All Families

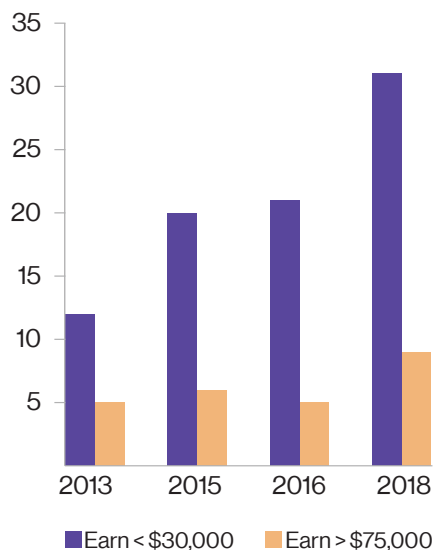
Diversifying your communication strategy is more than just good business; it's a matter of equity. By incorporating all communication channels (especially those available on mobile), you're ensuring your messages reach every family in your district—including those with lower income.

Over the past several years, it's typically been harder for administration, teachers, and other faculty members to contact parents outside of school hours. Contact information like home addresses, emails, and phone numbers can change from month to month, causing parents to miss important updates from their child's school or district.

The answer to this challenge is, of course, a multi-channel approach—one that includes and prioritizes mobile communication tools. Often we think of smartphones as a luxury only the upper and middle class can afford, but that simply isn't the case. In fact, many lower-income families are switching to a mobile plan and abandoning broadband service to access the internet at home.

From 2013 to 2018, reliance on smartphones rather than broadband increased from 12% to 31% for people with average incomes less than \$30,000, while only increasing from 5% to 9% for people with incomes over \$75,000. With such a variety of "pay as you go" plans and devices available to the public, purchasing a smartphone has become much easier—and more affordable—than it used to be. While wealthier Americans can diversify their internet usage across different devices (i.e. tablets, laptops, mobile phones), smartphones have become the cheapest way for lower-income Americans to talk to their families, look for jobs, and access their bank accounts on the go.

% of US Adults Who Do Not Use Broadband But Own Smartphones by Income

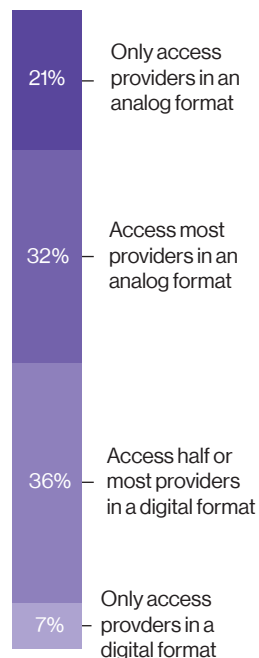


Since they're more accessible, smartphones allow lower-income Americans to ditch the usual expenses that arise from buying a home computer, like having to purchase a router, modem, and often overly expensive broadband service. According to a 2017 study done by the National Telecommunications and Information Administration, more households had a mobile data plan than wired broadband service. So if you want to reach the lower-income families in your district (as well as the other 81% of Americans who use smartphones), you'll need a robust mobile strategy.

Using the Community's Reach

A multichannel approach isn't just digital. While you'll want to prioritize mobile in your marketing efforts, you can't ignore more analog methods like print media altogether. After all, very few of us prefer to get our information one way to the exclusion of all others. When you're looking for news about current events, for example, you might check Twitter, CNN's website, or your local news channel, depending on the day. Most of us prefer a mix of channels, not just one.

When asked how they primarily access each type of local news provider, % of U.S. adults who...



You have an opportunity, then, to unite with other community organizations in your daily communications to extend your reach—and bolster your response. "One of the issues that we've had in emergency management historically is that everybody does siloed planning," Harris told SchoolCEO. Districts plan for their schools. Hospitals plan for their patients. But what you're looking for, Harris says, is a whole community concept: everybody operating toward the same goals and outcomes. Besides varied assets, community groups provide critical reach. "If you look at vulnerable populations—the deaf, non-English speaking, or even low socioeconomic populations," Harris explains, "there is almost always a minimum of at least one advocacy group in every community that deals with those populations." These organizations can be especially helpful in disseminating information and building trust across channels.

It boils down to making sure your district is present on every channel, all the time—so that no matter where your audience goes looking for information, they'll find what they're after. In an emergency, this diligence can save lives.