

Communications Team

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Employee Emergency Texting Program

Overview:

We designed an employee emergency texting program in which employees receive text messages during emergency situations that affect their ability to work. Opt in is strictly optional; to date over 500 (about 36% of all staff) have signed up on their personal phones. Response to texts has been very positive. We plan to expand our marketing to enroll additional employees in the months ahead.

Method/Participants:

Public Health – Seattle & King County currently employs approximately 1400 staff located at dozens of sites across King County. In 2010, 800 employees responded to a survey that asked about their interest in signing up for an emergency program, as well as any concerns that they might have about such a service.

Results:

Key themes from the employee survey showed that:

- About 60% of all staff wanted to receive work site closure and other emergency information
- The most salient emergency information for employees was site closure information
- Cost of receiving texts was not a concern for younger employees, but was a consideration for employees 30 and older
- Most employees (60%) did not think two-way messaging was necessary
- Additional concerns were that texts would intrude on employees' "off-time." In addition, some employees said that it was inappropriate to be spending money on a texting program during a time of public health budget cuts and funding crises.

In January, 2012, our region was hit by a large snow and ice storm. We used the employee emergency texting program for the first time on a wide scale. We sent 15 messages over 5 days. Topics included site closures, late work-day starts and safe commuting reminders. For example:

- 1) 01/19/2012 8:26:31 AM to ALL : Ice storm. Roads dangerous. PHSKC on late start at 10. If not critical staff check with supervisor before coming. Check web and hotline 206205XXXX for info.
- 2) 01/19/2012 010:32:08 AM to Renton Dental: PHSKC: RENTON DENTAL is closed due to lack of power. Check with supervisor about work plan for day. More info from HR to follow. Check PH web for updates.



In the week following the snowstorm, over 180 employees responded to a survey about the texting program:

- 83% of employees thought that the messages they received were either very relevant and helpful (63%), fairly relevant and helpful (20%), or somewhat relevant and helpful (12%). Only 5.4% of recipients thought that the texts were annoying.
- With respect to the number of messages that were sent: 83% of recipients thought we sent “about the right number” of texts; 15% felt we sent too few, and only 2% thought we sent too many.

Recommendations:

- Survey your employees to find out what kinds of messages they want prior to launching a texting program.
- Keep opt-in marketing materials simple, and respond to issues raised in initial survey. For example, we explained that employees could opt-out at any time without penalty.
- Limit the number of text messages you send to only what’s most important. Otherwise, employees may view the messages as “spam” and opt-out.
- Try to provide customized messages whenever possible. Our employees can sign up to receive only messages about their particular worksite, several worksites, or all worksites.
- Provide a website where employees can learn more about the texting program and how to sign up and opt out.