

FOCUS ON TECHNOLOGY

Shooting raises interest in emergency-alert system

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THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

A central Ohio company's product that helps notify people individually in an emergency is receiving increased attention following the Virginia Tech shootings.

Leader Alert, a software product from Leader Technologies Inc. in Westerville, sends messages to landline or cell phones. Schools or other organizations can contact tens of thousands of employees, students and parents within minutes.

Interest in the product has been "enormous" since the Virginia Tech shootings, said Mike McKibben, founder and chairman of Leader Tech-



Mike McKibben of Leader Technologies in Westerville said the system can call everyone on a big phone list in minutes.

nologies Inc. The company's primary focus has been a teleconferencing product, but lately, Leader Alert "is all I've been spending time on," McKibben said. "It's unfortunate that it takes an event like that to bring this to people's minds."

With Leader Alert, schools set up one or more phone lists. When an alert is necessary, an official can create a message

and send it to selected groups, such as administrators only or to everyone. The automated system is Web-based and doesn't require any installed equipment.

The system was used a few weeks ago by Greenbriar Middle School in Parma, near Cleveland, after a woman carrying a knife was disarmed at the school. Officials sent an alert to 700 parents within a few minutes of the incident.

When emergencies occur, schools usually are flooded with calls and parents often show up, McKibben said. Most schools tend to distribute information about emergencies through a combination of methods, including making and answering phone calls,

sending e-mails and contacting local media.

But speed is the main consideration, and Leader Alert makes that possible, McKibben said. Other advantages include the ability to handle a large volume of calls and ease of use.

The initial setup fee is \$2,500, and subscription fees range from \$100 to \$500 per month, depending on the number of messages sent.

Cost was one deciding factor when the Ohio Emergency Management Association decided in late 2005 to begin using Leader Alert, said Mark Patchen, the agency's director of technical support. The EMA uses the system to notify staff members or county directors about incidents.

"The biggest advantage is rapid information delivery," because it's important to quickly convey information to counties, which are the first responders, Patchen said.

Another Ohio company, OneCall Now, provides a similar service and has said it will offer two calls a year free to any school, school district or university. The Troy company also has seen increased interest since the Virginia Tech shootings, said Corie Schweser, director of business development.

Schweser said she normally fields two to three calls a month from universities, but after the shootings, she talked to 14 in three days.

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