PROTECTING STADIUMS

Owen Miles *examines the important role that critical communications play in stadium security*

For Super Bowl 50 in Santa Clara, fans were offered an opt-in security information service by police

The Super Bowl, which this year took place at the 72,000-seater Mercedes-Benz Stadium in the City of Atlanta, is one of the biggest spectator events in the world. Not only do fans crowd into the stadium but at this year's match, City of Atlanta officials were expecting 150,000 out-of-town visitors and over one million people to attend related events in the days leading up to the big game. Clearly this year, as has been the case in previous years, the safety considerations had to be taken very seriously.

To manage communications around any incident that might arise, the City of Atlanta deployed Everbridge's platform to power its emergency alert system. This allows city residents, visitors and attendees of the game to opt-in to be alerted on their mobile phones if an emergency or disruption arose, or if it was vital to share important information, such as street closures around the stadium or any transport delays. The same process took place in 2016 for Super Bowl 50 at the Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara, California. In this case, the city of Santa Clara Police Department operated a joint information centre, which also leveraged an opt-in system so that fans, locals and other visitors could text a keyword to receive the latest information and updates throughout the event.

Security and safety in stadiums has come under the spotlight once again in the UK since the Manchester Arena suicide bombing in 2017, but prior to this British stadiums have suffered a number of tragic incidents. These have included the collapse of a stand at Ibrox in Glasgow in 1902 and the death of 66 fans crushed in the same stadium almost seventy years later to the Valley Parade fire in Bradford in 1985 and the Hillsborough stadium disaster in 1989 in Sheffield, all of which have prompted changes in the way that stadiums are built and managed.

When it comes to big-ticket events like the Super Bowl, the Olympics or football World Cup, safety and security requirements are heightened and years of planning are carried out. However, for managers of stadiums and venues of all sizes and for all purposes, the threat is present on a daily basis and there is a constant challenge to respond quickly to any kind of critical or even routine emergency that might impact on visitors, staff and the building itself.

IT IS IMPORTANT TO DISTINGUISH BETWEEN A ROUTINE EMERGENCY AND A CRISIS SITUATION

In every incident highlighted above, better communication would have made a huge difference to the outcome. Relevant information delivered in real-time can change the flow of crowds, warn people of danger and instruct them to go to a safe place. The technology that underpinned communications and protected visitors to the Mercedes-Benz and Levi's stadiums shows the effectiveness of a critical event management strategy. By leveraging mobile keywords, as an example, attendees and local residents receive the information about events that are important and relevant to them, representing one tool available from a robust critical event management platform.

Adoption of a critical event management platform means that stadiums can take better control in two areas, crisis communications and incident management. To help visualise how this works in practice it makes sense to describe it in five key stages.

STAGE ONE: VISUALISE AND ASSESS

When initiating an emergency response, the first step is to aggregate situational intelligence by collecting data from multiple information sources, such as CCTV cameras, social media and other threat feeds including police, live traffic and weather alerts, as well as visual data from on-the-scene mobile users. This data can then be consolidated to generate a unified view of the entire threat landscape inside and surrounding the stadium.

While stadiums don't always need a command centre, it does help to fully assess safety and security and streamline the management of an emergency response. In the case of a major event, such as the Super Bowl or a large music concert, a command centre can be set up temporarily, which will help to provide powerful visualisation and orchestration capabilities, in the event that an emergency alert needs to be issued.

STAGE TWO: LOCATE

To ensure those at risk are targeted and can respond effectively, the next step is to locate the threat and map the incident zone. This could be areas of overcrowding which need to be dispersed or it could be a dangerous package or bag that has to be investigated. From here, key decision makers within the stadium management team can determine the impact of the threat, decide precisely who is at risk and target those in harm's way with the information they need to stay safe. Critically, threat-location data can also be used to efficiently deploy emergency resources when and where they are needed.

STAGE THREE: ACT

Once the threat has been assessed and those at risk located, action can be taken to manage and mitigate the emergency situation. By leveraging an integrated critical event management system, response processes can be pre-defined by key decision makers in the stadium and automated via the platform. This can allow for both officials working for the stadium and police and ambulance services manning their posts to initiate instant communications and share relevant information with those at risk and with those who can respond throughout the event.

STAGE FOUR: COMMUNICATE

Effective communication not only forms the basis of the successful management and mitigation of emergency events, but can mean the difference between a well-managed incident and an escalating crisis. While location-based alerting technology is often used across towns, cities and regions, it can also be deployed in large venues and stadiums, to ensure that notifications and messages are targeted and reach the right people at the right time.

The bombing at the Manchester Arena happened as the crowd was leaving the stadium and it is alleged that a lack of communication between emergency services led to delays in their response. For this reason, it is vital that information can be delivered via multiple contact paths, such as text, voice, email, digital signage, alert systems and even via sirens, to ensure it is reliable and gets the message across. Connectivity can be interrupted, particularly in crisis situations, so every channel of communication needs to be made available.

STAGE FIVE: ANALYSE

Once a critical event has been resolved, it is imperative that the management team in the stadium, and all those involved in safety and security procedures, takes the time to analyse the response times and incident time-to-resolution data for measuring and assessment. This information will provide the vital insight necessary to learn from emergency incidents and improve response times and resourcing for future events.

Threats and emergencies in stadiums come with various levels of severity, so it is important to distinguish between a routine emergency and a crisis situation. A routine emergency does not mean it will be easy to handle, it can often be difficult or challenging. However, the routine nature of it means that it can be prepared for. One of the advantages of using a critical event management platform is that the risk presented by routine emergencies allows for an appropriate plan to be developed, training to be put in place and exercises carried out to ensure all those involved are ready.

THERE IS A CONSTANT CHALLENGE TO RESPOND QUICKLY TO ANY KIND OF CRITICAL EMERGENCY

By contrast, a crisis situation is often characterised by its unexpectedness. This makes it much more difficult to predict and manage, something that can be compounded by the threat never having been encountered before or by its development at an unprecedented speed – rendering routine emergency plans inadequate. In this situation, good communication has a vital role to play, but emergency services will need to handle the situation creatively.

There is no doubt that stadiums and other public venues face a growing range of threats when it comes to safeguarding big public events that draw large crowds. Formalising and consolidating an operational response that allows them to alert not only their own staff, but emergency services and visitors too is becoming ever more urgent.

Protecting people is a priority, but stadiums also need to protect their own infrastructure and the systems that allow them to operate. Harnessing the right critical event management technology means they can ensure they have the latest intelligence and visualisations, can proactively anticipate threats to both people and assets and construct targeted and efficient response plans that can be implemented the moment a crisis occurs. Just as importantly, the right critical event management platform makes it possible to audit the response to ensure continual improvement.

The distressing scenes at the Manchester Arena and the ongoing trial over the Hillsborough stadium disaster all these years later, keep stadium safety in the headlines for negative reasons. People want to be sure these venues are safe to visit, and stadiums want to reassure visitors that they have proven crisis communications and systems in place. Utilising the right technology and constructing targeted and efficient plans that can be implemented the moment an emergency occurs, regardless of its scale or severity, will go a long way to providing that reassurance ●

Owen Miles is Technology Director for Everbridge and for the past 10 years has worked alongside customers to advise and implement solutions across a wide range of industries. As a result he has an enviable depth of knowledge and experience in the world of business continuity, resilience and effective crisis communications.

Security considerations at events like the Super Bowl have to be taken very seriously

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