



Don't take communications for granted

By John A. Gentle, DLP

RECENTLY, A NEARBY COMMUNITY found itself embarrassed and under attack because of a serious communications failure. It all started when the police found a local, middle-aged male dead in his house. The coroner ruled death by natural causes and after a month or so sought permission to cremate the unclaimed remains. Then, last week, the newspaper ran a story that a local family, with the same last name as the deceased, reported a missing person to the police.

The family was distraught when they learned that the remains of the recently cremated person was, in fact, their sought-after relative.

Apparently, the police told the coroner that they could not find any information in the house that could point to next of kin. And when a prescription bottle found at the home led to a physician that could not be located, the coroner, who apparently is responsible for notifying next of kin, simply stopped looking.

It is pretty obvious that neither the police nor the coroner provided reasonable investigative work to find the family and clearly there was no effort to communicate at all. To make matters worse, neighbors apparently had told the police that there was family in the area, but this information was never forwarded to the coroner—or if it was, it was never acted on.

Had the police or coroner simply opened the phone book and called the two individuals with the same last name this whole debacle could have been avoided. With all the CSI shows on TV, you wouldn't think that something seemingly as simple as this could still happen.

I believe that many shippers take the communication process for granted, while 3PLs recognize the critical nature and timeliness of information exchanges and work tirelessly to ensure all parties who need the information have it and are acting on it. So, as shippers, how do you ensure that information is moving to and from the appropriate parties in a timely manner? And more importantly, how do you know that

they received the information and are going to act on it promptly?

The test for this is interesting because certain information is transactional and a computer can track certain types of information easily and automatically. EDI shippers can track tender acceptance, pick-up times, as well as planned and actual arrival times. Occasionally there are operational issues with plant production causing loading/unloading delays; weather problems; and trailer pools. Knowing who should be contacted quickly, not e-mailed, is critical especially if you're having a systems problem or key personnel are absent.

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Some administrative information is unique and directed to your carrier's or 3PL's account executive as important information that needs to be released at one time to all business partners, such as: plans to outsource; department reorganizations; planned or sudden changes in origin points and or service areas; RFQ/RFPs; or even notification and chapter 11 or 13 filings. Other important administrative information that requires timely response includes: decisions to terminate the agreement; contracts/rate negotiation documents; or even tracking lost or stolen shipments.

While many companies have fairly good communications with the carrier's customer service, technology cannot handle all the operational challenges that require timely information with the right people. Likewise, important administrative messages and/or documents must be communicated in a timely manner to the right people.

What are your contingency processes to move transactional, operational, or administrative information and how do they hold up to the various real world risks? Remember that when people need to use a phone to make important and timely calls there must be enough knowledgeable human resources available who know who to call and how to make all those calls in an appropriate timeframe. □

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