How This Town is Pioneering BlackBerry AtHoc's Powerful Crisis Communication Capabilities in France

At a Glance

The town of Rosny-sous-Bois suffered a major crisis in 2014, when a gas explosion killed eight people. In the wake of this tragedy, town officials recognized the need to improve their emergency response process. This realization led them to modernize their crisis management initiative – an effort that eventually led them to the BlackBerry AtHoc Crisis Communication Platform.

Ville de Rosny sous-Bois

Company Ville de Rosny sous-Bois
Industry Public Sector
Location France
Products BlackBerry AtHoc
Deployment Size ~45,000 Residents
http://www.rosny93.fr/

The Organization

Situated approximately ten kilometers from the heart of Paris, France, the township of Rosny-sous-Bois boasts a population of approximately 45,000 residents and growing. Governed by town hall Mairie de Rosny-sous-Bois, the town is experiencing a period of rapid growth and expansion. According to Menahd Ouchenir, City Councillor in charge of Communication and Digital City, the town will see three new subway stations by 2022.

Rosny-sous-Bois recently deployed the BlackBerry AtHoc Crisis Communication Platform as part of its emergency response improvement plan.

Menahd Ouchenir

The Challenge

On August 31, 2014, tragedy struck Rosny-sous-Bois when a gas explosion killed eight people. Following this tragedy, Mayor Claude Capillon and his team began an initiative that saw the town reinvent and modernize its crisis response process. The need for such an initiative was further reinforced by 2015's Île-de-France terror attacks.

"We realized that we needed to communicate more quickly than we had been," Ouchenir explains. "Situations like what happened in 2015 are a nightmare for a town like ours. We hope we'll never have to deal with them, but as evidenced by current events, these incidents can happen anywhere – and it's every government's responsibility, down to the municipal level, to be capable of effectively managing and mitigating them."

At the time of the gas explosion, Mairie de Rosny-sous-Bois did not even have an official Facebook page for its residents, and communication between officials was done through a private Facebook group. This made getting the word out about an incident extremely difficult. And though the town had a crisis management plan in place, officials found that they often lacked the means to effectively execute it.

"We had what is known in French as a plan communal de sauvegarde – essentially, a business continuity plan, but for our town," says Ouchenir. "This PCS designated the people you needed to have around in a crisis. For example, if you had to redirect traffic, you'd need to contact one official, subway infrastructure required contacting someone else, and so on."

This all had to happen manually. There was no tool that the entire organization could rely on, and no means of notifying all critical personnel of a crisis at once. Further, the lack of a mass notification system for the general populace meant residents often had to rely on word of mouth rife with misinformation.

"It was all a bit messy, to be honest – structuring our communication was extremely complicated," Ouchenir recalls. "And it was made all the more difficult by the fact that we are neither a small town nor a big city. We therefore experience the technical challenges of both: a lack of resources and IT personnel on the one hand, and a large volume of projects and initiatives to manage on the other."

To effectively manage the disasters it might face, Rosny-sous-Bois needed a way to keep staff, officials, emergency personnel, and civilians apprised of any crisis it might encounter. To achieve this, they required a platform that was easy to deploy, easy to manage, and readily scalable. More importantly, that solution needed the capacity to integrate with a wide range of different communications systems and platforms.

After looking into the matter, Marc Cohen, the town's then-CTO, discovered BlackBerry AtHoc.

"Before AtHoc, we only had some paper instructions on what to do during an emergency – on who to contact, and we lacked an effective platform for sending out mass notifications to the community With AtHoc, we will be able to respond quickly, efficiently, and effectively, alerting all stakeholders and residents to the nature of an emerging crisis."

– Menahd Ouchenir, City Councillor in Charge of Communication and Digital City, Mairie de Rosny-sous-Bois

The Solution

According to Ouchenir, Mairie de Rosny-sous-Bois found that AtHoc Alert, BlackBerry AtHoc's mass notification solution, perfectly-suited its needs. Using AtHoc Alert, an organization can immediately notify all relevant personnel of a situation. AtHoc Alert can also be used to send mass notifications to the citizens of a particular town or city.

"AtHoc Alert was the main feature we were keen on," says Ouchenir. "The ability to send a mass notification to everyone – civilian, emergency responders, and city officials alike – is a necessity in our PCS. That's why, when we first discussed AtHoc, the lion's share of the discussion was focused on Alert."

AtHoc Alert wasn't the only feature that caught Mairie de Rosny-sous-Bois's attention, however. After a deep dive into BlackBerry AtHoc's capabilities, Ouchenir and his team also found themselves interested in the merits of both AtHoc Account and AtHoc Connect. AtHoc Connect enables interoperability between organizations with different communication networks, while AtHoc Account empowers government agencies with the ability to monitor the safety status of personnel during an emergency.

The Deployment

Mairie de Rosny-sous-Bois recently finalized the changes to its PCS. Now that its new crisis management process is down on paper, it can begin fully integrating BlackBerry AtHoc within its community and bringing that integration to other organizations in its region. According to Ouchenir, the town is starting with simple use cases before deploying BlackBerry AtHoc in more complex ways.

"The first scenario we are currently deploying is an alert button which could be used by a person at city hall in the event that someone displays threatening behavior," says Ouchenir. "From there, we intend to create more elaborate scenarios and deployments. Eventually, the plan is to be capable of managing any and every crisis from formation to conclusion."

"We have some other situations that we're looking closely at, as well – natural risk, for example," he continues. "Such

events require a unified response across organizations such as the national police force, firefighters, and ambulances. Having a tool which can centralize crisis information and notifications is therefore invaluable."

To bring these organizations together, Ouchenir and his team plan to use AtHoc Connect. AtHoc Account, meanwhile, will allow Mairie de Rosny-sous-Bois to gain real-time safety information about important personnel and ensure a quicker, more effective response overall.

"Ultimately, I like to think of our current situation as that of a professional sportsman," says Ouchenir. "His performance might already be excellent – but they can always be better, and he'll always be looking to improve. We want to improve our reactivity and effectiveness in a crisis, and we think AtHoc is the right solution to help us do so."

BlackBerry

The Future

"When the construction of our new subway stations is completed in 2022, it will bring a huge influx of people to Rosny-sous-Bois," Ouchenir explains. "That will be excellent for our community, but it will also go hand in hand with some risks. Those are risks we'll be able to manage through AtHoc."

To that end, Mairie de Rosny-sous-Bois is also hoping to collaborate with organizations such as RATP (which controls the subway lines in Paris and the Paris area) and SNCF (which runs the trains). Such agencies, Ouchenir explains, generally employ their own security and maintenance personnel. Bringing these personnel into the loop is just as important to crisis management as notifying civilians of a disaster.

"If something happens in one of Rosny-sous-Bois' subway stations, for example, if it's a minor incident, RATP or SNCF can handle it on their own," explains Ouchenir. "Otherwise, they could use BlackBerry AtHoc to immediately notify the local or national police force – or any other personnel they think are necessary to address the situation."

The idea is to bring multiple security companies, public sector organizations, and law enforcement agencies together into a single chain. That way, no matter the emergency, it will be easy to bring in whoever can best manage it. Although crisis communication technology is still relatively new in France, Ouchenir is hopeful.

"We saw what happened in Barcelona. What has been happening in Europe over the past years," says Ouchenir. "The ability to quickly exchange information between multiple agencies means a much more efficient response to attacks like that – and ensures they'll cause less damage. I think agencies are very willing to collaborate, especially nowadays."

And BlackBerry AtHoc is just the tool to help them do so.

About BlackBerry

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