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(l-r) Habitec Security Director of Operations Pat Ehram, Central Station Manager Tracy Ehram and President John Smythe have directed the company to a sparkling .24 false alarm dispatch rate within Toledo, Ohio.

HABITEC

Breaks False Alarm

HABITS

Taking a hard look in the mirror at its alarm management practices proved an eye-opening experience for Ohio's largest independent security provider. However, Habitec Security took the bull by the horns to slash false alarms and establish a model program worthy of the Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award. **By Scott Goldfine**

IT'S NEVER TOO OLD TO TEACH AN OLD **DOG** — or in this case an established alarm monitoring company — new tricks. Although founded back in 1972 it was not until much more recently that Toledo, Ohio-based Habitec Security decided to really get serious about revamping its alarm management tactics and techniques. In seemingly no time, Habitec swiftly forged a more structured companywide initiative that has optimized procedures, reduced false alarms and minimized unnecessary police dispatches.

"It took us until 2011 to truly grasp the problem false alarms cause for responding authorities," says Habitec Security President John Smythe, whose late father James Smythe founded the business more than 40 years ago. "At Habitec, we do not want to be part of the problem; we want to work toward a solution. Once onboard with reducing false alarms as the goal, we reached out to SIAC [Security Industry Alarm Coalition] and have since cultivated a strong partnership."

In 2012, Habitec worked closely with the local police department and sheriffs while rolling out Enhanced Call Verification (ECV), which resulted in a 20% false alarm reduction the very first month and has since reached 57%. The firm also made a policy change on residential panic alarms that cut that type of alarm by 90%, as well as created a false alarm notification program and raised awareness among the customer base originating with the point of contact at the time of initial sale. These changes have won law enforcement's attention and endorsement.

"In looking at the statistics regarding false alarm calls,

we have observed a trend regarding Habitec Security," says Captain Tricia White of the Lucas County (Ohio) Sheriff's Office. "In comparison to the many alarm companies that we deal with, [Habitec's] rate of false alarm is significantly lower. The efficiency and thoroughness of the company is of great value to not only the Lucas County Sheriff's Office but also its citizens."

Habitec's implementation and ongoing support of a multitude of proven best alarm management practices have allowed it to slash its false alarm occurrences. These actions and results have led to the company capturing the industry's most prestigious alarm management accolade: the 2015 Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award.

Founded in 2005 by SIAC, the False Alarm Reduction Association (FARA) and *Security Sales & Integration*, and subsequently officially endorsed by the Installation Quality (IQ) program, the PDQ Award annually recognizes a security company that best demonstrates a proactive, cooperative and successful effort in false alarm reduction strategies. The PDQ program's mission is to raise industrywide awareness, promote partnering with responding agencies for public safety, motivate alarm companies to be proactive and provide workable models.

Applicants participate at no charge and are evaluated by three judges in a rigorous and thorough process that analyzes 14 areas (*see box*). In another very close competition, Habitec narrowly edged out runners-up (*see sidebars*) Amherst Alarm and Engineered Protection Systems (EPS).

"I have judged industry awards for a few years and it doesn't get easier, with this year's PDQ recipient a prime

ALARM MANAGEMENT: PDQ AWARD HANDED TO HABITEC



Habitec owns and operates its own monitoring center in Toledo, Ohio, where since 1972 it has grown to 90+ employees. Besides providing premium service, Habitec offers the latest technologies, such as video verification.

example. The scores were so close judges had to go over the top two contenders several times before a winner could be agreed upon,” says SIAC Director Ron Walters. “Habitec Security stood out for the lengths they go to be in contact with customers after their alarms have tripped. With user error the leading cause of alarm problems, this intimate relationship between the company and their customers is the most effective way to reduce their dispatch footprint.”

Habitec is able to take advantage of being a full-service electronic security provider that sells, installs, services and monitors

100% of its accounts. This soup-to-nuts chain allows the firm to take ownership of all facets of the customer experience. Having operated its central station for more than 30 years, Habitec is Ohio's largest independent security provider with monitoring services delivered to in excess of 17,000 clients. In addition to Toledo, the company also deploys some of its 90+ associates at two branches in Columbus, Ohio, and Charlevoix, Mich.

“Our entire company has embraced false alarm reduction,” adds Smythe. “We understand it is good for law enforcement, our company and the industry as a whole. With these combined efforts we have taken our dispatch rate from .68 to .24. We are very proud of our progress and consider it an honor to be recognized.”

Given the service, satisfaction, harmony and superior public safety prudent alarm management among provider, customer and law enforcement, instituting policies and procedures such as Habitec's makes an unimpeachable business case all around. Furthermore, the company's newfound PDQ notoriety serves notice and encourages other providers that they need not be a large, national company to implement effective and responsible programs.

SSI pumped Smythe for all the details on the company's false alarm regimen, his take on the industry's approach to the issue and the keys to Habitec's overall success.

What drove Habitec Security to mount a comprehensive false alarm reduction program?

John Smythe: We always knew false alarms were an industry problem, but never peeled back the shell to look if we were part of the problem. I had friends in the industry who told me about two-call verification and other false alarm management programs that they had implemented. This made me run our false alarms stats. In 2012, we determined that we had an alarm factor of .8 and we then knew we were part of the problem. At that point we developed a false alarm committee with an action plan and started working on the problem.

Who are the primary people responsible for developing, implementing, fine tuning and maintaining the program? How was the mission accomplished organizationally?

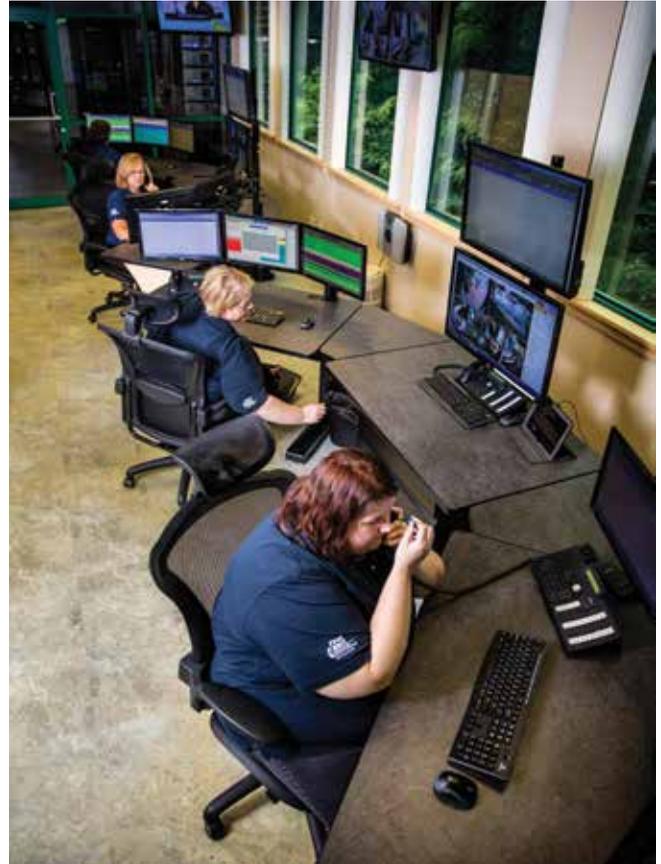
Smythe: Tracy Ehram, central station manager, Pat Ehram, director of operations and myself. We met with all department heads to determine how they could be of help on false alarm reduction. After analyzing all of their input we created an action plan and began implementation.

What modifications to the plan had to be made along the way and why? What are some of the areas you would still like to see improvement in and what are you doing to achieve it?

Smythe: We went for the largest reduction first with the implementation of ECV and more frequent requests for updated contact information. Since then we have researched higher volume false alarms issues and went after these areas including outdoor motion protection and residential panic alarms. We would like to implement a more cost-effective video verification option. I believe our manufacturers will have great solutions for this in the very foreseeable future.



Central Station Manager Tracy Ehram (*above*) has been instrumental implementing Enhanced Call Verification (ECV) within Habitec. The firm's facility (*right*) handles monitoring for more than 17,000 customers.



How costly of an undertaking was this; how did you budget for it?

Smythe: The cost to implement our plan of action was minimal. Our senior management team was involved from the beginning, and determined we could accomplish all of this with existing staffing levels. The implementation of two-call verification has saved our operators time by reducing callbacks to the authorities to cancel alarms.

How difficult was it to get Habitec's personnel to conform to the new policies and procedures? What has the internal feedback been?

Smythe: I would say the feedback was mostly positive. Our sales staff had to get used to explaining ECV and why it's a better form of response. Reducing false alarms equals faster response to good alarms.

What are the advantages of operating your own central rather than contracting with a third-party monitoring company?

Smythe: We would never have been this successful with a third-party central station. Owning our central station was critical to our success. It allows us to implement changes quickly and react to problems that we see in an effective manner. It allowed us to take 100% ownership of the project.

What standards and practices do you believe are most important for successful alarm management?

Smythe: Proper end-user training on install is critical. It is important for our customers to feel comfortable using their systems, which will also lead to fewer false alarms. ECV is very effective in reducing false alarms. We feel that it should be mandated by all jurisdictions.

What were the challenges in implementing the plan on the customer side? What has the overall feedback been from your customer base?

Smythe: We had very little issues with the implementation of ECV. Any customers that did have an issue initially understood

why we were doing this after we discussed it with them. General false alarm management is more difficult with commercial accounts. Just 3% of our customers cause 65% of our false alarms, and a majority of them our commercial/governmental clients.

What were the challenges implementing the plan on the law enforcement side? How did you get their buy-in?

Smythe: We work very closely with law enforcement in our area. I am on a committee with the Toledo Police Department that helps review false alarm policies. They have noticed and appreciated a reduction in false dispatches from Habitec. Another large county in our area went to required two-call verification shortly after we made it company policy. They are believers in the value of alarm systems and appreciate our efforts to eliminate any nuisance that they may cause.

What kind of feedback have you received from colleagues with other monitoring providers? Have you inspired any of them?

Smythe: We have a lot of friends in the industry that influenced our decision to address our false alarm issue, and I have shared our success story with other colleagues. I know of at least one company that we directly influenced in their decision to reduce false alarms with their customers.

How have the results meshed with your projections and expectations?

Smythe: We have exceeded our expectations. We have been able to reduce our false dispatches by 65% since launching our

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initiative. I can't say enough about Tracy Ehram, our central station manager, and her team! They embraced this company initiative, and succeeded beyond our imagination.

Do you believe your approach/plan should serve as a blueprint for other monitoring centers and alarm companies to follow?

Smythe: It is much better to proactively address the false alarm issue than have to react to a negative alarm response policy change from your local PD. What we have done is not rocket science; it just takes organization and time. Take what others have done and see what will work for your company, create benchmarks and work toward a reduction.

Looking at the industry, what do you believe the future holds for police response to burglar alarms? How will the landscape change?

Smythe: As law enforcement continues to implement well thought-out policy changes, alarm response should continue for the foreseeable future. In the meantime all alarm companies need to proactively implement good false alarm policy. I see video verification becoming a strong solution as it becomes more economical.

Does Habitec presently offer video verification? What are the prospects and challenges in this realm?

Smythe: We do offer video verification, and it is very helpful in the reduction of false alarms. The price points make more



SSI Editor-in-Chief / Associate Publisher Scott Goldfine (left) and SIAC Executive Director Stan Martin (right) presented Habitec Security President John Smythe with this year's PDQ Award at the ESX event in Baltimore.

sense in commercial applications currently. I think pricing on equipment and services will continue to drop, making it a more cost-effective solution for homes.

What are some of Habitec Security's overall keys to its business success?

Smythe: We have been so successful over the years because of our people. I would put our team up against any in the industry. Our people understand the direction of our company is headed and what their role is in that vision. We were recently named one

PDQ RUNNER-UP: Amherst Puts Alarm Management First

Founded by CEO Tim Creenan and his wife, Maryann, in 1984, Amherst Alarm is a full-service installation monitoring provider serving Western New York. With 55 employees, Amherst operates its own computerized UL monitoring center and its .039 police dispatch rate for the city of Buffalo in 2014 helped it claim finalist recognition for the PDQ Award for the third year in a row.

Highlights of Amherst's fastidious alarm management program include: a letter on Enhanced Call Verification (ECV) that demonstrates the process followed when an alarm occurs; sales staff uses an Installation Quality (IQ) program script about procedures, and client duties; employs Alarm Verification and Notification Procedures as set by ANSI/CSAA CSV-01-2004; from central station to service department, uses SedonaOffice to track and follow up on all dispatches (false or real); holds weekly meetings to address problem accounts and what action is needed; and invoices notices, newsletters, IQ info brochures and Web site show clients variety of ways to prevent false alarms.

Tim Creenan is active in local (Western New York Electronic Security Association), state (current president of the New York State Electronic Security Association) and national (Electronic Security Association) groups in leadership and board positions. He has also been invited to speak at the False Alarm Reduction Association's Annual Training Symposium, on ECV processes and quality control for alarm companies. Prospects and clients can take a tour of the Amherst Alarm facility and see much more about the company via its YouTube Channel (youtube.com/user/AmherstAlarmInc).

"As we celebrate the 30th anniversary of the founding of Amherst Alarm, I believe we have demonstrated the high level of continued commitment we have to reducing and eliminating false police and fire dispatches," says Creenan. "I am confident the processes we employ, with the IQ program and Enhanced Call Verification, have made Amherst Alarm the leader in Western New York State for systems that do not generate false dispatches."

Congratulations to Amherst Alarm on being a 2015 PDQ Award finalist.



Amherst Alarm has been a PDQ runner-up three straight years. Shown above, its CSAA Five Diamond Central Station and Buffalo, N.Y., area headquarters.

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of the best places to work in Toledo, so not only is our team great at what they do but they like doing it! This makes a difference.

We are a very forward-thinking company in regard to technology. All new customers have interactive services included in their service, we recently rebuilt our entire central station bringing it up to the most current technology, we have added a hosted access control solution, and we hired a director of technology, amongst many other technology initiatives

Lastly, do you believe the PDQ program is valuable to the industry and can help make a difference?

Smythe: The PDQ recognition has been great for Habitec. It was another incentive for our team to work on a problem, and should be an incentive for all alarm companies to address any false alarm problem they may have. Our team was so excited when we were named the PDQ winner because it acknowledged all of their hard work. We will be doing a press release to the periodical/news stations in our community. We also plan on sending out a copy of the cover story to our local law enforcement. We plan on using this in our sales presentations, because we know customers see value in it. They don't want false alarms either! SSI

14 PDQ Best Practices

1. Advertising, sales literature provide realistic expectation of alarm response
2. Salespeople explain permitting requirements, fees and fines
3. Use of SIA CP-01 control panels
4. Use of Enhanced Call Verification (ECV)
5. Contact customers after every false alarm
6. Track worst false alarm offenders and take action if needed
7. Instruct customer on verification process and keep call lists updated
8. Ongoing communications with customers
9. Installers have minimum NTS Level I or II training
10. Customers thoroughly instructed on all system operations
11. Checklists used for installers and customers
12. Unique or additional initiatives (e.g. video verification)
13. Development of strong working relationship with local law enforcement
14. False dispatch rate provided, along with letter from associated agency



PDQ RUNNER-UP: EPS Exercises Dispatch Discipline

Celebrating its 50th year in 2015, Engineered Protection Systems (EPS) is a full-service installation and monitoring provider founded in Grand Rapids, Mich. What began as an inconspicuous, local business with a few employees has mushroomed into a multistate operation with 200+ employees, six locations and thousands of satisfied customers. During the past decade, EPS has more than doubled in size to in excess of 19,000 residential, commercial and industrial customers.

The firm operates its own UL-Listed and CSAA Five Diamond-Certified monitoring center, from which it serves accounts throughout Michigan, Wisconsin, Illinois, Indiana, Ohio and Kentucky. EPS was named a Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award runner-up for the second consecutive year. The company notched a dispatch rate of just .13 in the Grand Rapids jurisdiction.

In its immaculately organized PDQ entry, EPS especially impressed program judges in the areas of advertising and sales literature; use of CP-01 panels and Enhanced Call Verification (ECV); customer instruction and training; ongoing customer communications; installer and technician education; using checklists; and development of a collaborative working relationship with local law enforcement. The firm's ECV implementation has resulted in a more than 90% reduction in dispatches since September 2005.

"EPS has established excellent relationships with the local responding authorities," says Director of Business Development David Hood. "We have an open-door policy with the local police, fire, rescue and 911 personnel. We also offer tours of our facilities as well as coordinate meetings when necessary. To ensure we are on the same page as authorities, we make sure to update all parties whenever there is a procedure change of any sort at EPS. Our proactive communication and overall coordination allow us to effectively respond to authorities and customers alike."

EPS has created a False Alarm Task Force that meets biweekly to discuss false alarm issues, if they have been resolved and the appropriate remediation measures that may be necessary. Customers with excessive false alarms are scheduled for contact and the task force follows up at the next meeting to ensure progress has been made.

"EPS is an exceptional company to work with whose opinion we trust as experts within the security industry," says Grand Rapids Police Chief David Rahinsky. "I value the exemplary communication EPS employees provide in developing optimal central station alarm procedures, ensuring timely and effective alarm responses, and continuing to develop high-quality service protocols through regular educational meetings and training sessions."

Congratulations to EPS for being a 2015 PDQ finalist.



Local authorities appreciate EPS' reliable alarm monitoring. At top, EPS' David Hood accepts a public safety award from Grand Rapids (Mich.) school system officials.