F or most endeavors worth pursuing, when all the components come together harmoniously it can be a beautiful thing to behold. Alarm management is a powerful case in point. Combining the proper equipment, system design, installation techniques, user training, customer care, monitoring procedures and law enforcement communications reduces nuisance alarms and false dispatches while also increasing the protection of people and property. Now that truly is a beautiful thing.

No one is blending all those moving pieces together more seamlessly and effectively than Warrendale, Pa.-headquartered Vector Security, which serves more than 270,000 customers throughout the East, in California and national retailers. The company’s all-encompassing alarm management program has propelled it to become the first two-time recipient of the 8th annual Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award.

“I was impressed with Vector Security and the professional documents they have implemented to communicate with law enforcement and customers to establish strong relationships,” says Gerry Miller, past president of the False Alarm Reduction Association (FARA) and a PDQ program judge. “Salespersons explain permits, fees and fines for false alarms in their jurisdiction. The use of checklists that require the customer’s signature, tracking false alarms and follow-up after each false alarm, and in-house and external training for installers were additional highlights.”

Founded in 2005 by the Security Industry Alarm Coalition (SIAC), FARA and SECURITY SALES & INTEGRATION, and now also officially endorsed by the Installation Quality (IQ) initiative, the PDQ program raises industry-wide awareness, motivates alarm companies to be proactive and provides workable models. The PDQ Award annually recognizes the security company that best demonstrates an enthusiastic, cooperative and successful effort in false alarm reduction strategies. The winner also receives a check from Honeywell.

Applications for the free program are evaluated by three judges in a rigorous and thorough process that addresses 14 areas of consideration (see box, page 36). This year, Vector Security scored exceptionally high and consistent marks to narrowly edge out finalists Alarm Detection Systems, Amherst Security and Engineered Protection Systems (see sidebars).

“The voting for this year’s PDQ Award was perhaps the closest yet, and in fact several applicants could easily have won,” says SIAC Director Ron Walters, a PDQ judge who was on hand during the award presentation at the Electronic Security Expo (ESX) in Nashville, Tenn. “The main aspects that separated Vector Security was their universal application of ECV [Enhanced Call Verification] and CP-01 panels to all customers. This high level of commitment to these two important industry standards gave Vector Security enough separation to be named the winner.”

In its compelling 60-page submission, Vector Security listed a 2012 police dispatch rate of .13 within the Loudoun County, Va., area served by the company’s Columbia, Md., branch. That rate was verified in a lengthy and personal letter of support from the Loudoun County Sheriff’s Office False Alarm Reduction Unit’s alarm administrator.

“If the PDQ Award is to be awarded to the company ‘that promotes cooperative best practices, reduces unnecessary dispatches and give the most complete information to responding officers,’ then Vector Security should receive that award,” wrote Shelleie S. Reid. The letter points out that while the region is served by more than 350 alarm companies, Vector Security is in a class of its own and details several ways in which the firm goes out of its way to serve its customers and assist law enforcement.

“We strive to lead the industry in everything we do, from customer service to technology to alarm monitoring,” says Vector Security President and CEO Pam Petrow. “We consider false alarm prevention a high priority because it helps preserve financial and human resources, and ensures that first responders are available for true emergencies.”

Vector Security, with Petrow and her predecessor, John Murphy, both being SS/Industry Hall of Fame inductees, has been guided by uncommonly astute business leaders who also champion industry causes. In addition to capturing the PDQ honor, Vector Security notched the rare distinctions of also being named runner-up for both 2013’s Installer of the Year and Integrated Installation of the Year awards. Those add to an ever-growing legacy of accolades. It’s time to take a
peek under the hood to more closely examine the precise and powerful engine that drives Vector Security.

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

Pam Petrow: The program was developed with input from all segments of the business — sales, operations and central station. Each controls a piece of the solution and all are needed to be included in order to assure they had ownership of the program. On a daily basis, the false alarm coordinators in each of the branches oversee activity and work with internal departments, the customer and the responding agencies to address issues. We have an individual at a corporate level that compiles the data and creates reports to show progress or shortfalls on a comparative basis by quarter. With the initial launch, we provided training at the branch level as well as a comprehensive program for 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?

Pam Petrow: We continue to adjust our response protocols as needed. In addition, we have developed collateral to be E-mailed, and also refined end-user material to be easier to use and to encourage interaction. We continue to seek ways to reduce commercial dispatches that are caused by user error. With turnover in personnel and cleaning services, this is a constant challenge. Having panels that are more user-friendly and integrating interactive services has helped but needs to be expanded.

How costly of an undertaking was this; how did you budget for it? How does it fit into ROI terms?

Pam Petrow: Ours is not a hard cost model. We know we will have better agency response and a happier customer that will not attrit if we address problems that cause dispatches. In addition, fixing repeat alarms reduces the central station traffic and associated costs for responding to the activations as well as allowing us to handle real emergencies in a more timely manner.

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

Patricia Killian (False Alarm Program Manager): There hasn’t been any difficulty. All employees are trained on our policies and procedures, which allow us to provide a higher level of customer service. We’re able to reach out to the customer and resolve the false alarm problem they may be having.

How do you coordinate efforts between your installation and monitoring departments/personnel? Are there a lot of meetings...
and discussions? What does each side bring to the table?

**Killian:** We utilize our software to flag accounts that have false alarms. The central station will assign a code to an account; that code generates notification to the branch managing the account. The managing branch then contacts the customer to resolve their problem and works with the central station if special instructions need to be placed on the account to avoid any further dispatches.

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

**Petrow:** There are several advantages, but mainly we are able to hire and train our own operators on procedures that are specific to Vector Security. We are also able to better manage quality control as well as equipment upgrades to make sure our customers get the best and most up to date monitoring services possible.

What role do standards like CP-01, practices such as Enhanced Call Verification and training, NTS for example, play in successful alarm management?

**Killian:** ECV has been one of the best practices put in place, along with electronic verification. We saw an immediate decrease in the number of dispatches when we put these into play. These two practices alone reduced dispatches by 35%. CP-01 was instrumental in getting our manufacturers onboard with dispatch reduction, which allowed customers to be accustomed to having that few extra seconds to disarm their system versus the immediate transmittal of a burglary signal and subsequent busy signal on their phone line.

What were the challenges in implementing the plan on the customer side? Did any problem accounts become more problematic? What has the overall feedback been from your customer base?

**Killian:** We did not see a lot of challenges from residential customers, as our mailing campaigns informed them of the changes we were making and the benefits to them. For the few that complained, once they were advised of the reasons we were doing this and that we could save them from being fined by their municipality, they jumped onboard. Large retail accounts took a little more convincing. Our National Accounts Division (NAD) provided a great deal of training, and presented statistics and costs savings. Eventually the national retailers came onboard. That was probably one of our bigger challenges but our NAD team did well with it.

What kind of feedback have you received from colleagues with other security companies? Have you been able to inspire any of them to be more proactive and conscientious?

**Killian:** We are well respected by colleagues regarding our program. We have had companies call to discuss what we do and how we do it. Our dispatch Web site has been shown to other companies, allowing them to view how we track our data.

How have the results meshed with your projections and expectations?

**Killian:** We set goals early on. Once we reached that goal we created another. Our goal now is to continue to reduce false alarm incidents each year, which we do, and to continue our program with the same enthusiasm that we started with.

Vector Security operates in a sometimes, cold and hostile weather environment. How does that affect your approach to technology, design/installations, maintenance/service and practices/procedures?

**Killian:** Cold weather can be difficult, but not to the same degree as the warmer weather that is accompanied by severe thunderstorms and hurricanes. Our technicians inspect doors and windows very carefully prior to placing sensors on them. Our offices involve all employees to make sure customers are serviced as soon as possible and discuss special instructions with customers to reduce their risk of accumulating false dispatches.
Can your approach act as a blueprint for other alarm companies to follow? Is it applicable to firms of all sizes?

Killian: I say yes, wholeheartedly. We believe our program is one of the best in the industry and our results back that up! However, there are a number of variables. Every company can and should have a program in place no matter what size they are. Smaller companies may not have the ability to dedicate an employee solely to a program; however, they can still implement a reduction program by using best practices.

What impact does the PDQ program have on the industry?

Killian: The PDQ program is very valuable to our industry. The information flow from the winners of these awards helps those companies that don’t have a program in place to start one, and those that do may find the information they need to fine tune and achieve their goals.

Vector Security is the first two-time PDQ winner. How has your alarm management program evolved since the first award?

Killian: We’ve learned so much since then and as more public safety agencies passed ordinances, we have had to continuously review our practices to make sure we were in compliance. Our offices have had to add staff to ensure compliance with permitting/registrations and requirements from these ordinances that may have been stricter than others. Our National Accounts Division created a department specific to registrations/permits for our national retail accounts.

ADS ADDS VALUE BY PRIORITIZING ALARM MANAGEMENT

Founded in 1968, the family-owned and operated Alarm Detection Systems (ADS) is a full-service installation and monitoring provider based in Aurora, Ill. Serving approximately 30,000 customers throughout Northern Illinois and neighboring states, ADS operates a UL-Listed CSAA Five Diamond Certified central station. Founder Bob Bonifas is a member of SSI’s Hall of Fame, and the company won the PDQ Award in 2008.

Among the areas ADS’ 57-page submission most impressed PDQ judges were advertising and sales literature setting realistic response expectations; tracking repeat false alarm offenders and making sure installers are well trained. One of the unique aspects of ADS’ offerings is video verification. In fact, the company supports the Partnership for Priority Video Alarm Response (PPVAR). For more on this, see page 57.

The PDQ endorsement letter from Joseph Groom, commander of police for the Aurora Police Department, in part read: “The population of the city of Aurora has grown more than 70,000 people over the last decade, to become the second largest in Illinois. Alarm Detection Systems Inc. is by far the most dominant commercial and residential alarm company in our community. Despite this growth, false alarms dispatched from our dispatch center from private alarms are down slightly over 40% over the aforementioned period.”

As further evidence of its commitment to improving alarm response, ADS Vice President Ed Bonifas, immediate past Central Station Alarm Association (CSAA) president, is co-chair of the Automated Secure Alarm Protocol (ASAP) program. ASAP speeds up the alarm notification delivery from central stations to public safety answering points (PSAPs). He has also crusaded against municipalities taking over and monopolizing fire alarm monitoring.

Congratulations to ADS for being a 2013 PDQ finalist.
AMHERST IS ADAMANT ABOUT RIGHT ALARM RESPONSE

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 more than 50 employees, Amherst operates its own computerized UL monitoring center and its .051 police dispatch rate for the city of Buffalo in 2012 helped it claim finalist recognition for the PDQ Award.

Highlights of Amherst’s rock-solid alarm management practices include: customer letter on Enhanced Call Verification (ECV) demonstrating the process followed when an alarm occurs; sales staff using the Installation Quality (IQ) information script about procedures as well as client duties; posting false alarm reduction tips on its Web site and contributing to local newspaper articles; strict use of SIA CP-01 compliant control panels; using SedonaOffice management software to track and follow up on false alarms; and making sure all installers are minimum NTS Level I certified.

“This letter is to inform you that Amherst Alarm adheres to the City of Buffalo’s Permit and new Customer Notifications, in a timely matter,” Catherine Perry from the City of Buffalo Permit & Inspection Services Office of Licenses, wrote in verifying the professionalism of Amherst’s conduct. “There are very few unregistered customers, and invoices are paid in an acceptable manner.”

Creenan is active in local (Western New York Electronic Security Association), state (New York State Electronic Security Association) and national (Electronic Security Association) groups in a variety of leadership and board positions. He has spoken at the FARA Annual Training Symposium on CP-01 and ECV processes.

Congratulations to Amherst Alarm on being a 2013 PDQ Award finalist.

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Engineered Protection Systems (EPS) is a full-service installation and monitoring provider founded in Grand Rapids, Mich., in 1955. What began as a modest, local operation with a handful of employees has blossomed into a multistate company with more than 180 employees, six branch offices and thousands of satisfied customers. During the past decade, EPS has more than doubled in size to 18,000+ residential, commercial and industrial customers. The firm operates its own UL-Listed and CSAA Five Diamond-Certified monitoring center.

In its very slickly assembled PDQ entry, EPS particularly captivated judges in the following categories: advertising and sales literature; use of CP-01 panels and 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.

To the latter point, an excerpt from Grand Rapids Chief of Police Kevin R. Belk read as follows: “EPS, a long-standing security provider in the city of Grand Rapids, is an exceptional company to work with and whose opinion we trust as experts within the security industry. 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.”

Belk credits EPS’ implementation of ECV in the fall of 2005 for achieving upwards of a 90% decrease in false police dispatches. The submitted alarm dispatch rate for Grand Rapids was .15%. EPS was also a finalist for this year’s CSAA Five Diamond Marketing Marvel Award (see SSI’s upcoming November issue).

Congratulations to EPS for being a 2013 PDQ finalist.