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While ADS does not stand for Accurate Dispatch Services, given Alarm Detection Systems' history of false alarm reduction it just as well could. The security provider's staunch approach, which includes a task force and fewer false dispatches amid baseline growth, has earned it 2007's Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award.

ADS WAGES WAR ON FALSE A

BY SCOTT GOLDFINE

In the 1980s, "The A-Team" burst into TV viewers' living rooms to bring thugs to their knees when no one else could. Our industry has its own version of "The A-Team," only in this case the bad guys are false alarms and the mission is keeping unwanted dispatches from intruding on some of those same living rooms. The "A" stands for Alarm Detection Systems (ADS), and the grade it received in winning the 2007 Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award.

The Aurora, Ill.-based security and fire installation, alarm monitoring and services provider has managed to slice its dispatches as a result of false alarms from what they were when it was only one-third its current size. The company's comprehensive commitment to false alarm reduction led a three-judge panel — one member apiece from program organizers the Security Industry Alarm Coalition (SIAC), False Alarm Reduction Association (FARA) and *Security Sales & Integration* — to recognize ADS for its special achievement.

Established in 2005 (Pittsburgh's Vector Security was the initial recipient; Brink's Home Security captured the 2006 honor), the PDQ program aims to stem the false alarm problem by recognizing those installing and monitoring companies that follow established industry practices and partner with law enforcement to achieve the highest quality in police dispatch requests. The goal is to raise industry-wide awareness, motivate alarm companies to be proactive and provide models that work for others to follow.

A runner-up for the 2006 PDQ Award (*this year's runner-up was Custom Alarm, see page 59*), ADS and President/CEO Robert Bonifas have reputations as key proponents of proactive and effective alarm management practices. Family owned and operated since its founding more than 40 years ago, ADS protects homes and businesses throughout Northern Illinois and neighboring states against the threats of burglary, fire and medical emergencies, as well as low temperature and flood damage.

Bonifas, who was inducted into the *Security Sales & Integration* Hall of Fame in 2004, is a past president of both



ALARMS

the National Burglar and Fire Alarm Association (NBFAA) and Central Station Alarm Association (CSAA), and co-founder of the Security Network of America (SNA). In 1992, he chaired one of the original false alarm committees. It focused on three "Model Cities," including Elgin, Ill., which is part of ADS' territory.

How serious is ADS about false alarms? Enough to invest in at least one full-time false alarm reduction professional for 14 years, and to currently have several employees assisting on its False Alarm Reduction Team. Today, the company averages 15 fewer false alarms per day despite tripling its size. Its average number of false alarm dispatches per alarm site during 2007 was just .44.

ADS has implemented several other proven best practices, including clear, ongoing communications and training for customers and its own employees; use of SIA CP-01 compliant alarm control panels; deployment of Enhanced Call Verification (ECV); identification and immediate follow-up of problem accounts; frequent account updates; and development of a working partner-

ship with responding law enforcement (*see sidebar on page 57*) and firefighters.

In the following Q&A, Mr. B. (Bonifas) discusses how this methodology has been executed so spectacularly and why his "A-Team" feels no pity when it comes to thwarting false alarms.

FIRST STEP IS TAKING RESPONSIBILITY

What were the drivers in deciding to mount such a comprehensive false alarm reduction program?

Bonifas: We feel very strongly that being responsible for the dispatches made starts with the alarm company. We want to make every effort and have the police departments we work with want to continue to work in a cooperative way, and that takes some additional effort on our part. With police and fire resources stretched as far as they are, it's a responsible act for an alarm company to make an additional call or two and try to determine the validity of the situation.

We also believed that finding somewhat permanent solutions to problem customers would reduce our costs

Fostering Favor With Law Enforcement

A CRITICAL COMPONENT OF OPERATING a successful, respected alarm installation/services business is establishing and maintaining an amicable, collaborative partnership with law enforcement. This is also one of the overriding criteria for the Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award, which this year was presented to Alarm Detection Services (ADS).

The company's winning entry cited a multitude of ways in which ADS works closely with law enforcement. SSI asked Norma Beaubien, one of the PDQ judges who serves as director of the Montgomery County (Md.) Department of Police False Alarm Reduction Section and president of the False Alarm Reduction Association (FARA), what makes ADS so unique.

What makes ADS worthy of winning the PDQ Award for false alarm reduction?

Beaubien: The single biggest thing that set ADS apart from other submissions is its creation of a False Alarm Prevention Team, where there are dedicated employees whose sole job is to work with problem accounts to reduce and/or eliminate their false alarms. As part of this program, the employees are empowered to take whatever means are necessary to reduce false alarms, including visiting customers on-site and switching out equipment when necessary. Additionally, ADS has instituted an excellent, comprehensive in-house alarm technician training program, which is second to none.

How does ADS serve as a role model for other alarm companies?

Beaubien: ADS has a full false alarm reduction program in place that includes education on false alarm prevention, actively pursuing ECV [Enhanced Call Verification] for existing customers, putting tips on its Web site and having technicians leave FARA false alarm prevention tip brochures with customers. These are all initiatives that every other alarm company in the U.S. could institute with little trouble, and which would have a significant impact on the reduction of false alarms.

What procedures did ADS implement that you believe have made the biggest difference?

Beaubien: ADS' program, which requires staff to contact each and every alarm user after a false alarm has occurred, has definitely made a huge impact on its false alarm rate. By giving personal service in this manner, ADS is able to quickly rectify problems and/or retrain alarm users when needed, before they become a burden to law enforcement. Programs such as these, coupled with other best practices ADS employs such as installation of CP-01 compliant panels, use of ECV and acceptance of electronic cancellations, helped make ADS the perfect candidate for this year's PDQ Award.

What does ADS do to foster strong relations with law enforcement?

Beaubien: ADS has worked closely with the law enforcement community for many years in its efforts to reduce false alarms. The company has developed close working relationships with law enforcement in the communities in which it serves, and even has the former city of Aurora police chief employed on as a consultant. ADS contributes to the law enforcement community through workshops designed to educate police and fire officials on advances in alarm equipment and alarm industry initiatives.

What is the value of the PDQ program to the recognized companies, and the alarm industry?

Beaubien: The PDQ Award program seeks to raise the bar for recognizing comprehensive false alarm reduction programs initiated by alarm companies. PDQ winners are viewed as heroes to the law enforcement community because they truly go above and beyond in their efforts to be good corporate partners. They demonstrate, on a daily basis, their willingness to get involved through the implementation of false alarm reduction programs in their own companies and through the expenditure of resources to have a positive impact on reducing false alarms to which law enforcement responds.

If even one other company institutes a false alarm reduction program because of what they see PDQ winners doing, then it has been a great success and reflects well on the alarm industry as a whole.

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ADS' Ed Bonifas accepts this year's PDQ Award. (l-r) SIAC's Stan Martin, Honeywell's Ron Rothman (the company gives the winner \$1,000), Bonifas and FARA's Steve Heggemann.

in the long run and history has proven us right.

Who are the people responsible for developing, implementing, fine tuning and maintaining the program?

Bonifas: We have three primary people who manage this program.

Rick Raper, our central station manager, in addition to focusing his staff on making multiple call verification as effective as possible, is responsible to enter false alarm problem accounts identified by his central station personnel on the service log as a repeat false alarm problem.

Melissa Hodgetts is our in-house person in the service call center who runs reports daily to identify a problem in its infancy. She has the authority to create a service request for obvious problems and she relays the activity to Ron Buerger.

Buerger is a 10-year-plus false alarm reduction expert who is the primary person responsible for reducing false alarms from problem customers. He takes the failure to achieve solutions for problem customers as a personal challenge.

We also have a sales staff of more than 20 people who are very aware of the fact that this is a hot-button area with us, and they are diligent in getting additional phone numbers to be called before dispatch.

Our entire central station staff is 5-Diamond Certified, and is aware of the importance of making sure we are doing our due diligence in determining the validity of the call. It is a program that has been embraced company-wide, and our employees are all onboard with implementing it.

ANY COSTS ERASED BY LATER GAINS

What modifications to the plan had to be made along the way?

Bonifas: Customer contracts were amended stating that ADS would be implementing a second call. We also had to set our automation system up to list two phone numbers instead of just the primary one. We made a full-out effort to get reliable phone numbers from customers when we were having communications with them. We also started making two calls to the customer premises, so if they have call-waiting, and the phone is communicating with the panel, on the second call we can get through.

We try to avoid issues with a person not knowing or forgetting a passcode, as we will try to verify them by contacting an additional key holder. We will call the premises, and if we receive no answer but have a 'cancel' from the panel we will accept it as electronic verification.

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

Bonifas: Fourteen years ago the cost was one full-time person in the field and some office time to manage the in-house false alarm data. We believed we were already suffering the expense of repeat service calls. The false alarm team concept merely shifted the problem customer to our false alarm expert from our other techs. So from a budget standpoint, we believed there would be a nominal budget impact, and we were right.

We now have six service department team leaders assigned problem customers by our on-the-road false alarm expert,

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A Customized Approach

ROCHESTER, MINN.-BASED CUSTOM ALARM/Custom Communications Inc. was launched by President/CEO Leigh Johnson from the basement of his home in 1968. Today, the provider of residential and commercial security systems and monitoring, and sound and media solutions, employs nearly 70 people.

A hallmark of the company's success is first-rate customer service that includes an emphasis on effective alarm management and minimizing false alarms/dispatches. These initiatives have led to Custom Alarm notching a .33 false alarm dispatch rate in 2007, and being named runner-up of the Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award two of the past three years.

Techniques used by the company include consistent messaging throughout its advertising, sales literature and contracts; thorough education, training and follow-up; acceptance of electronic cancellations; SIA CP-01 compliance; and excellent working relationships with responding police and fire departments. Custom Alarm Director of Marketing Nikki Johnson, one of several family members involved in the business, lends insight to the company's false alarm prevention program.



Custom Alarm President/CEO Leigh Johnson is proud of the company's UL-Listed central monitoring station and dispatchers who recorded a .33 false alarm dispatch rate in 2007.

What inspired Custom Alarm to mount a comprehensive false alarm reduction program?

Nikki Johnson: As a company and particularly as a central monitoring station we are very conscientious about serving our customers. It is our responsibility to make sure we are setting our customers up with the tools they need in order to have the lowest number of false alarms. We realize that a lower number of false alarms makes better business for us, happier customers, and also pleases local law enforcement.

How has the program evolved over time?

Johnson: An area we modified was fire alarm response — we do not do any two-call verifications on fire alarms. Late 2007, we met with the local fire marshal to discuss fire responses and dispatches. It was agreed that we would make one call to the home/business at the same time we are dispatching the fire department. This has further reduced the number of times the trucks roll for unnecessary calls.

In the third quarter of 2007, we drafted a follow-up letter that was sent to the customer after calls are made on false alarms. This letter thanks the customer for taking the time to discuss the alarm event and outlines procedures for preventing false alarms. It also helps re-enforce the need for preventing false alarms.

What have been the internal challenges of implementing the program?

Johnson: Since we have always had false alarm reduction as a top priority from sales to installation, it was not a big adjustment. Our central station dispatchers have been the affected most. They are the ones who make the follow-up calls and help customers determine the best course of action. It was really our employees who rallied for two-call verification as an effort to minimize dispatches, and increased efforts to reach customers prior to unnecessary response.

As for the change in the fire dispatching, it too came from the central station re-searching those call procedures beforehand. They now have the ability to call the customer and 'double check' that the alarm was not accidentally set off. This additionally helps make our relationship with the customer even stronger as they see the efforts we go through to make sure they are safe, yet not sending help when it is unnecessary.

Is this plan appropriate for any security company?

Johnson: It should work for most companies. The real success of our program comes from communication with customers, which is key. This is a program that works for any monitoring company willing to invest the time to make it work. These programs do not cost a lot; it is an investment of time by the dispatchers to follow-up with customers when their system sends in false alarms, and to work with law enforcement to develop a working relationship.

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and they have been trained to be experts in solving these problems as well.

DEALING WITH CLIENTS, COPS, CP-01

What were the challenges in implementing the plan on the customer side?

Bonifas: As new customers become part of the ADS family, they are asked for names to call before dispatch. As far as getting information from established customers, we sent a mailing to all of our customers giving them full information on our anticipated change in process and asking them to supply us with secondary phone numbers. Customers who have given us feedback are impressed and appreciate our efforts.

What about the law enforcement side?

Bonifas: All law enforcement agencies were happy to hear of the second call verification. We had no problem getting any buy-in. Skeptics became believers when they saw the actual



ADS CEO Robert Bonifas (left) discusses false alarm prevention with SSI Editor-in-Chief Scott Goldfine.

numbers improving as the program was implemented.

What role do standards, practices and certifications play in successful alarm management?

Bonifas: CP-01 is and will be a major driver in reducing false alarms in the long run. That said, lacking an upgrade to a CP-01 panel, CP-01 will not solve the problem with some 20-million-plus legacy alarm systems. Enhanced Call Veri-

fication has the dramatic advantage of immediately impacting legacy systems, while new CP-01 systems can begin the first day the program is instituted.

Training and certification programs, such as 5-Diamond online training and certification of all central station personnel, make a major impact in more effectively verifying that an alarm signal is in fact false so we do not dispatch law enforcement.

ESTABLISHING A MODEL PROGRAM

Do you believe others should use ADS' approach?

Bonifas: Yes, we are a leader in the industry and have been more than willing to share our information with others who may want to model their improvements after ours. It is a situation that needs to be addressed by the entire industry. In fact, it is the only ethical thing to do. ■

Scott Goldfine is Security Sales & Integration's Editor-in-Chief. He can be reached at (704) 663-7125 or scott.goldfine@securitysales.com.



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