HST BRINGS THE HAMMER DOWN ON FALSE ALARMS

Too many installing security companies and monitoring providers resign themselves to merely accepting as fact that false alarms are a necessary evil that come with the territory. Even providers that are more conscientious commonly make the mistake of addressing false alarms as isolated incidents or as a problem separate and apart from other aspects of the business. A shining exception to such pitfalls is HS Technology Group, whose comprehensive alarm management practices and procedures have been validated with the 7th annual Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award.

"HS Technology Group has taken on the false dispatch issue as a company-wide effort. From sales and administration to the technical side of the company, they have confronted the issues with a 'we can fix it' approach," says Ron Walters, director of the Security Industry Alarm Coalition (SIAC). "It is obvious by HS Technology's realistic advertising literature, fully trained sales personnel, installation standards and monitoring company requirements that everything is geared toward proactive false alarm reduction through working closely with customers and law enforcement," adds Gerry Miller, a past president of the False Alarm Reduction Association (FARA).

Launched in 2005 by SIAC, FARA and *SECURITY SALES &*

INTEGRATION, and now also officially endorsed by the Installation Quality (IQ) program, 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. Four judges grade applications that address 14 categories.

This year, HS Technology nudged out finalists Monitronics and Vector Security for the trophy, which was presented at the Electronic Security Expo (ESX) in Nashville, Tenn. In its winning 78-page submission, HS Technology listed a 2011 police dispatch rate of .18 within the Baltimore County area where it is based. That rate was verified in a letter of support from

HS Technology Group proudly displays its newly won Police Dispatch Quality Award in the reception area of its Baltmore headquarters.

HS Technology proves that implementing a successful false alarm management program does not require an especially large staff or internally generated monitoring services. What it does require is a well-coordinated plan, outstanding communication, follow-through and a commitment to achieving results. All of which HST demonstrated in spades in capturing the 7th annual Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award. **by Scott Goldfine**

HST President Stuart Forchheimer (center in gray jacket) has placed a premium on customer care and new technology since launching the company in 1993.

the manager of the false alarm reduction unit. The achievement was accomplished in collaboration with HS Technology's third-party wholesale monitoring provider, Lydia Security Monitoring (d.b.a. COPS Monitoring) of Williamstown, N.J.

"There were two main reasons for initiating our false alarm reduction campaign," says HS Technology President Stuart Forchheimer. "The first was our ongoing commitment to our customers. We're continually introducing new programs that add value to our services and contribute to the safety of the families we protect. The second reason was as treasurer for the Maryland Burglar and Fire Alarm Association and involvement with FARA's 'train the trainer' program, I felt a sense of responsibility and wanted to motivate other members to get involved. Minimizing false alarms is proven in helping law enforcement better address actual threats."

A journey inside HS Technology reveals how effectively managing alarms, minimizing false dispatches and partnering with law enforcement have become operational pillars at the core of the company's daily business activities. Plus, Monitronics' and Vector's programs are spotlighted. Together these methodologies offer other providers inspiration to produce similar results and successful tactics to emulate.

HST Founder and President Stuart Forchheimer is active in both the False Alarm Reduction Association and Maryland Burglar & Fire Alarm Association.

HOMEGROWN FIRM HITS HOME RUN

Having worked on and off for his father's general contracting company for more than 15 years, in 1993 Forchheimer leveraged his computer/IT experience and fascination for technology to form Homesafe Security Technology (HST). Since then, the firm has continuously reinvented itself from being one of the nation's leading authorized ADT dealers to its present status as an independent, diversified technology solutions provider with commercial, residential, new construction, electrical and design divisions.

"HST will be celebrating our 20th anniversary in 2013," notes Forchheimer. "From the beginning we have grown from a modest alarm company to one of the region's most respected and awarded full service technology integrators. Simply put, what truly makes us different is our people and how we go about assisting our clients day to day."

In addition to capturing the PDQ accolade, those facets of HST's business collectively garnered it finalist recognition for *SSI*'s 2012 Installer of the Year (*see July 2012 issue*) in the small to midsize company category (fewer than 150 employees). Some of the virtues that make HS Technology unique include:

- Investing in efficiency technologies, making for a pleasant working environment and happier customers (e.g. Sagequest integration with Sedona Office to dispatch closest field tech and provide customer's history)
- Phones answered by live operator with minimal transfers
- Ongoing training for techs and other staff
- Flexibility to customize and integrate technologies quickly as they change
- Interactive showroom featuring products and services
- Product/services tested internally before deployment to ensure ease of use and identify potential future service calls
- Provide manufacturers product feedback to act as partner in development process
- Installers passionate about helping others, with minimum 10 years' industry experience
- Focus on solutions and thinking "outside the box" rather than selling a product
- Customers for Life preferred service loyalty plan
- In-house master electrician to handle electrical and generator division
- Associates motivated with internal events, as well as charitable initiatives
- Active with many industry groups

"We have a top-down commitment to excellence in all aspects of our operation," says Commercial Sales Manager Brian Shrake, one of HST's 25 associates.

HST's tighly knit 25-member staff pulls together as a team whether its in planning meetings (*right*), in the field (*bottom*) or engaging in the company's many community and charitable causes (*below*). In addition to the PDQ Award, HST was an *SSI* 2012 Installer of the Year finalist.

"Starting with excellent, engaged personnel at every level committed to providing the finest products and services to our customers and then following that up with a tremendously effective customer service program. Every individual in the company takes personal responsibility to ensure our customers receive the attention and support to remain happy and loyal."

That approach has been carried through to HST's alarm management practices, which function so well because they have been interwoven into the fabric of the entire enterprise. The program includes emphasizing installer/user training, implementing Enhanced Call Verification (ECV) and GSM cellular technology on new installations, tracking and following up on all false alarms, ongoing customer communications and reminders, and establishing and maintaining a strong relationship with responding law enforcement.

PROGRAM POINTS AND BENEFITS

The planning of HST's false alarm program took several months over the course of a year. The company had regular monthly meetings to discuss what each team member would be responsible for and developed an outline with a timeframe for implementation. Toward the end of the process weekly meetings were held to fine tune the process.

Highlights of the program include: advertising, sales literature and contract give a realistic expectation of the response that will be made when an alarm occurs; salespeople explain how alarm permitting and fines work; information provided on false alarm prevention and the false dispatch issue; customers instructed about verification and call lists; ongoing customer communications on false alarm prevention; detailed training of alarm users including how to cancel a dispatch request; and use of other devices like checklists, postcards, fliers, etc.

"Most people hesitate and feel the need to question change, especially when it requires additional work or responsibilities," says Forchheimer. "We asked our staff to view these changes as if they were our customer and how it would positively affect their experience. Since implementing the new procedures, our staff takes pride in knowing our customers will get the proper education from a company that truly cares. Once we began to receive good suggestions we knew they were embracing the program."

Additional technical and procedural aspects of the program include: installing SIA CP01-compliant control panels; employing ECV (two-call verification) on all intrusion alarm signals; and installers certified as National Training School (NTS) Level I or II, or equivalent as well as additional training. As Forchheimer details, while these elements can be costly the payoff is well worth it.

"CP01, ECV and additional training are all beneficial and should be incorporated into any successful alarm management program," he says. "Yet there are

tremendous costs associated with updating legacy panels, educating customers on why they need to be updated, the cost to convert a subscriber base to ECV, as well as the additional costs associated with the time for the training of the staff and technicians. However, the investment brings reducing of false alarms and our customers receiving improved support and a lower dispatch rate."

Indeed, the return on investment (ROI) in terms of results is quite measurable. According to Forchheimer, it includes the amount of time spent working central station reports being lessened because they become smaller. Plus, systems are in place to handle repeat offenders and customers' municipal fines have dropped dramatically.

3rd-PARTY RELIANCE & CLIENT CARE

One of the trickiest aspects of implementing a comprehensive false alarm reduction program can be when the installing company does not handle the alarm monitoring itself, but rather must coordinate with and rely upon a third-party provider. As it turns out, there are pros and cons to both scenarios. But in either case, the bottom line is it is entirely manageable and no less essential.

"The biggest challenge we faced was asking them to participate in helping us manage our program," says Forchheimer. "They are an independent third-party central station and most of what we asked for was never discussed when we signed up. But working with a third-party central brings a lot of benefits to the table as well. They can help us model our program with 'what has worked' for some of their other dealers."

Having access to this information, ac-

HS Technology representatives with *SSI*'s Scott Goldfine (*left*) during the PDQ Award presentation at this year's ESX event in Nashville, Tenn.

Founded in 1994, Dallas-based Monitronics Int'l is one of the nation's largest security alarm monitoring companies. The third-party wholesale monitoring firm, which in 2011 was also a PDQ Award finalist and won FARA's Industry False Alarm Reduction Achievement Award, provides monitored business and home security system services to 700,000+ residential and commercial customers through its network of nationwide, independent authorized dealers.

Monitronics' False Alarm Control Team (FACT) increases communication with subscribers and builds relationships with responders while decreasing false alarms.

Monitronics has implemented a False Alarm Control Team (FACT), overseen by Supervisor Jorge Rodriquez, to further increase communication with subscribers. Among the objectives are building relationships with responding authorities and decrease false alarms that take police off the streets to handle true emergencies. Specialized reports are run with outbound phone calls for the subscribers who either have issues with their system or have forgotten their password. In 2011, FACT made personal visits to jurisdictions in different states, and worked with marketing to communicate and promote the changes through mail inserts and social media. In addition, Enhanced Verification Plus was launched as a program where the central station operators place one more call to the contact number before dispatching the authorities.

In its finalist PDQ entry this year, Norma Beaubien, False Alarm Reduction Section Director for the Montgomery County (Md.) Police Department, wrote: "Monitronics has instituted policies and procedures that are having a positive effect on the reduction of false alarms. While all are significant, the commercial reduction is particularly impressive. I know how hard it is to reduce commercial false alarms when customers can write off the losses, so I realize a tremendous effort was put forth to achieve the numbers. A residential dispatch rate of .18 means police respond to a false alarm approximately once every five years for each customer. That is truly a remarkable statistic and one of which Monitronics should be very proud."

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cording to Forchheimer, along with HST sharing what is working on its end, helps Lydia Security Monitoring (COPS) become a better third-party station as well, and provides added benefits to other dealers seeking to cut down on false alarms. Lydia has offered to provide HST with mailing services, customized E-mail and text message alerts, customized bill stuffers and more. "The real key is in working with us to reduce our overall signal traffic as well as developing a platform for us to manage our E-mail and text message alerts for our clients."

One of the most critical considerations for a successful false alarm reduction program is contacting customers after every alarm. The objective is to determine what took place, identify the cause of any false activations and implement corrective measures to curb future issues. In cases of repeat offenders or "problem" accounts, more serious action could entail discontinuing service. HST continues to fine-tune these procedures.

"Throughout the process we had different opinions on which central station reports to work and how much time we should direct to frequent abusers," says Forchheimer. "We are still focusing efforts on the automation part of the process. The idea is to have messages with a link in the E-mail for the customer to click on and generate a service request for a courtesy visit at no charge to resolve the problem. We want it to be very easy."

The pain of implementing a comprehensive alarm management plan is eased by positive customer feedback. Just because you think you know what is best for them does not mean customers appreciate it. Many resist any type of change. Fortunately for HST, most clients have given the proverbial thumbs up. It helps to have engendered trust based on a history of personalized care. **>>**

"We make it a point from the very beginning to let every customer know they have a support system and if they should have a problem, we're here to help," says Customer Service Rep Tina Ray. "We are with them every step of the way and we ensure our clients understand the operation of their system by the time the installation is complete. Because we build a close relationship from the beginning, they are more attuned to listening and understanding the importance of being a responsible alarm owner."

FINAL PIECE IS PEACE WITH POLICE

Equally vital to cultivating a bond with your employees, monitoring provider and clients is reaching out to responding law enforcement agencies. Out of the four cornerstones of this equation, this is the area that requires the most proactivity and often the most care and sensitivity.

As Baltimore County's Alarm Reduction Unit manager's endorsement letter illustrates, HST excels in this area: *It is a pleasure to report Homesafe's false alarm dispatch rate in 2011 was 0.18. This means customers on average experience a false alarm less than once every five years. Homesafe's low dispatch rate prompted me to pull its rate for each of the last three years. Homesafe's false alarm dispatch rate never exceeded 0.19. Homesafe's sustained commitment to false alarm reduction is to be commended.*

Besides extending itself to build rapport with law enforcement, HST also pursues other avenues to further the cause. The firm is active in FARA — with Forschheimer recently being presented with that organization's W. Rex Bell award for his contributions — and the local alarm association.

"My involvement in the two associations and my willingness to work on these challenges probably converted any possible skeptics," says Forchheimer. "Our low false alarm rate speaks for itself, and our positive working relationship with law enforcement is an added benefit. Our company is continually improving our methods of operation and we have been active in supporting changes to the laws that will reduce false alarms."

Still, he laments the limitations of being just one company in the grand scheme of reducing false alarms. Many states do not require ECV or much training, have limited resources due to the economy and are unable to enforce what they do require. At the same time, Forchheimer empathizes with some companies' struggles to generate the resources for such a program. Nevertheless, he believes a relatively minimal effort can make a significant dent in this critical industry challenge.

"Minimally, every company should be able to identify signal traffic at their central station on a regular basis," he says. "This information should be prioritized, ranking dispatches highest, communication problems second and any 'troubles' third. They should also be able to get corresponding info from local authorities that have tracking software in place for false alarms. This will identify how big a problem a company has and the major offenders. Such a program can reduce attrition and generate more referrals." ∎

RECOGNITION VALIDATES VECTOR'S ONGOING EFFORTS

For more than 40 years, Pittsburgh-headquartered Vector Security has been a premier provider of intelligent security solutions tailored to the needs of the customer. The company offers a full suite of electronic security services for residential, business and national account customers across North America and the Caribbean through a network of branches and authorized dealers. Vector Security is a sister company of the Philadelphia Contributionship, a private insurance company founded in 1752, and provides security solutions to 260,000+ homes and businesses.

Vector Security nearly became the first company to capture its second PDQ Award as the firm took home the inaugural trophy in 2006. Next year, the company will mark the 10th year since launching its ambitious and comprehensive program to reduce false alarm activations. The 12-step plan consists of:

PDQ finalist Vector Security posted a false alarm dispatch rate of just .16 in Loundoun County, Va.

1. Understanding false alarm causes
2. Staffing
3. Account segregation
4. Internal awareness
5. External training
6. Counseling offenders
7. Inspecting system designs
8. Using ECV
9. Providing information updates
10. User introductory training periods
11. System operational programming changes
12. Using new technology and training

Vector has further fine-tuned, refined and enhanced those basic steps into one of the industry's finest false alarm management programs. As a finalist this year, Pat Killian, Vector's false alarm reduction administrator, entered the company's Columbia, Md., location for posting a false alarm dispatch rate of just .16 in its Loudoun County, Va., coverage area.

Excerpts from Killian's two-page letter of endorsement speak volumes about Vector's uncommon commitment to excellence: "Since taking over the unit, I have had different personnel within Vector Security call or E-mail just to welcome me. My office has direct access to people who can get things done. With other companies, my staff is shuffled around endlessly, wasting valuable time. Since the inception of our unit, Vector's dispatch rate has dropped more than 10%. I have never had one of Vector's customers call to complain about their service or tell me that they didn't know about the need to register. Vector Security exemplifies the highest standards of the alarm industry. Their commitment to false alarm reduction and assisting local law enforcement makes my job easier."

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