

INTRUSION

False Alarm Reduction Is Customary at Custom Alarm

Proven techniques that cut false alarms and police dispatches are business as usual for Custom Alarm. The company's assimilation of practices like two-call verification and following up on all false alarms helped it earn the 6th annual Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award. Find out what makes its outstanding false alarm management program tick.

By Scott Goldfine | August 01, 2011



A winning team: Custom Alarm President/CEO Leigh Johnson is flanked by COO Melissa Brinkman (left) and Director of Marketing and Vice President Nikki Johnson.

The 'C' in [Custom Alarm](#) could just as well stand for its *commitment* to excellence, outstanding *customer service* or *continuous improvement*. The latter ingredient, along with three others — deploying SIA CP01-compliant control panels and [enhanced call verification \(ECV\)](#), and proactive internal and external *communication* — played particularly prominent roles in the company capturing the 6th annual Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award. The honor validates Custom Alarm's efforts and success in effectively managing alarms, minimizing false dispatches and partnering with law enforcement.

Established in 2005 by the [Security Industry Alarm Coalition \(SIAC\)](#), [False Alarm Reduction Association \(FARA\)](#) and [SECURITY SALES & INTEGRATION \(SSI\)](#), the PDQ program raises industry-wide awareness, motivates alarm companies to be proactive and provides workable models for others. The [PDQ Award](#) annually recognizes the security company that best demonstrates an enthusiastic, cooperative and successful effort in alarm reduction strategies. Three judges grade applications that address 15 categories.

This year, Custom Alarm edged out finalists Monitronics and Bay Alarm for the trophy, which was presented at the [Electronic Security Expo \(ESX\)](#) in Charlotte, N.C. In its winning 43-page submission, Custom Alarm listed a 2010 police dispatch rate of .19 within the Rochester, Minn., area where its headquarters and UL-Listed and FM Approved central station are located. That rate was verified in a letter of support from the chief of police.

"False alarms take police away from real emergencies, risk lives, and make each alarm seem less credible," wrote Chief Roger Peterson. "The Rochester Police Department supports the attention that Custom Alarm gives to false alarm prevention. [Custom Alarm](#) has maintained a professional and cooperative relationship with the police department in working toward a mutual goal of minimizing false

alarms so officers can spend their time on the street responding to emergencies and working proactively with the community in addressing crime."

Founded in 1968 by President and CEO Leigh Johnson, the residential and commercial security and sound systems provider employs more than 70 people, and has branch offices in Winona and St. Paul, Minn. Brinkman is one of two of Johnson's daughters — along with Director of Marketing and Vice President Nikki Johnson — who has helped build a successful enterprise whose accolades extend beyond PDQ honors. Custom Alarm has also received notices from the U.S. Chamber of Commerce, Wal-Mart, Notifier, Bosch, United Way and [SSI's SAMMY Awards](#).

In the case of the PDQ distinction, Custom Alarm kept pushing forward and strengthening its alarm management program after having been a runner-up on several previous occasions.

"The first time we came close to winning this award we were simply honored to be mentioned among those finalists," says Nikki Johnson. "With each passing year, we became more determined to earn that top award. We worked harder on evaluating our program, the changes we could make and what more we could do. Having come so close all these years and worked so hard to get here makes winning all the more special to us."

Alarm system owners and responders alike are now benefiting from Custom Alarm's finely honed approach. These techniques and policies apply to outbound communications, marketing materials and contracts; sales and installation practices; customer and installer education/training; industry-established standards like CP01 and ECV; follow-up on false alarms and problem accounts; and working closely with local law enforcement.

Keep Customers' Eyes Wide Open



Once an installation is complete, a Custom Alarm technician shows the customer how to use their new system properly, discusses exit and entry delay times, and how to prevent false alarms.

Often the first representation a company has to a prospect is through its advertising and marketing materials. Thus, it is important ads and literature provide a realistic portrayal of how alarm systems function, and what response procedures are when an alarm occurs. This clear message must be consistently carried through the entire customer experience, including sales pitch, contractual agreement, installation, monitoring, and ongoing service and maintenance.

Custom Alarm gets clients off on the right foot by spelling out its alarm dispatch and false alarm procedures, and false alarm prevention program in its [contracts](#). In addition to outlining standard terms and customer responsibilities, the monitoring agreement discusses ECV (also known as two-call verification) and includes a section covering false alarm charges that the salesperson reviews with the customer. An emergency contact information form, or call list, explains alarm response and how to prevent false alarms.

Custom Alarm has found exercising ongoing vigilance to keep call lists up to date can be critical for nipping unnecessary dispatches in the bud. The company counsels customers on how to select keyholders and seeks mobile, home and office numbers for each person. In 2010, account verification letters and forms were mailed to all monitored alarm customers to check accuracy of the information on file. The initiative drew a participation rate of 82 percent, most of which involved account changes.

"We have a systematic way of updating and then logging changes to ensure the updates are done on each response," says [COO Melissa Brinkman](#). "We feel the [ROI \[return on investment\]](#) outweighs any costs because our dispatchers have more confidence in the people they are contacting and know they are able to verify alarms prior to dispatching law enforcement. The peace of mind knowing if a customer's alarm goes off we can reach someone to verify it prior to dispatching the police is immeasurable."



Custom Alarm has 10 techs with some level of NICET certification and 26 certified for power-limited systems. Online training was established with all departments having required courses. Employees are expected to train for at least 12 hours beyond what's required.

So as not to skip any key points, during the sales phase Custom Alarm representatives follow a checklist to educate customers on how a system can be tailored and used according to their unique needs and lifestyle. This includes discussing exit and entry doors, and how the system can be armed in different ways. The rep makes certain the customer fully understands how false alarm fees are incurred from local authorities and, if applicable, explains the permit process.

Minimizing System, User Errors

As it did when measured against most PDQ criteria, [Custom Alarm](#) earned high marks in the key installation areas of equipment, installer training and customer instruction.

SIAC recommends control panels meet the Security Industry Association [CP-01 standard](#), with all programmable options set to default, and all applicable UL standards. These are practices Custom Alarm has adhered to the past five years. In 2007, the firm introduced a loyalty upgrade program to help longtime customers migrate to newer alarm systems at virtually no cost to them. The upshot of enticing them to put their older technology out to pasture is ensuring the system operates with fewer problems — and less chance of false alarms.

"This was a big investment on the front end for us as a company, but the continued loyalty by these customers as well as knowing their systems are updated and communicating on the latest technology was worth it," says Nikki Johnson.

Custom Alarm has 10 technicians with some level of NICET certification, and 26 techs who are state certified for power-limited systems. In 2010, an online e-learning training program was established via [Total Training Network \(TTN\)](#) in which each department has required courses to complete. Employees are expected to undertake at least 12 hours of annual training beyond what's required.

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"We have set up a space arranged in classroom style with adjacent computer stations for online training equipped with headsets for multiple users," says Johnson. "It is used for departmental or technical training sessions. We also have a product rollout group to handle anything from new motion detectors to security panels. The team lays out details from product literature for salespeople to training requirements for technicians."

Once the installation is complete, a technician shows the customer how to use their new system properly, discusses exit and entry delay times, and how to prevent false alarms. The training includes telling them how to change the master code and add additional user codes. Other points include: "stay" and "away" arming levels; how to cancel alarms if they are accidentally set off; how to obtain service if the system malfunctions; and how variables such as an answering machine, call waiting or DSL may impact the alarm system.

Why It's Nice to Call Twice

Custom Alarm then smoothly hands new customers over to its central station. Hallmarks of its alarm management strategy on the monitoring side of the business include use of ECV and contacting customers after every false alarm.

"ECV has really changed the landscape of the way we dispatch on alarms," says Brinkman. "For example, in the first five months of 2011, without our two-call verification program we would have seen a 23-percent increase in the number of law enforcement dispatches. Had we called law enforcement instead of a second keyholder, they would have all resulted in false alarms."

Custom Alarm also places a premium on follow-up. Central station personnel review a daily dispatch record to identify alarms reported as false and schedule those subscribers to be called. Dispatchers determine the nature of the false alarm and offer service based on its cause. The outcome of the call (service ticket written, customer declined service, additional training needed, etc.) is logged in the account history. The information is then entered into a false alarm activity report summarizing all dispatches, history of the call, cause of the alarm and result of the dispatch.



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If [law enforcement](#) had been dispatched, Custom Alarm follows up with them for an update and adds that to the account as well. If law enforcement had been dispatched without the central station being able to contact a keyholder, the next day the customer is notified so as not to be surprised if they receive a notice in the mail from the police. Additionally, a disposition of events report is distributed to salespeople so they might personally call their customers to see if there is anything they can do to help.

And how does Custom Alarm handle troublesome accounts where [false alarms spiral out of control](#)? "We do not have any accounts that have a bad false alarm record," says Johnson. "We have such proactive

procedures in place that we do not have anyone who is problematic. We also offer customers that have false alarms free system inspections to ensure everything is working properly."

Custom Alarm also accepts electronic cancellations from the system's keypad following an alarm activation, but still calls to make sure everything is OK. Systems are set up to automatically test at least once a week, with any issues being noted and addressed. Caller ID on incoming calls to the central station in many instances helps operators know immediately who they are speaking with.



Founded in 1968, Minnesota's Custom Alarm is a residential and commercial security and sound systems provider that employs 70+ people, and has offices in Rochester, Winona and St. Paul. The firm operates a UL-Listed central station out of its Rochester headquarters.

There are three other essential factors contributing to Custom Alarm's high standard of alarm monitoring: dispatcher training, owning and operating its own facility, and its familial culture.

Besides the availability of training resources discussed regarding installers and technicians, all of the company's dispatchers and supervisors are now required to complete the [Central Station Alarm Association's \(CSAA\)](#) 40-hour online certification course. Dispatchers also have SIA certifications that are valid nationwide.

Having its monitoring center located within the company's headquarters helps Custom Alarm produce a well coordinated effort. Managers of sales, operations and customer services/dispatch team can interface on a regular basis. "We see a distinct advantage to being one company working together in one building," Brinkman says. "If there is an issue everyone is easily accessible to help resolve it; it particularly helps to have the salesperson involved. Every department brings a different perspective on how to best take care of the customer."

While size or ownership should not be determinants of the energy devoted to an effective alarm management program, there can be something to be said about a smaller, family friendly atmosphere. "As a smaller security company with our own central station in a concentrated market we are able to work with the key people in law enforcement in the communities we service," says Brinkman. "Virtually all of our dispatchers know our 'regular' customers, and the customers know our dispatchers by name. We are able to build rapport and loyalty."

Clients, Police Must Be in the Loop

Relationship building is a pervasive theme underlying effective alarm management. This applies to both customers and responding law enforcement. It's about open, ongoing communication to address their individual needs and keep them engaged.

Immediately following an installation, Custom Alarm sends the new customer a welcome E-mail that includes a link to the company's Web site where they will find common causes of false alarms and reduction tips, and permit information. The link is also embedded in all outbound E-mails and the

company's monthly e-newsletter, which always highlights a specific false alarm reduction tip. Welcome packets that include an alarm system quick guide cheat sheet and a refrigerator magnet with the central station's phone number are also mailed out. Printed information on the back of subsequent invoices reinforce the company's alarm response procedures, tips for reducing false alarms and a note on keeping keyholder lists updated.



Custom Alarm was named winner of the PDQ Award at ESX in Charlotte, N.C. Shown (l-r) are Custom Alarm's Leigh Johnson, SSI's Scott Goldfine, Custom Alarm's Melissa Brinkman and SIAC's Stan Martin.

As demonstrated by the [police chief's comment](#) at the outset, Custom Alarm excels in forging a cordial partnership with local law enforcement. "We have established a great deal of trust on both ends of the relationship," says Johnson. "Additionally, we are proud of the professional relationships we have with the fire departments."

As an example of this collaboration in action, the company has agreed with police to immediately dispatch on commercial alarms between the hours of 10 p.m. and 5 a.m. before contacting a keyholder. This has resulted in quicker dispatches and several apprehensions. In this circumstance, the police department has agreed to waive any false alarm fees that would otherwise be assessed.

In 2007, Custom Alarm got buy-in from fire responders in the development and implementation of a [CO detector monitoring](#) procedure. The firm provides those customers with code-protected lockboxes to hold entry keys the fire department can access to avoid having to break down the door.

Custom Alarm also distributes to police and fire departments a monthly alarm report of calls by county. Authorities say these reports help them double check their records.

"In our community, the police response to burglar alarm systems situation is great," says Brinkman. "We can attribute that to a great relationship that has been built over the years with our local law enforcement. The key is having an open line of communication."

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