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AMHERST STRONG-ARMS FALSE ALARMS

How appropriate that in the famously frigid locale of Buffalo, N.Y., a leading local security company is putting false alarms into deep freeze. Discover the commitment and techniques that allowed Amherst Alarm to break the ice and capture its first Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award.
By Scott Goldfine

THANKS TO THE PROACTIVE, conscientious efforts of upstate New York's Amherst Alarm, police have to shuffle off to fewer false alarms in Buffalo and the surrounding areas. The company's outstanding alarm signals management has resulted in it capturing the 2016 Police Dispatch Quality (PDQ) Award.

For more than 30 years, Amherst has led by example as an upstanding member of the local business, regional trade association and national security industry communities. At the same time, its professionalism has spurred growth that has the firm about to break ground on a new \$3 million headquarters that will expand its operational base to more than four times its present size.

Founded in 1984 by CEO Tim Creenan and his wife, Maryann, Amherst Alarm is a full-service installation monitoring provider serving Western New York. With 65 employees, Amherst operates its own computerized UL monitoring center and its .037 police dispatch rate for the city of Buffalo in 2015 helped it finally bag top PDQ honors after being named as a runner-up each of the previous three years.

"What struck me most about Amherst was their perseverance. Undeterred after being a runner-up several times, they continued to pursue the PDQ Award and with each application they improved in all categories," says Security Industry Alarm Coalition (SIAC) Managing Director Ron Walters. "This is obviously a company that constantly reviews their methods and results, and it shows. The PDQ application process requires a real effort to complete and I was very pleased they pushed through until they came out on top."

As a subscriber of the you-get-back-what-you-put-in school, Creenan is very active in industry groups and visible at events. His current and past roles include president of the Western New York Alarm Association; two-time president of the New York State Electronic Security Association; and multiple committee stints with the Electronic Security Association (ESA). However, the initiative and position of greatest impact where reducing false alarms is concerned has been his participation on the Installation Quality (IQ) program board.

"I encourage other security system companies to apply for the IQ certification, and by doing that it will give them the opportunity to [potentially] be recognized with a PDQ award in the future," says Creenan. "The IQ certification process we've gone through has been a key business method of growing our operation and we are glad to be recognized by SIAC with the PDQ award."





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ALARM MANAGEMENT: STOPPING FALSE ALARM STAMPEDES IN BUFFALO



Clockwise from top left: Monitoring Response Center Manager Rick Whalen checks one of Amherst's two generators; Marketing Coordinator Claire Kerstein and Residential Sales Manager Jeff Naab review house plans in the company's customer showroom; operators in Amherst's monitoring response center; and Commercial Sales Manager Matt Hoffmeister reviews fire alarm and CO detection plans for an upcoming project with CEO Tim Creenan.

Founded in 2005 by SIAC, the False Alarm Reduction Association (FARA) and *Security Sales & Integration*, and subsequently officially endorsed by the 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 tight competition, Amherst Alarm nudged out runner-up (see sidebar) Engineered Protection Systems (EPS).

Amherst's authoritative program includes: a letter on Enhanced Call Verification (ECV) that demonstrates the process when an alarm occurs; sales staff uses an IQ script about procedures and client duties; employs ANSI/CSAA CSV-01-2004 Alarm Verification and Notification Procedures; from central station to service department, uses SedonaOffice to track and follow-up all dispatches (false or real); holds weekly meetings to address problem accounts and action plan; and invoice notices, newsletters, IQ info brochures and website show clients ways to prevent false alarms.

While those are all key ingredients, an element that helped Amherst finally get over the hump to win its first PDQ Award was

establishing the new position of client satisfaction specialist. Designed to ensure clients are consistently operating their system to its fullest potential, this person contacts anyone having trouble to offer training and employs analysis tools to identify those not using their system.

"A reason this may be happening is that they may have had a difficulty with the system or a false alarm in the past and are now hesitant about using the system, thus not getting the protection desired," says Creenan. "Being proactive in this, we hope this effort gives the client confidence in using the system and that they use it in a way that does not create false dispatches."

Just ahead, Creenan explains other factors, nuances and strategies that have and continue to set Amherst Alarm apart. *SSI* congratulates everyone at Amherst as this year's PDQ winner.

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

TIM CREENAN: We decided back in the late 1990s to participate in the IQ Certification program to set us apart from our competition. We knew that certifications would show quality to people who were considering us to provide security systems for them. The natural results of using the IQ Certification program were the reduction of false alarms, better installations and better user training.

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

CREENAN: We involve all the different departments of our company to help provide better customer satisfaction. Our installation manager, Joe Schmidt, is also our IQ compliance officer. His job is to make sure we comply with all the IQ regulations and guidelines to make sure systems are installed properly. One of the things we do is meet on a regular basis to review the top false alarm offenders in the company. We work with them to reduce and identify the causes of the false alarms.

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?

CREENAN: We are constantly looking at the products we use to make sure they don't cause false alarms. We're also looking at installation methods to come up with better ways for installations to reduce false alarms. We review dispatches that are made on a daily basis, identify them as either a user or equipment error, and then respond accordingly.

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

CREENAN: The initial investment of achieving a quality control program was around \$500. Beyond that, the cost of administering the program has been very minimal and has far outweighed the previous cost we incurred from investigating false dispatches. We've reduced the amount of dispatches to investigate because of these new practices and procedures in place when we became IQ certified.

How difficult was it to get Amherst's personnel to conform to the new policies and procedures?

CREENAN: We explained to everyone in the sales, service, installation and monitoring departments the benefits of using these processes. For the most part, people were already doing the right things. We only had to tweak them slightly to make them better than before.

How do you coordinate efforts between your installation and monitoring departments/personnel? What are the advantages of operating your own central rather than contracting with a third-party monitoring company?

CREENAN: Each week the department managers have a meeting where they discuss the operations of the company. They discuss product issues, review a list of the top 50 false alarm generators, and look to see if service has been provided and if there are any errors we can retrain the customer on. It doesn't take long for them to identify any potential customer responses.

The advantage of having our own central station is speed of communications between the installation, service and monitoring departments, and that they all work together as a team so customers are handled properly and data is entered correctly. When there is a problem, we find a quick and accurate solution so that the customer gets the best service.

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

CREENAN: The CP-01 standard is in all the security panels we install and sets a standard for system configuration. The Enhanced Call Verification procedure allows dispatchers to double check if someone made a mistake with their system before notifying the police. Usually it's a second call to the customer's cellphone, so if there's a problem with someone operating the system setting it off accidentally, the homeowner or business owner will know if someone is supposed to be there or not.



(left-right) SIAC's Stan Martin, SSI's Rodney Bosch, Amherst Alarm's Tom Creenan and Honeywell's Gordon Hope during the official PDQ Award presentation at this year's ESX show in Fort Worth, Texas.

What were the challenges in implementing the plan on the customer side? What has the feedback been?

CREENAN: The customers get extra training from us that they typically don't get from other security system companies. Our people go through a standardized system of training to make sure the customer knows how to operate the system, how to test the system, and how to cancel a false alarm. Our customers give us very positive responses.

What were the challenges implementing the plan on the law enforcement side?

CREENAN: We haven't had any challenges on the law enforcement side. The observation we see is that fewer calls are being made to them. When we do call them, they have a high degree of confidence that there's a real event they're responding to.

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

CREENAN: We've shared our experiences, especially with Enhanced Call Verification. Once they hear about our results, and the low dispatch rate we have, and the processes we use, they begin to see the value in these false alarm reduction processes.

How have the results meshed with your projections and expectations?

CREENAN: We didn't know what to expect when we started doing these things, but we know our customer base has grown sig-

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Amherst Alarm Technical Service Manager Mike Saxer reviews server performance data in the computer room (left). Later, Saxer views a handheld surveillance monitor in the service department. The wall's control panels are used to simulate and test different applications for Amherst clients.

nificantly, and we have a very high rate of referrals from our existing customers that give us new business all the time; we know something is working.

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

CREENAN: Absolutely. By using these standards and guidelines, for example from the IQ Installation Quality program, there is a blueprint that allows other companies and the industry to achieve a greater customer satisfaction level from reducing false dispatches.

What about video verification as a tool to mitigate false alarms? Is this being practiced or investigated by Amherst?

CREENAN: We're using video verification on a limited basis for certain high security applications that traditional systems have trouble with, like outdoor parking lots, remote sights, those types of things. There are a limited number of clients who want the video verification in our market. There's an additional expense involved for installation and ongoing monitoring, so it's a specialized kind of client who needs that service.

Looking at the industry, what do you believe is going to happen with police response to burglar alarm systems? Is the situation getting better or worse?

CREENAN: In our region, we've seen the police response improve, because there are fewer dispatches resulting in a higher degree of confidence something is actually happening at the home or business. We've gotten callbacks on a regular basis from police dispatchers letting us know what caused the alarm, like a broken door or a smashed window or any situation like that. We have a great line of communication with the police and fire departments.

What are some of Amherst Alarm's overall keys to its business success? Also, what is your top challenge?

CREENAN: We've been doing things the right way, according to

the IQ standards and guidelines, and are always making sure we're thinking about what's the best way to do something for the customer, to make sure they understand all the options available to them.

Our top challenge is recruiting good people to work in our business and ensuring they have the right attitude and aptitude in making a career in the security system industry.

You are very involved in the IQ program, how so and why?

CREENAN: I'm involved with the IQ program because I believe the value it brings to our business is huge. The many things we've been able to accomplish over the years are because we've stuck to the IQ guidelines and standards in terms of how we operate our business.

From the way we design our systems, the products we select, the installation methods that are used, the monitoring standards that are used, and the customer training we provide, all contribute to a satisfied customer who then uses their system properly and refers other people to us.

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

CREENAN: The PDQ program raises awareness for the continued efforts of reducing false dispatches. The more we raise awareness about the problem they can create, the better it is for the industry and the consumer.

How are you leveraging the PDQ accolade to your company's advantage?

CREENAN: We're making sure everyone knows we've been recognized for our efforts with the PDQ Award. It's in our Internet marketing, from our website to our Facebook page, and all our print materials will highlight PDQ recognition as well. 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



RUNNER UP: Why EPS Also Stands for Exceptional Processing of Signals

CELEBRATING ITS 51ST YEAR IN 2016, 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 ballooned into a multi-state operation with more than 200 employees, six locations and thousands of satisfied customers. During the past decade, EPS has more than doubled in size to nearly 20,000 residential, commercial and industrial customers.

“EPS has continued focus on growth. Michigan is thriving in new construction, renovation and continues to attract new business,” says EPS Director of Business Development David Hood. “The largest opportunities for growth exist within our own footprint. A focus on vertical markets has been a strategy of our marketing, development and sales teams.”

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 third consecutive year. The company notched a dispatch rate of just .13 in the Grand Rapids jurisdiction.

“EPS has grown to have a major presence in their market,” says Security Industry Alarm Coalition (SIAC) Managing Director Ron Walters. “Honestly, if we could have given two awards this year would have been the year to do it. EPS has elevated themselves to respect and recognition. They frequently receive awards in many categories and there is no doubt that the PDQ is in their future.”

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.

“At EPS, our monitoring center is the lifeblood of our company. We have great focus on alarm management, Enhanced Call Verification and mutually beneficial partnerships with local law enforcement,” says Hood. “During the past year, EPS has redesigned our monitoring center with new workspaces and a more audio-friendly environment. EPS staff has a choice of sitting or standing throughout their workday providing greater comfort. EPS has also introduced additional monitors to showcase metrics and acknowledge top performers within the department.”

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.

“This is the third consecutive year in which EPS has been recognized as a runner-up for the PDQ Award. We plan to keep performing at the highest level possible; maybe someday we will earn the top honor!” adds Hood.

One of EPS’ top clients is Grand Rapids Public Schools (GRPS), for which it has deployed intrusion detection, access control and hybrid networked video surveillance systems. Like most of its customers, GRPS representatives can’t speak highly enough of EPS.

“EPS has been an optimal security provider and their products and services truly enhance the security and life safety of anyone attending, working or visiting a Grand Rapids Public School,” says GRPS official Larry Johnson. “I personally and professionally recommend EPS to any school district based on their ability to engineer the best solution, maintain a distinct level of performance, and communicate effectively in a timely manner.”

Congratulations to EPS for being a 2016 PDQ finalist.

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