Reduction Strategies for False Alarms

During the author’s career at a specialty retailer with more than five thousand locations, the company received its first notice that a false alarm ordinance existed and was being levied against a store in the Phoenix market. A letter arrived demanding $17,000 in fines for false alarms from a single store in that market.

Since then, such ordinances have become the norm and every organization would be well served to develop a control and prevention program. There’s no faster way to make an impact on controllable expenses than to implement an effective false alarm reduction strategy and program.

It is impossible to adequately cover all aspects of a successful false alarm reduction strategy in a short article so we will concentrate on several effective measures not commonly addressed by most large alarm services users or providers.

Effective reduction begins well before user training and supervision: It begins with the selection of alarm components for an environment. Selecting dual- or tri-technology motion detection equipment is just the beginning.

Consider impact factors such as the age of the facility and its vulnerability to vibration from sources such as nearby train tracks, high winds or the presence of large rats in the building after hours (those of you with New York City locations can relate!)

Wide gap door contacts can accommodate worn, aged doors that can cause false alarms due to play between the closer and the door jamb.

Pet-friendly motion detectors or curtain-style detectors can take into account the movement of vermin in the building at night. Remember in such circumstances to mount the detector on the ceiling or a vertical wall away from any nearby shelving in view of the sensor. A small mouse or rat moving along a shelf in close view of the detector looks like an elephant to the sensor.
Another workable strategy is to install dual sensors and program the alarm so that both sensors must register an intrusion before activating the alarm. It is also possible to position detectors to view the same area from different perspectives, ensuring even greater discrimination between actual motion and other stimuli.

Examining the zones that account for the greatest amount of false alarm activity will often yield valuable insight into priority causes to be addressed. For example, if the majority of false alarms are occurring within 90 seconds of the facility’s closing signal, the most likely cause is employees attempting to dash back inside to retrieve forgotten items before the arming signal takes effect.

One likely solution would be instruct the central monitoring station that alarms occurring within two minutes of the closing signal should be responded to with a call to the premises, and then to a keyholder at home rather than with an immediate call to the police dispatcher. In such a scenario, probably 95 percent of false alarms would be eliminated with no loss of protection.

Studies have validated the dramatic decrease in false alarms when users switch from a single-button personal panic transmitter to one with dual buttons. Requiring that both buttons be depressed for not less than a half-second eliminates at least half of all false alarms from this source.

Lastly, organizations can begin to reduce false alarms by establishing a false alarm coordinator position. The coordinator would be responsible for tracking every alarm in the preceding 24 hours and addressing its causes with operations management.

The coordinator and the alarm vendor must have authority to work at the management level in order to marshal efforts to address any deficiencies in new employee orientation, permitting, fines processing, corrective service call management and procedural improvements. An effective coordinator with adequate authority can achieve a reduction of 20–40 percent in actual dollars paid for false alarms.

When penalty amounts climb into the hundreds of thousands of dollars — as they often can with typical restaurant or retail chains — false alarms rise to the level of attention of boards of directors and corporate officers. At this point, the security department had better be ahead of the game with a solution already in process!

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