



By Stacy Deveraux

THE GAME CHANGER

See page 2 for Brian's comments.

IP and cellular fire alarm communications make a difference



What hasn't already been said—numerous times—about the supposed imminent demise of the U.S. hardwire public switched telephone system and new fire alarm communications technologies? About four years ago, IP fire alarm communicators came on the market, followed by cellular devices becoming more readily available two years later. Dealers' use of IP and cellular communicators picked up slowly. Adoption by what NFPA calls an Authority Having Jurisdiction (AHJ)—an individual such as a fire alarm inspector—was even slower. However, manufacturers of the more popular IP/GSM devices are seeing huge upticks in demand as many dealers across the country have reportedly started to use this new technology to their advantage to expand current customer offerings and, more importantly, win over new accounts. "Once a couple facilities near to each other cut the phone lines and go with IP or cellular fire alarm reporting, it seems word of the big cost-savings benefits starts to spread quickly among local property owners," said Gene Pecora, director of customer marketing at Honeywell Fire Systems. "And once dealers understand how easy some of these communicators like the IPGSM-DP are to set up, this 'new money-saving technology' becomes a top-selling tool for them." Concern over GSM communications and recent claims of its possible "sunset" or discontinuation is a topic currently creating a lot of controversy

within the fire alarm industry. The GSM Association estimates 80 percent of the world currently uses GSM technology when placing wireless calls, which amounts to nearly 3 billion people worldwide.

"There are other types of cellular technologies out there, but none have the proven track record of GSM. This tried-and-true method is not going away anytime soon," Pecora said.

Fire alarm and security integrator ASG Security in Wilmington, N.C., pitched the cost-saving benefits of transmitting fire alarm signals via GSM to the owner of a large apartment complex protected by 17 fire alarm control panels. By eliminating two phone lines per control panel, ASG illustrated a cost-savings of nearly \$18,360 a year. This not only won the company the job, but the fire alarm maintenance, testing and monitoring contracts for the whole complex, too. Soon, others followed.

"It's crazy. Since that time, we've made five more sales," said Justin MacDaniel, an ASG sales consultant. "We had one small family business call us because they wanted to switch their phone over to IP, but their fire alarm was the snag. Now their fire alarm communicates over that same IP line, and in eight to 10 months, they'll see that return on investment."

Dealers are starting to see IP and cellular communicators not only as valuable sales assets but also as problem solvers that are less challenging than dealing with plain old telephone service (POTS) lines. Mark Popkowski, president of Modern System Concepts in Houston, describes a current project involving the monitoring of fire alarm systems throughout a high-profile company's multiple high-security facilities.

"When this company upgraded its internal communication structure to VoIP, it caused many

issues with their monitoring,” Popkowsky said. “We’re now in the process of converting everything to an IP solution for them. Considering all the issues that we’re seeing pop up with changeovers to voice over IP, IP and cellular communications

are proving to be more reliable for transmitting data.”

Fire alarm communicators capable of offering two different communication paths—IP as primary and GSM as backup—appear to be gaining the respect of AHJs. Enhanced

pathway supervision is another plus.

“Initially, our local AHJ was interested but hesitant to ditch the phone lines. He’s taking a lot of responsibility in his hands when signing off on this new means of communication,” MacDaniel said. “The

IP/GSM unit we use checks in so frequently—every five minutes—and that was what made the fire marshal comfortable.”

As for AHJ approvals, the preference is to involve local authorities from the start. Many dealers pioneering the use of IP and GSM communications within their markets have reportedly gone so far as to get local authority acceptance prior to approaching potential customers.

Companies looking to grow their monitoring business are starting to see the growth potential IP

and cellular reporting offer. Brian Sheely, president of Innovative Life & Safety Solutions, grabbed hold of this concept, and, after nearly three years, landed his biggest client to date—the federal government.

“We approached the head fire protection engineer for Government Services Administration in 2009,” Sheely said. “Using their own data, we documented their current expenditures and were able to show the positive impact these upgrades would have on their operational budget. The savings start to snowball pretty quickly for a federal agency that operates and maintains over 3,500 government buildings worldwide.”

Sheely noted that money-saving benefits are available if access to IP network lines already exist but cautioned that those who take advantage of such lines need IT’s acceptance.

“Be sure the facility’s IT people are involved at the beginning and they buy into the fire alarm sharing that line,” he said.

Declining numbers of POTS lines aside, the sales potentials IP and GSM fire alarm communications offer dealers to acquire new customers is too big to be ignored. An increasingly fast adoption rate by AHJs in geographical pockets across the United States opens the window for virtually any fire alarm application, anywhere.

MacDaniel summed it up best: “I have not seen anything in the market that has caught on so fast and offers such a quick return on investment for end users and installers.” DQ

Stacy Deveraux is the marketing director for Fire-Lite Alarms and Honeywell Power Products.

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