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Emerging fire alarm technology – better testing and reporting for building owners and managers - by George Aguiar

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George Aguiar, NOREL
Service CO., Inc.

When is the best time to conduct a test of your fire alarm system? The most typical response for most building owners, facility engineers and property managers is, “There's never a good time.”

For retail, shopping centers, or mixed-use buildings, fire alarm system testing requires scheduling and entry coordination with store owners/occupants, facilities managers, or property managers. And, depending on the building type and the number of notification devices, the optimal time to test alarm-signaling devices may be before or after store or business hours, which could result in technician overtime costs.

Fire alarm technicians need to adhere to associated building and NFPA codes while performing the appropriate tests on each horn, speaker, strobe and other emergency signaling device. For larger campuses and facilities, testing will yield a short period of time in which the alarms will be sounded off and on. Sometimes, the testing time is extended due to separate signaling devices for local smoke detectors, CO detectors, and building general alarms.

It's always a good idea to review and assess your fire alarm system before a major or minor event occurs and to reduce the chances of false alarms. Too often, a system is evaluated after a false alarm takes place, or after a triggered event highlights a deeper issue or malfunction.

The exciting news is that emerging fire alarm technology includes components which make life easier for building owners and managers. New technology not only streamlines and automates fire alarm testing, but provides for more immediate and accurate reporting on your desktop, mobile phone or tablet. This sophisticated technology allows for signaling devices to be programmed to perform different functions in different situations, for example, smoke detector activation can be indicated by one sound while carbon monoxide can be indicated by a different sound. As well, newer systems can be set to auto-test and report at predetermined times and improve the length of any disruption(s) or sounding of alarms.

Your fire alarm systems should have these features or components:

- Individual or selected groups of signaling devices to be tested at a predefined date and time
- Shortest amount of time to test all signals in a building
- Testing protocol in compliance with fire code.

For the best in retail and mixed-use properties, it's even more important to be able to test fire alarm systems without disrupting customers, store owners, and occupants. The most current features to look for include:

- Automatic testing of fire alarm signaling devices in 5 seconds or less
- Auto testing or scheduling to be done any time, day or night
- Panel-generated reporting of test results listing every notification device by location
- Reports broken down for retrieval and delineated by "trouble" or "alarm"
- Longer battery life and power supply for reduced energy costs
- Comprehensive plan for fire alarm testing over the life of the system
- Command centers with the ability to view statuses for all devices immediately
- Integration with other Building Management Systems (BMS)
- Self-testing notification.

"Nice to have" components allow for your future needs, whether you are thinking about upgrading your existing system, adding additional fire alarms for other buildings, or integrating your fire alarm systems with new projects or structures. These include:

- Reporting capabilities which include automatically-generated reports from the control panel listing signaling devices tested, by time, date, location, and pass/fail test status
- Paging and background music over the same notification/alarm system
- Emergency text message alerts
- Transfer of panel information and programming via USB device
- Testing without disruption to customers and business owners

- Pre-programmed smoke sensitivity and wider ranges for these settings
- Easy to upgrade and to scale with flexibility and modular design.

Each winter, we've seen the impact of fires in New England. Is it time for you to review your fire alarm systems?

George Aguiar is VP integrated systems, sales & marketing for NOREL Service Co., Inc. Waltham, Mass.

New England Real Estate Journal - 17 Accord Park Drive #207, Norwell MA 02061 - (781) 878-4540