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Fire Detection in the 21st Century

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Fire Detection in the 21st Century

by Brad Highten

Are you thinking about changing or upgrading your fire detection system? There are many new options and features to consider. We live in a new world. September 11, 2001, changed all of our lives. Priorities changed and the things we previously took for granted, like our basic safety, became a primary concern. Even the way we think about firefighters has changed. They are no longer simply people who put out the flames. Now we all know them as “first responders” in an emergency situation.

Consequently, the way we think about fire safety systems has changed, too. Emergency notification has become paramount. Mere, old fashioned fire alarms are no longer sufficient.

Voice activation technology is the most significant advance in the fire alarm industry and promises to continue to be for the foreseeable future. It

should be noted that voice evacuation technology is not relegated to fire incidents only. It can be used in the event of other hazardous conditions, including hurricanes, tornadoes, chemical spills, and even a terrorist event. Its importance, as not only a fire protection tool but as a general hazard protection tool, cannot be overstated.

There is an increased awareness that horns beeping and sirens flashing can be supplemented for a more effective protection solution. This has led to intelligent, integrated emergency evacuation systems that can direct people in an organized and orderly fashion through an exit plan that is designed for the specific event that is taking place.

It's easy to understand why fire alarm systems are inherently the right choice for use in mass notification. For one, fire alarm systems are code driven and regulated. All of the circuitry is fully supervised, and the systems are periodically tested using NFPA guidelines. In other words, the rules, testing procedures, and installation practices are already established, so fire alarm companies are able to hit the road running. Furthermore, first responders are typically familiar with the fire alarm system equipment. There is no great learning curve for these individuals, and in today's environment, time is of the essence.

Another noteworthy advancement has been the addition of addressable features to the fire detection systems currently available. Addressable features allow you to immediately and effectively identify the location of an event or situation as it occurs. This new feature will allow you to pinpoint exactly which device has activated first as well as the succession, thereby decreasing the response time. "Smart" panels not only display information on alarms and other events, but can also notify off-premise monitoring

companies, giving them the necessary information to alert the proper authorities.

Even the sensors previously used have been upgraded. They are no longer factory set for sensitivity. The current technology allows the installer to set the parameters for the individual environment being protected. For example, the temperature of a heat sensor can be set to a higher level in a hot environment like a boiler room, thereby reducing the number of false alarms. Smoke sensors can be set for different sensitivity based upon the time of day. They are even able to self-verify and will double check themselves if there is any change in the environment.

Once addressable smoke detectors became available, there was a dramatic decrease in the amount of wiring needed for the detection system. The installation of addressable notification appliances can provide substantial long-term savings. The installer uses fewer wires and can connect more appliances per circuit, which makes for a faster, error-free installation. Non-addressable notification appliances require a labyrinth of wires, which take a long time to install and leave many opportunities for errors during the installation process.

All of these new technologies are available on every scale and can be accommodated by almost any budget. Flexibility of these products will allow for a more efficient retrofit to your current system when you're ready to upgrade.

If reading about all this new technology has you looking through the phone book for the phone numbers of your local fire alarm installers, then let me share a few pointers that I have picked up in the past thirty years since becoming a life safety consultant and installing contractor in South Florida.

There are many things to consider when choosing a company to partner with to modify or change your alarm:

1. Is your current alarm service provider the best option for your project?
2. Will they be able to integrate a new system and its technologies into your building?
3. Are they experienced in interfacing with the elevator, security, and general contractors that may be involved in your project?
4. Have you considered the aesthetics involved? How will the retrofit look when it is complete? An experienced company will know all the tricks to make the new system virtually invisible. They will also be familiar with working inside of your residential units to comply with current audibility requirements without altering the decor of the residential home or causing undue hardship or upset to your occupants.
5. Ask for references. Look at other installations similar to yours. Specifically, look for how the finished product looks. How does it integrate into the environment? Is the panel recessed? Are the pull stations and smoke detectors properly and securely mounted and as unobtrusive as possible while still being readily accessible? Has the wire piping been done in a concealed manner? Again, this is an issue that an experienced installation company will be able to address.
6. If you are thinking about using a third party engineering firm or consultant to design and apply the current regulations to your facility, make sure that the firm only specifies the design build concept and not a particular product line. Your local fire alarm company is more suited to make these recommendations to you. They may be able to offer you several options and choices to help fulfill your needs and budgetary concerns.
7. Ask if your local fire alarm company is capable of handling in-house design and engineering? A third party engineering or consulting firm is not always necessary and can be an added expense. Keep in mind that all of the finished design work must be approved by your local fire authority prior to the permitting and installation, regardless of who you choose to do the actual design.
8. Expandability should be built in at the time of installation. Talk to your design specialist to allow for future needs as they may arise due to changes in codes, building renovations, etc. Even changes to your security system, access doors, garage doors, and integration systems can affect your fire detection system.
9. Be sure that your installation and design company sits down with you and explains every option available in detail.
10. How many authorized distributors are there for the product you are considering in your immediate area? Will you have choices in who maintains your system both now and in the future?

Newer, more technological fire detection systems are becoming an increasingly critical ingredient in fire protection plans for structures of all shapes and sizes. Because while each facility has its own unique character, one thing links them together: their inhabitants deserve the best possible protection against fire and other hazards. Don't wait until there is a failure of your outdated system to start planning your modifications.

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