Making the Case

Providing confirmation of an actual intrusion

By Jeremy Bates  Jul 01, 2014

In December 2013, the city of Akron, Ohio made the decision to implement new protocols that emphasized the adoption of verified alarms in regard to dispatching police to the properties of possible intrusions. Akron police officials indicated that the change in policy was in direct correlation with the estimated 10,000 alarm calls they had received in the previous year and the tens of thousands of alarm calls they received in the years prior.

Cities like Detroit, Salt Lake City and Las Vegas have similarly taken notice of the advantages of verified alarms, which use live audio and/or video monitored by a trained operator. This new era ushered in by alarm verification is able to not only provide confirmation that an actual intrusion is taking place within a given property, but it is also able to provide a level of detail regarding the circumstances of an intrusion that police dispatchers can qualify as actionable intelligence.

Today, technology facilitates change in real time. We live in the information age—an age of verified social media accounts—so that we can confirm the identity of a real person and use a verified payment system to confirm that we’re conducting business with a real merchant. So, what’s wrong with a verified approach to security?
A Case for Verified Alarms

Now, to clarify, I am not advocating policies for police to dispatch only to calls from verified alarms, as they have done in Akron. But why not embrace technology that allows the security industry to do a better job at significantly reducing false alarms, and more importantly, helping law enforcement to catch more bad guys? As the owner of a security company that provides both traditional and verified alarms, I can attest that while traditional alarms are still an effective way of deterring potential intruders the benefits of verified alarms are undeniable.

When Akron Police responded, two officers at a time, to thousands of alarm calls—almost 28 per day—they recognized not only the benefit, but often the necessity, given the inherent danger associated with their job, of having detailed information about what’s on the other end of those calls. The technology and infrastructure of verified alarms exists to be able to provide a greater, more accurate flow of information. This enables police officers to strategize a safer and more tactical approach to protecting a property and apprehending intruders when dispatched.

The Truth behind False Alarms

Beyond the added intelligence that verified alarms afford police officers when strategizing safer and more effective responses to real intrusion events, verification is also able to deliver practicality of another kind altogether: the minimization of false alarm dispatches.

When Akron police officials presented statistics that furthered their reason for prioritizing responses to verified alarm calls, it was explained that of the roughly 10,000 alarm calls received in the previous year, 9,850 of them turned out to be false. City officials estimated that Akron’s 98.5 percent false alarm rate costs taxpayers $200,000 annually. And Akron is not alone.

When last publicly addressed by the Department of Justice (DOJ), the status of the false alarm issue in the United States could only be described as shocking. In 2007, the DOJ’s Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) published a thorough report on the issue in a problem-specific guide for police, False Burglar Alarms. This report found that throughout the country, local law enforcement agencies dispatch officers to at least 36 million alarms annually, between 94 and 98 percent of which are false. The DOJ concluded that each year this costs taxpayers over $1.7 billion and that the typical security alarm’s reliability is generally between only two and six percent.
Today, with the technology and infrastructure of verified alarms, police officers can confirm that they’re responding to a real emergency and accordingly prioritize their responses. One effective false alarm reduction tool, Enhanced Call Verification (ECV), also known as two-call verification, is often misunderstood as a method of true alarm verification. Without using advanced technology like live audio or video, ECV cannot confirm an in-progress intrusion and will not drive a priority alarm response from law enforcement.

Results of “Crying Wolf”

When such a high percentage of all alarm calls turn out to be harmless, it’s hardly reasonable to expect a response to be treated with the same level of urgency afforded to a detailed description of a breakin provided via a verified alarm.

Here’s an analogy: Think about how you would respond to hearing a car alarm. Probably, like me, you would do nothing. But, if you saw somebody breaking into a car, you would surely take the action of calling the police.

Unfortunately, false alarms inherently lower the level of urgency and caution in which all alarms are responded to, detracting from the two percent of the time that an alarm is genuine. When law enforcement receives a call from an alarm that uses verified, real-time information regarding a very real situation, they know what they are walking into.
Standards for Priority Response Alarms

Contrary to a common misconception, advocates of priority response for verified alarms in municipalities across the country, such as the DOJ, are not saying that they will no longer be responding to burglar alarms. Through the implementation of alarm verification standards, what is in fact being expressed is the belief that today there exists the capabilities, products and services to deliver greater results. With the advent of verified alarms, there now exists the expectation and realization that the industry can improve that success rate.

So, what exactly are the standards for security alarms being given priority response? It’s right there in the name: verified intrusion alarms.

There are some general criteria for what actually qualifies as a “verified alarm.” The general theme is that a live human—not a motion sensor or door contact only—is involved in the dispatch process in one way or another. Verified alarms provide confirmation of an actual in-progress intrusion to a police dispatcher, while operators at verified monitoring stations are trained to quickly assess live audio and/or video to confirm the reality of an in-progress intrusion.

Confirmation of an in-progress intrusion is an extremely high police dispatch priority, eliciting an immediate response, which far more frequently results in an apprehension.

Alarm verification by an operator is essentially the same process as when someone reports an in-progress intrusion with an eye-witness account. This method of verifying an emergency situation is associated with the same priority as panic buttons and hold-up alarms, eliciting immediate police dispatch.

In 2014, an era of rapid progression and advancement of technology throughout industries of all kinds, priorities should be placed on technology that can better ensure and promote the safety of the public and law enforcement dedicated to their protection. It’s only fitting that with new technology, now is the time to embrace verified alarms and priority alarm dispatch. To do this is to embrace technology and practices that are safer for police, customers and the public, allowing security companies to do a better job lowering the false alarm rate, and ultimately, promoting the alarm system’s primary function—the apprehension of criminals.

**About the Author**