6 Tips for Easier Fire System Management

Jeff Barnes has worked on fire alarm and life safety systems for nearly a quarter-century as a design engineer, sales engineer and hands-on technician. He's performed programming, testing and inspecting everywhere from South Carolina to Afghanistan. Today, he's a Senior Fire Alarm and Security Design Specialist and NICET-certified Senior Engineering Technician (SET) at Jacobs, a multi-billion-dollar global professional services firm.

A major part of Barnes' fire alarm management knowledge was gained during his two years in Afghanistan where he headed an installation and service operation at Bagram Air Base. Upon arrival, he discovered that fire alarm systems had not been maintained properly for some time – whether it was missing heads or pillows duct-taped around horn strobes because no one knew how to reset the alarms. The experience made Jeff Barnes realize that anyone managing a fire alarm system could benefit from a little timely advice. Here are his top six recommendations:

TIP #1: UNDERSTAND THE VALUE BUILT INTO YOUR SYSTEM

Today's fire alarm control units are intelligent devices equipped with a wealth of features and capabilities that can make your job easier. Many of them can be programmed to conduct testing automatically – and automatically document test results. Control units can send you emails to inform you about system troubles, supervisory, and alarms. It's important to take the time to understand the capabilities of your fire alarm control unit. Be proactive – don't wait until something goes wrong. What you learn will save you time, resources, and headaches.

TIP #2: TALK TO A DESIGN ENGINEER BEFORE YOU EXPAND YOUR SYSTEM

If you're adding onto or reconfiguring your facility, you will need to expand your system. But before you do, first talk to a fire alarm design engineer.

That design engineer can steer you away from adding onto a system that may become obsolete. You can avoid installing products that cause maintenance problems; for example, putting a smoke detector on a vaulted ceiling, which would require scaffolding to maintain. Your design engineer also knows about specialized products that are available to handle unusual environments or situations – and new products that deliver additional value. If you're experiencing problems with your system, don't be afraid to ask the design engineer for help. You'll get a solution you can live with for years and possibly save thousands of dollars.

TIP #3: KEEP TRACK OF YOUR DOCUMENTATION

Imagine taking a road trip without an up-to-date map or reliable GPS. That's what design engineers and system installers face too often when they are called upon to work on an unfamiliar system. The reason? Too often, as-built drawings are lost or misfiled.

The as-builts are the design engineer's CAD/PDF drawings of the fire alarm system's configuration, updated with the system installer's notes and additions. As such, they provide essential information for anyone working to service or expand the system. Without the drawings, it's hard to add to the existing system and makes things harder to find – consuming hours of wasted time and creating opportunities for unnecessary costs. For example, without an as-built document set, a design engineer expanding a system has no way of knowing how much power capacity is available. This may lead the engineer to specify an unnecessary and costly booster panel or amplifier just to be sure.

In other cases, as-built document sets are not updated whenever new work is done – so the person who called to expand or update the system would not be working from the most current version of the system layout.

Bottom line? Keep all as-built document set drawings in a secure location and have them updated in their native file format whenever the system has been modified. It will save you time and expense. And while you're at it, keep all of your manufacturer's specifications, instructions, and cut sheets and store them where you can find them.

TIP #4: READ YOUR MAINTENANCE MANUAL

All fire alarm systems require regular maintenance to ensure proper protection and avoid annoying nuisance alarms. While the maintenance requirements are contained in the NFPA-72 code book (and available for free viewing via the web), there are specific instructions on when to perform that maintenance on your fire alarm system.

You can avoid many future problems if you adhere to the maintenance requirements and perform them correctly at scheduled intervals. Can't locate the maintenance manual? Go to your manufacturer's website and download a PDF copy of the manual to your tablet computer so you always have it handy.

TIP #5: COMMUNICATE WITH YOUR MANAGEMENT

You may be thinking your management or building owner has more important things to worry about than the status of the fire alarm system, but it's essential that you keep them apprised of any potential issues or vulnerabilities. A well-maintained fire alarm system may function effectively for decades, but chances are there will be situations that arise that will require capital investments. You don't want to wait until a major problem has occurred to bring your boss up to date. Communicate regularly with your management about the condition of the fire alarm system so that they can plan ahead and ensure that funds are available for upgrades, improvements, and system replacements when you need them.

TIP #6: KNOW WHO TO CALL

You're not alone when it comes to managing your fire alarm system. You have access to a number of qualified experts ready, willing and able to support you.

Your top priority is to know whom to call for service. Get to know your service representative and take advantage of their service calls to ask any questions you may have about the system and caring for it.

It also pays to turn to your fire alarm system salesperson for advice and guidance. Yes, their primary responsibility is to sell, but most of them are trustworthy people with extensive knowledge. If they tell you your system is sunsetting, it's because they want to ensure that you're well prepared. Otherwise, when something breaks, you may find that spare parts are no longer available.

An important, but manageable job

From Jeff Barnes' perspective, there's no reason why fire alarm system management should be difficult or resource-intensive. With a little foresight, education, and periodic care, you can easily ensure that your fire alarm system continues to protect lives and property.

Autocall panels and notification and detection devices can also make managing your fire system easier and more efficient. To learn more about Autocall, visit www.autocall.com.

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