



OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

July 2014

False or Unwanted

Alarms Part 3: Apathy among users and tenants

How do we overcome apathy with fire alarms? This could be the tenant or occupant ignoring an alarm thinking it is “just another false alarm”. Or, a property manager or maintenance worker that silences or resets an alarm prior to investigating the cause. It could also be the alarm technician that fails to verify if the system is on “test” prior to testing, carelessly causing an unwanted interruption to the tenants as well as a response by the fire department. There are many other examples, but some can and have had unintended consequences.

If a system is not operating properly or sounds frequently for unknown reasons it must be properly evaluated to identify why. Too often, we see these systems just reset and in some cases turned off to “solve” the immediate problem of the blaring horns. Other times some of the required elements are replaced with a different

type of device to make the problem go away. This may take care of the immediate problem, but what happens when a fire occurs?

In 2011 a freshmen student was killed while staying over at a friend’s off-campus apartment. At the time of the early morning fire not only was the sole apartment smoke alarm recently disabled by a tenant, but the building fire alarm was turned off at the breaker - in a padlocked closet. Tenants trying to escape through the smoke filled stairways reportedly pulled the fire alarms, but nothing happened. The fire had already grown undetected due to the inoperable smoke alarm, now the next level of notification has also been defeated. The cause of the fire was never determined, but was ruled as accidental according to media reports. This is what happens when untrained and uninformed people make poor decisions, especially for the building rep to turn off the alarm at the breaker. It will never be known if either of the alarms functioning properly would have had

an impact on the outcome of this fire, but I’m sure the family would have liked her to have the chance.

Upgrades to Existing Systems:

When called to make upgrades to an existing system or to replace an aging system it is helpful for the designer to understand the original intent or purpose of that system. This is also important when providing ITM and understanding why some components may be missing. Were there components designed in initially to address student housing issues? Were components eliminated legally through the building code or local requirements? Was the system oversized for a specific purpose? Always take the extra effort to determine these answers before proposing a design, and always obtain approval from the AHJ before modifying an existing system or installing new. Asking a few of these questions may help the situation make more sense and give you some idea on how to proceed. Take a few extra minutes to discuss the system with building



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staff to make sure they understand how the system operates and the proper method of investigating and resetting the activations.

Education and Response:

When students live on-campus there are rules regarding response to alarms. Quite simply, if the alarm sounds you must evacuate. Period! One of the benefits to living off-campus is that there aren't any rules, right? But, how do we reach the students and let them know that they should always evacuate when the alarm sounds? Work with the fire department or local AHJ to identify any educational materials that may be available. This includes general fire safety or "Cooking 101" info, as well as details about the alarm systems. Or, you can custom design these to identify special features for each of your buildings. If we have installed a common sense system or made improvements to an existing system the unwanted responses should be limited. Management must respond promptly to all alarm activations and identify

what caused the alarm, not just silence and reset. Keep records of the activations and the location of the devices so these events may be tracked easier. Also utilize the tenant's experiences - what do they remember when the alarm sounded, what did they see or hear?

Putting all of these efforts together will help to reduce the unwanted response and increase the likelihood that the systems will operate as designed and the tenants will evacuate when the alarm sounds, and not treat this as "just another false alarm."

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