Electronic Alarm Verification can Speed Alarm Response Time and Help Minimize False Alarms

It's critical for alarm systems to summon a prompt response in the event of an intrusion. But it's an unfortunate reality that many of the signals sent by intrusion protection systems to the central monitoring station are false alarms. A variety of factors can cause these false alarms—from pets or HVAC systems to users who are unfamiliar with system operation.

If police were to respond to every false alarm, their costs would quickly mount up and could impair their ability to meet some of their more critical responsibilities. In an effort to minimize these issues, the alarm industry has worked in cooperation with the public safety community to identify methods of minimizing false alarms while also maintaining a high level of security for end users.

In this white paper we look at an electronic alarm verification option available on alarm panels manufactured by Digital Monitoring Products (DMP) that provides end users with a means of verifying that a true intrusion has occurred or, alternatively, canceling an alarm in the event of a false trip. We will explore how this approach can minimize false alarms while also minimizing the time between the receipt of the alarm signal at the Central Station and the dispatch.

Electronic alarm verification explained
Electronic alarm verification, also known as CANCEL/VERIFY capability, is available as a programmable option on all alarm panels currently manufactured by DMP. This comes into play when a customer's alarm system goes into alarm and an authorized user enters a security code to silence the system. After the code is entered, the customer's keypad will display a message asking the user if he or she wants to CANCEL or VERIFY the alarm. (Alternatively the panel can be programmed to ask IS THIS A FALSE ALARM? and the user can answer YES or NO.)

If the end user selects CANCEL or YES, an ALARM CANCELED BY USER message is sent to Central Station personnel. If the end user selects VERIFY or NO, the Central Station personnel will receive an ALARM VERIFIED BY USER message. Central Station operators will respond to a VERIFIED or CANCELED message according to the policy established by the Central Station.

In the event of an ALARM VERIFIED message, some Central Stations may opt to dispatch police immediately. Others may treat the message as one of two calls in a two-call verification procedure. That procedure normally calls for Central Station operators to first place a phone call to the premises and, if the person answering the phone at the premises says the alarm was a false one and can provide the correct security code, the alarm is canceled. If the phone at the premises is not answered, the two-call verification procedure directs the Central Station operator to call another phone number—such as the customer's cell phone or another number previously specified by the customer—to try to confirm if a true intrusion has occurred.

The goal of the two-call system is to minimize false alarms by attempting to confirm with the end user if an alarm signal is a false one before dispatching police. The downside is that this procedure can consume several minutes of a Central Station operator's time before police are alerted. But if an ALARM VERIFIED signal overrides the two-call system or is treated as one of the two calls, police can be dispatched more promptly.

Another advantage of DMP's cancel/verify option is that if the end user verifies the alarm, the system remains armed and continues to send information to the central station, such as additional zones that are tripped.

If an alarm is tripped but the end user does not respond to the CANCEL/VERIFY or IS THIS A FALSE ALARM? message prompts within a pre-programmed delay period—typically about 30 seconds—the original alarm is still sent to the Central Station.

Advantages over two-way voice verification

Some Central Stations use two-way voice capabilities to try to verify an alarm signal prior to dispatching police. But electronic verification, such as DMP's cancel/verify option, offers several advantages over two-way voice verification.

One consideration is that two-way voice verification requires additional equipment at the customer site, increasing the cost of the alarm system. A two-way microphone is included with the system and when the Central Station receives an alarm signal, the central station operator attempts to speak with whoever is at the site in order to determine if a real intrusion has occurred. But sometimes audio quality is not good because the system user is not located near the microphone.

Another drawback is that two-way voice verification requires the Central Station operator to make subjective decisions about whether or not to dispatch police based on limited information. These options also tend to increase central station costs by increasing the time it takes for central station operators to process alarm signals and by requiring the operators to have special training.

Electronic alarm verification such as DMP's cancel/verify option not only is less costly than two-way voice verification, it also eliminates the need for Central Station operators to make subjective judgments about whether to dispatch police.

CSAA guidelines

Some Central Stations follow guidelines established by the Central Station Alarm Association in determining how to handle alarm signals. The CSAA played an instrumental role in establishing two-call verification procedures.

From time to time the CSAA revises its guidelines, as of July 2011, wherein they are in the process of approving new guidelines for alarm verification that recognize electronic alarm verification such as DMP's cancel/ verify capability as an alternative to the two-call verification system.

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