

Eureka! Public Safety Partners with Private Paging

Shared Solution Benefits Everyone

“Eureka!” is reportedly what the Greek mathematician Archimedes yelled when he leapt from his bath upon discovering the principle of buoyancy. Since then “eureka” (literal translation, “I have found it”) has become the word people utter when they discover an ingenious solution to a vexing problem. It is very apt, then, that the City of Eureka in Northern California is the setting for this story of how a fire department solved its communication problem through a collaboration between a public safety agency and a private paging company.



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Commercial Radio & Electronics (CRE) is a wireless two-way company that owns and operates PowerPage, a commercial paging business headquartered in Eureka, California.

“We’re a regional paging carrier,” explains CRE owner, Bob Hoover. “Our paging system covers from the Oregon border to about 180 miles south of Eureka. We also connect with other paging carriers to provide state-wide service.”

Hoover adds that this part of Northern California is fairly rural with a population of 60,000 in the city and another 125,000 in the surrounding county.

Too hot to handle:

The City of Eureka Fire Department operates a 9-1-1 dispatch that handles all the city departments: Fire, Police, Public Works, Emergency Operations Staff, and also provides dispatch service for the fire department of a neighboring city. For years the Eureka Fire Department had relied on a voice paging system using Motorola Minitor® pagers.

The problem was that the constant chatter from the voice pagers meant that many users, particularly the volunteer firefighters, didn’t like to carry the pagers with them if they went out to dinner, a movie, or some public event. Another issue was lack of coverage,

particularly if firefighters had to travel beyond city limits to answer a fire call. To solve both these problems, the Eureka Fire Department decided that it needed to switch to alphanumeric pagers and perform other upgrades to its paging system.

Partnership:

At first the Fire Department looked at buying its own digital paging transmitters, but found that such a major expense wouldn’t be cost-effective or provide any long-range service. In the end, they decided the best solution was to partner with a local paging provider, PowerPage, that already operated its own wide-area paging system.

The resulting fire paging system interfaces a Zetron 2000 Series Paging Terminal to the City of Eureka Fire Department’s IBM AS400 computer running CAD (Computer Aided Dispatch) software developed by HTE.

“It has a database related to the city,” explains Fire Chief, Eric Smith. “When you type in an address and the type of emergency, it relates that to a table which tells the dispatchers what type of apparatus to send, which department, and the number of fire fighters. A third party software called ICOM 400 then takes that information and puts it through a paging software

which dials the 2000 Series Paging Terminal at PowerPage and sends a page to the appropriate group.”

Chief Smith explained that firefighters receive messages on their alphanumeric pagers that look something like this: “Structure fire, 123 B Street. Engine 1, Engine 2, Truck 1. Chief 1. Fire in the oven.”

Letter drop:

In addition to fire alarm messages, the paging system is also able to store informational messages such as road construction, fire hydrant and equipment out of service announcements. This has proven so useful that it is also being used by Public Works and other city departments in addition to the police and fire services.

But what really sold the Eureka FD and other users on the new alphanumeric paging system was the ability to combine various levels of official messaging with personal messaging. In order to accomplish this, each pager has four numbers through which it might receive information. Two of these numbers are primary, and two are secondary. The system uses these numbers in two ways:

Primary Numbers

1. The first primary number is specific to the individual and is used to transmit routine (non-emergency) information. For example, a child or spouse can send a message to a fire fighter using this number. Each user can choose which alerting system they prefer to receive notification of these types of message: tone, or vibrate.

2. The second primary number is used for critical, agency-specific emergency pages. This is the number that pages are sent to for recalling employees to work, or for disseminating critical information. For example, a major fire is underway and all off-duty personnel must report to the station immediately. This number is always set to sound an audible alarm.

Secondary Numbers

1. The first secondary paging number is used to distribute agency-specific informational pages. This is currently used to disseminate non-emergency information such as special events, overtime needed, etc.

2. The second secondary number is used when a department member is to receive informational pages from two specific departments or agencies. In the case of the fire chief, the secondary paging numbers are specific to Fire Department and Emergency Operations Center information.

“The biggest advantage is that, through this technology, our employees and volunteers are carrying their pagers,” Chief Smith says. “A secondary advantage is that it automates the paging process and improves reliability. As part of the contract with the local paging provider, they must inform us when their system needs to go down for maintenance. Thus far, PowerPage has been excellent to deal with.”

The power to be flexible:

Chief Smith adds that the decision to go with a private paging provider also gave them the flexibility to increase coverage as needed. Eureka’s fire coverage area includes the north coast; but as responsibility increases within the agency, so does the coverage. By using PowerPage’s system, the Hazardous-Materials team has regional coverage and the Chief Fire Officers have coverage throughout Northern California.

Should an individual want to increase his or her coverage statewide for their vacation, PowerPage will normally extend coverage for a week without charge.

A win-win solution:

The public safety/private paging partnership greatly benefits both parties. The Eureka fire department gets wide area coverage without the cost of buying, installing, and maintaining a large paging network. Radio Communication Electronics gets close to 200 subscribers for its PowerPage business—a real boon during a time of churn for the paging industry. Now that’s a solution to shout “eureka” about!

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