

Picking the Right Emergency Phone

There are lots of choices out there. How do you know you're getting the best buy with the most features?

A rewrite of articles published in Campus Safety Journal, Security Management, and Security Sales Magazine

ADA-compliant phones aren't cheap. Before busting the budget, find out which phone gives you the most bang for your buck. Many manufacturers offer a plethora of choices. But choosing the right ADA-compliant emergency phone can be a risky business because phone features differ and not all phones are suited to all situations.

Picking the wrong emergency phones can cost you plenty, first in terms of initial investment and installation costs, and then later in maintenance costs. To avoid getting hooked with the wrong emergency phone, security professionals must understand their options. Hopefully this article will shed some light on the subject and help you understand your choices.

To see how some ADA-Compliant phones stack up, several security magazines recently published a survey comparing phones from each of the seven largest manufacturers: Allen-Tel, Ceeco, Gai-Tronics, Talk-A-Phone, Rath Microtech, Code Blue, and Viking Electronics. This article is a summary from those magazines.

The research shows that all makes and models incorporate the same basic features—a built-in dialer, speakerphone, a light indicating that the call has connected, and some method for the answering party to identify the caller's location. But once you get past the basics you'll find significant differences among products in terms of functionality and cost.



The lineup left to right: Viking Electronics, AllenTel, Talk-A-Phone, RathMicrotech, Ceeco, Gai-Tronics, Code Blue

Cost-benefit analysis.

Security departments must first abandon the notion that the higher the phone's price, the more features it offers. In fact, the survey shows just the opposite to be true. Some of the lower-priced models not only meet basic requirements but also offer long-term money-saving features. And, behind some of the most impressive and expensive exteriors lie obsolete technology that could prove costly to maintain and repair.

These considerations may not be critical for a small business buying a single emergency phone, but for large businesses or public facilities purchasing multiple phones for parking ramps, elevators, and outlying areas, the investment can quickly add up, especially considering that the high-end phones sell for more than \$700 each.

The survey indicated that the phones differ in six major aspects: dialing, disconnecting, central station features, power sources, temperature range, and polling.

Dialing

ADA-compliant phones do not have dials or touch-tone pads—they have built-in auto dialers. So the question becomes who do they call and what happens if the line is busy or no one answers? An improperly answered phone, or one that isn't answered at all, could spell trouble for the user and the company purchasing the phone.

These days, a user could have any number of reasons for making an emergency call such as an assault or a serious medical condition, neither of which should be left to either an elevator service company's answering service or a receptionist in a property management office.

It also no longer makes sense to limit dialing choices to a single phone number. The phone should be able to notify multiple sources, including on-site security personnel, who should be first on the scene, as well as secondary sources.

While all the phones researched in the survey can dial a phone number that is

at least 10 digits—necessary to dial a phone number complete with area code—research revealed that two of the seven phones can only dial a single phone number. Worse yet, these same two phones were incapable of automatically redialing in the event of a busy signal or no answer. Such products could expose an organization to significant liability.

In contrast, three of the other five models dialed at least two different phone numbers in sequence, with one phone capable of dialing as many as five 20-digit phone numbers sequentially. The 20-digit dialing capability is a nice feature to have if the organization also wants to alert maintenance people or site managers via their display pagers or cell phones. The extra digits can even be used to place the call through an alternative long-distance carrier such as 10-10-220.

The three phones that could dial multiple phone numbers were also designed to redial the numbers automatically if the user encountered a situation where the phone was not answered or was busy. That's an important feature.

While the specifications of the fourth phone say that it can dial two different numbers, a quick read of the fine print shows that it can only perform the second dial sequence after being triggered manually by a key switch located on the phone. This feature makes the second dialing option useless for the caller.

Only one of the seven phones was capable of dialing using either touch-tone or rotary pulses. The other five phones were touch-tone only. This is a moot point if a company's phones are hooked into a PBX system, which sends all transmissions via touch-tone. But, if a company is using dedicated phone lines or pooling emergency phones on a single phone line, rotary dialing can save money on monthly

charges. This is because, in many locations, rotary pulses are standard and touch-tone service incurs a monthly upcharge.

If your organization is using regular phone lines, every area code change can force you to reprogram all the emergency phones. So ease of reprogramming should be another consideration to make up-front.

Most of the phones are set up to permit reprogramming remotely via phone lines. But one of the phones uses jumper pins that must be manually changed to reprogram the phone. Reprogramming a phone this way requires that maintenance people remove the phone from its enclosure, reset the jumper pins, and then reinstall the unit—a time consuming and, therefore, costly process.

Hangup

A disconnect feature is critical to ensure that emergency phones are not captured for extended periods of time. Vandals and pranksters would have a field day if they knew they could tie up an organization's emergency phones for hours on end.

Most of the phones have a call timer built in, and most of the timers are programmable. One phone with a built-in call timer had a set limit of two minutes per call before automatic disconnect. This seems like a brief amount of time, especially for situations—such as assaults or stalkings—where emergency personnel want to keep the caller on the line while help is dispatched.

The more technologically advanced phones automatically disconnect through a variety of means, such as return of a dial tone, silence, a busy signal, a certain ring count, or a calling party control (CPC) break—a break generated by the telephone company when the answering party hangs up. The CPC break signals the emergency phone to hang up.

Calling For Help

Only one of the phones is capable of dialing into a burglar alarm company's 24-hour central station and communicating critical location information electronically. For example, you can program the phone with this feature to always dial into the central station, or use the central station option as a backup when primary numbers go unanswered or are busy. Once connected to the central station computers, this phone communicates in a special protocol, electronically transmitting location ID which appears in readable form on the attendant's screen. The equipment also allows the central station to carry on a real-time voice conversation with the caller.

Central station personnel are specifically trained to handle emergency situations. They know whom to call and usually have good working relationships with emergency care providers and other safety personnel. A UL Listed central station must comply with strict standards for reliability, training, and backup equipment. All this adds up to reduced legal liability at a reasonable price—central station fees run as low as \$30 per month—making this a worthwhile feature for many companies.

Getting Power

Installation costs are always a concern when outfitting a facility with emergency phones. It's costly enough to run low-voltage telephone cable in a conduit to protect it from the elements and vandals. Running additional AC power to those same phones can be cost prohibitive.

Five of the seven phones run off of telephone power alone, while two phones require not only AC voltage but also rechargeable battery backup. With the additional cost of running AC lines this seems like a poor option, especially when there are so many line-powered phones available.