SPOTLIGHT ON:
Emergency Communication Systems
(also known as Mass Notification Systems)

In order to become a full-service fire protection company, many distributors have found themselves branching into unfamiliar fields. When expanding a business, there are important questions to ask and t's and i's to cross and dot. Firewatch! *is here to help. To make such preparations a little less daunting, this column will spotlight a different product area in each issue. If you'd like to see a field featured, please e-mail tamaram@nafed.org.*

Interview with: John F. Wojdan, Great Lakes Building Systems, Inc., Buffalo, New York

1. When did your company expand into this area of business?
Great Lakes Building Systems (GLBS) expanded into Mass Notification Systems (currently referred to as Emergency Communication Systems or ECS by NFPA) in 2009.

2. Why did you decide to expand into this area?
GLBS decided to pursue ECS due to changes planned by NFPA. NFPA 72, 2010 edition, was significantly modified to include ECS as part of this code. Chapter 24 was formed to establish minimum standards for the performance of ECS. The actual name of NFPA 72 (2010 edition) was changed from "National Fire Alarm Code" to "National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code." This version allowed and "encouraged" the use of a facility fire alarm system for ECS. Since fire alarm systems are 50 percent of our business, the pursuit of ECS was a perfect synergy.

3. How much capital was invested in this new product area?
Capital investment was very small, as we were already set up with vendors, engineering, installation, and service/technical departments. The only investment was time. We started to host "lunch & learns" in our training facility to educate our customers and AHJs on ECS and changes to NFPA 72.

4. Did you need to hire new staff to start working in this area or were you able to train current staff?
We used current staff. The interesting and critical component was the interface of our IT personnel with the customer's IT staff. Our ECS consists of a fire alarm/evac system that interfaces with a critical response notification system. This system sends several communication signals (text message, cell, and e-mail) to customer's emergency response team. The integration of these components is completed using the customer's LAN. Therefore, getting the customer's IT department involved was necessary.

5. Were any licenses or certifications required? What codes, restrictions, local and federal laws did you have to be aware of?
Same rules and codes that we currently use for fire alarms apply, with the addition of the federal government's Department of Defense (DOD).

6. Did you have to expand your insurance coverage to do this work?
No additional insurance was required.

7. Can you briefly describe how this type of work is performed, and what type of products or components are involved?
Typical system includes addressable fire/evacuation system. Usually several panels are required which are networked via high-speed fiber optic network modules. The main panel is referred to as the "Autonomous Control Unit" (ACU) and remote panels "Local Operating Console" (LOC). Each panel typically has complete system annunciation and evacuation system control. This system is integrated into a mass alerting system as described above.

8. Were there any kinks in implementing this new program? What do you wish you had known or considered beforehand?
The only "kink" we had was not getting the owner's IT department involved with the initial design and planning. We have since changed our operation to include their technical staff in the design process.

9. How did you market the service and gain customers for it?
Marketing of ECS is completed by making our existing and/or potential customer aware of the additional potential of his fire alarm system (FAS). Instead of a typical system with horn/strobe alarm-indicating devices, upgrade him to voice evacuation. This minimum additional cost can offer tremendous ROI by utilizing the FAS for other facility emergencies such as medical, critical equipment failure, ammonia gas leaks, security breach, etc.

10. How long was it before you realized ROI?
Realization of ROI—immediately.

11. What advice would you give to other distributors considering an expansion into this line of work?
Do due diligence to the customer's risk analysis and ECS needs. There are many options to accomplish these needs. However, these options often include the integration of several different manufacturers and products. Make sure you have the proper technical team in place to handle this high-end technical challenge. ❖