How Emergency Phones Can Improve Security Response and Customer Service

By David Fleming

As in most businesses, parking professionals continue to struggle over the best direction to take to ensure the operation's success. On the one hand, there is a need to provide the best possible service and safety for those that access your facility. On the other hand, market drivers continue to push toward a more automated system where on-site personnel are less and less relevant.

So how do you balance these two demands, which seem to be pulling in opposite directions? One answer is to take a new look a product that has been a staple in the parking industry for decades – emergency phones.

Creating Reliable Communication Lines

Providing the best service possible always starts with communication, which is why emergency phones can be a crucial driver for providing quality security and service to visitors. Emergency phones, many times referred to as blue light phones, are outdoor-rated communication devices that can be secured into an enclosure attached to the wall or floor of the parking structure.

They are ideal solutions for visitors to request assistance for a medical emergency, vehicle issues, suspicious person reporting and crime witnessing. Instead of dialing 911 via their cellphone and connecting with a first responder that could be miles away, emergency phones allow a person to instantly connect directly with the personnel on-site at the parking facility.

Emergency phones also can provide non-emergency services to these same visitors. If devices such as gates, elevators, lights or electric vehicle charging stations are not working, emergency phones provide visitors with an outlet to notify staff of these issues. They also can serve as a courtesy phones, allowing users to request directions and ask questions. Their presence alone can provide peace of mind to visitors and deter would-be assailants from taking action.

From an operational perspective, emergency phones can minimize the cost of additional security personnel to proactively patrol all of the levels and stairwells in the facility. Additionally, most are modular in construction, meaning that with little cost, they can easily be upgraded with the latest components and integrations.

When implemented correctly, they also can help minimize legal considerations by offering visitors another level of security and allowing security personnel to provide a faster response time.

'UL 2017' Is the Key

Not all emergency phones are created equal. Security professionals understand that the most reliable, weather-resistant and future-proof products on the market are built for the regulations. This includes things such as ADA and NFPA 72 Chapter 24 compliance (emergency communication systems).

The key regulation, however, that consumers need to look for when purchasing emergency phones is a UL 2017 listing for emergency signaling devices. This identifies emergency phones that are self-monitoring. This means that if all or a portion of the device faults for any reason, its diagnostics can immediately notify those maintaining the security system that there is an issue. This is of particular importance in parking garages, where conditions can fluctuate with the outside weather.

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Some intercom companies have attempted to sell their devices as emergency phones, sometimes referring to them "intelligent intercoms." From the outside, they appear similar, but often these devices cannot hold up to the rigors of natural or manmade stressors, such as extreme temperatures or vandalism.

Because these devices are not built with emergency situations in mind, they come with ratings such as UL 60950 that covers only basic office equipment such as traditional telephones and does not include any type of proactive monitoring capabilities.

A unique feature of emergency phones is inclusion of auxiliary inputs on the speakerphone. Through an input port, a parking facility can integrate other safety devices through the phones connections.

For example, a nearby fire extinguisher housing can be wired into the auxiliary port in such a way that when the housing is opened (either for a fire emergency or due to criminal activity), the contact closure is triggered and an alert is sent through the phone to alert security. Camera feeds also can be integrated to give the responder eyes on the incident as it is occurring.

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messages to be broadcast over public address speakers, emergency phones, and digital signs and monitors, while also providing the ability to deliver email and SMS notifications.

Having first responders being able to push crucial messages out via emergency devices throughout a parking facility is integral to a comprehensive security solution. It's of particular importance for areas such as colleges and hospitals, where parking facilities are part of a larger ecosystem.

As demands continue to evolve in parking facilities, and the need for automation grows, it's important to remember that devices such as emergency phones remain a crucial driver of effective and efficient communication.

When properly built and tested for the regulations, they not only can provide a secure way to interact with those needing assistance, but also serve as a hub for communication between the parking structure and a larger ecosystem.

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Solutions for Any Facility

For some existing facilities, it may become difficult to run additional communication or power lines for emergency phones. Advancing technology has provided a number of power, communication and mounting options that make it easier than ever to implement emergency phones.

From a communication perspective, emergency phones have several options to connect without running additional conduit to the device. IP wireless connectors and cellular modules are available to provide communication to and from the unit. These options also allow the device to providing full UL 2017 self-monitoring capabilities.

When it comes to open parking facilities and lots, there may not be sufficient wall spaces to mount emergency phones. That's why free-standing pedestal options are available that can be mounted into the ground. This provides flexibility in placement of the emergency phones and eliminates the logistical need to place them only at the edges of the facility.

Connecting to a Larger 'Ecosystem'

Emergency signaling-rated devices also provide the ability to integrate into larger incident response "ecosystems," providing security and first responders with more comprehensive tools for providing assistance.

Using Code Blue's Alert EMS (Event Management Software), for example, security personnel can tap into camera feeds nearest the emergency phone to assess the situation and communicate with the person who has pushed the button. Then, when the incident is done, the system will automatically archive the video feeds, voice communication and the responder's written notes into a secure file for later reference.

Another crucial layer of security in which emergency phones can be integrated is mass notification. Mass notification software allows