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Why are you still using POTS (Plain Old Telephone Service) lines for monitoring? - by Jared Kleinman

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Jared Kleinman, AFA Protective Systems

If you still use POTS (Plain Old Telephone Service) lines to communicate with your central station monitoring company, you are using outdated technology. In the before time (as my father likes to say) POTS lines were one of the most reliable means of transmitting an alarm signal. However, telecommunications carriers like Verizon and AT&T are abandoning their support of copper-based phone networks in favor of fiber optic lines. New phone lines are almost all VoIP (Voice Over Internet Protocol). While VoIP is a fine technology for providing phone connectivity, it may not be when it comes to your fire alarm signal.

In this editorial, I hope to shed light on an increasingly common issue that has been affecting the real estate industry as it pertains to alarm signal transmissions. I will also explain the importance of switching to modern technology for alarm signal transmission, like internet and cellular.

The difference between POTS and VoIP

Traditionally, POTS lines were dedicated pairs of twisted copper wires, which worked by transmitting voltage through the copper wire connection. The phone companies would provide the support to those lines including power. This is why when you lost power in a storm, you would still have a working phone line! This transmission method was highly reliable and ideal for fire alarm signal transmission.

Over the last two decades phone companies have spent an enormous amount of resources converting their networks to fiber optic, making VoIP the supported technology. VoIP transmits signals by compressing the data and sending it over an Internet network. Since VoIP sends signals as a compressed data, by the nature of its technology, it changes the format of the signal. VoIP lines may be approved for use in jurisdictions as long as they are functioning on an MFVN (Managed Facilities Voice Network).

The issue with POTS and VoIP regarding fire alarm signals

Most commercial fire alarm communicators still have two POTS lines connected to it. This means, when an alarm event is detected (e.g., smoke, heat, carbon monoxide), a signal leaves your building over traditional copper POTS lines. However, once the signal is sent from your building into the world, it may not be running over POTS. When the signal goes out to the communications carriers, it’s VoIP.

Although VoIP and POTS are indistinguishable for the purpose of a phone call, for alarm signal transmission, VoIP is not the same. The alarm signal is altered by the nature of VoIP technology therefore; it may not be as efficiently received by your monitoring center.

POTS lines being switched to VoIP lines by phone providers presents an extremely common problem that has been affecting buildings in New York for years. We have received calls from concerned customers who are notified that our central station stopped receiving signals from their fire alarm communicator. This is usually due to the phone company converting from POTS to VOIP lines. Customers do not always receive notice of the conversion, which tends to cause a lot of stress and frustration for the property managers, who are all of a sudden facing a potential violation from the city. Fortunately, there are ways to avoid this POTS/VoIP issue completely.

Make the Switch to Internet and Cellular Communication

While POTS was once an efficient and reliable methodology to transmit signals, its recent conversion to VOIP, combined with the increased reliability of newer technologies makes POTS

continued use less desirable. In fact, the standards and codes for fire alarm signal transmission are now reflecting this by indicating that each system should have two different technologies and two paths to get a fire alarm signal out.

With POTS lines becoming extinct (both Verizon and AT&T have said by the end of 2022), every building that still uses POTS lines will eventually have to switch to a newer technology in order to receive reliable connectivity for alarm signal transmissions. The good news is that IP (internet protocol) and digital cellular are available and are FDNY approved transmission technologies. Internet and cellular transmission will provide faster, safer and more reliable connectivity to send signals from your premise to our central station monitoring facilities. Best of all, internet and cellular technologies can save you $60-$100 per month because you can eliminate those old phone lines.

AFA Protective Systems is encouraging all of our customers to make the switch to IP/digital cellular now to avoid potential issues with connectivity in the future, thereby keeping your premise and tenants safe. You can find more information on the benefits of upgrading to internet and cellular technology at: https://afap.com/fire/digital-cellular/.

Jared Kleinman is the vice president of AFA Protective Systems, Inc., New York, N.Y.