

Commercial Advisory Council

SMS, Multimedia & Apps, Oh My!

The public safety landscape is on the verge of great change. Generation Y (those born in the early '80s to 2000, also known as Millennials) and Generation Z (those born between 2000 to present day, also known as Digital Natives) are outnumbering Baby Boomers.¹ Members of generations Y and Z have enjoyed a lifelong relationship with digital communication and media technology. Because of this relationship and an expectation to communicate in a digital environment, public safety must be ready for new kinds of inputs and data coming from every direction.

We are now in an era where technological advances allow us to be more connected than ever before. While it may seem quirky or futuristic to have a connected, "smart" home that allows us to control lighting, security, entertainment and thermostats from our smartphone, the connected "smart" PSAP must be just around the corner. APCO's Application Community (AppComm) currently lists more than 175 mobile apps serving a public safety or emergency response purpose. There are 88 PSAPs in the U.S. that currently accept text messages.² Nine (with many more go-lives planned) are receiving automated alarm event notification through the automated secure alarm protocol (ASAP).³ And even more data from telematics, body worn devices, safety profiles and even field officer vitals may soon be coming.

As you can see, it's not just the potential for voice calls to overload and overwhelm your PSAP, but video, automated notifications and other forms of digital communication. While we're learning to embrace these changes in our home, how can we embrace new technology in our PSAP without overwhelming our already overloaded staff? By focusing on the three Ps—people, process and product—we can effectively manage and control the data and make it useful for PSAP personnel and, more importantly, first responders.

People

As we hire employees who are members of Generation Z, they can become a great resource to our teams. Digital natives are quick to adapt to new technology and are accustomed to a broadly connected environment: TV, phone, laptop, tablet, gaming device, music player and more. Acknowledging that generational differences do exist, the annual APCO conference has featured many sessions that dive deep into the characteristics of Generation Z, how to mentor and manage them, and even how our other team members can learn from them.

Process

Processes are needed for agencies to function properly and effectively. Standard operating procedures (SOP)

enable emergency responders to successfully coordinate an incident response across disciplines and jurisdictions. Similarly, developing SOPs for new data coming into the PSAP will help determine the necessary steps to facilitate incident response. Under the guidance of committee members from several commercial vendors and PSAP management, NENA has developed an interim texting policy SOPs as a template for PSAP managers to review and update according to their agency workflow.

The public safety industry also has a valuable resource in its consultants. When looking for new systems, the first step should include acquiring a consultant to assist in developing requirements and procuring new technology. Many consultants have a background as former public safety managers and first responders, so the depth of their experience enables them to provide consultative services in establishing process to incorporate new data elements into an agency's operations and workflow.

Products

Historically, when comm center personnel have been given a new task, it included a new application, which meant a new screen, a new mouse and a new user experience. A typical dispatch console now boasts at least five screens with multiple user experiences and workflows: mapping application, command line driven application, queue driven application, mouse driven application or button clicking application.

We cannot solve staffing and efficiency challenges by adding more screens that require more training and different interaction methods. Products put in the PSAP must focus on the quality of the user experience. When products are developed with a focus on the user experience, the new types of inputs can be prioritized in a task-oriented manner. The system needs to be smart enough to present the right information at the right time in a digestible format that will improve the workflow.

Products focused on the user experience allow information to be managed by the user. There is current technology that enables the user to control what information they request from the citizen, and when to view it. When the users are in control of the communication, it enables them to effectively manage all the data that is available on their own terms.

As we continually get bombarded with new apps and technology that make us more connected, we should do our best with our people, process and products to not only embrace the new technology, but to manage and control the communication. The more we know, the more we can help. *by Bob Koenig, TriTech Software Systems northern regional sales director.*

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