

Limitations of False Alarms

Fact: In recent studies there were 231,100 false alarm callouts in 2012-2013.
(Source: Department for Communities and Local Government, Fire Statistics Monitor: England April 2012 to March 2013; June 2013)

No-one wants false alarms. For businesses they mean lost revenue and customer inconvenience. Unnecessary Fire Service response is an expense which has to be recouped through higher taxation or in some cases the fire brigade will charge companies for callouts for a false alarm. In the long-term a history of false alarms may even affect business insurance premiums.

There are a number of reasons why false alarms occur. The most commonly cited examples are poor maintenance or human error, however, appropriate education from engineers and regular servicing should ensure that neither of these creates a recurring problem.

The root cause of the increasing level of unwanted activations lies with poor education.

Fire protection has become more and more sophisticated – particularly over the last two decades. Alarms have become increasingly sensitive and offer much improved functionality they also require environmental tuning and regular servicing to work effectively. Educating both the users, and in many cases, the servicing organisation to tune the detectors to operate in the environment in which they are sited is now an essential part of reducing unwanted alarms. A lack of knowledge can lead to human error such as setting the alarms off through burnt toast or failing to isolate detectors during building maintenance.

Fire protection systems must be extremely sensitive to dangerous conditions, but not to other environmental conditions which do not pose a threat. This is a careful balancing act which requires ongoing management.

What can be done to reduce the financial burden of false alarms?

The key elements of effective false alarm management are; using the most appropriate equipment, managing the system on an on-going basis and regular servicing. A properly trained individual, backed up by an accredited fire protection contractor, can ensure optimum performance and, importantly, keep the incidence of false alarms to a minimum.

Top 5 tips for reducing false alarms

1. Keep a log of the location and cause of false alarms so any trends can be spotted.
2. When the function of a protected area changes, ensure the alarm type and settings are also reviewed and if necessary updated. Don't forget to assess the false alarm risk when adjusting sensitivity levels.
3. Make sure there is an accurate record of the equipment checked at every service visit.
4. Only use maintenance companies who are accredited with either BAFE SP203 (British Approvals for Fire Equipment) or the LPCB (Lost Prevention Certification Board). This means they meet current standards and have been independently assessed.
5. Review your requirements regularly – new solutions are being developed on an ongoing basis.

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Key product features to look for:

1. **Adjustable Sensitivity** – Most modern detectors can have their sensitivity levels adjusted to suit the environment to which they are appropriate. For example, a data processing room that is clean and has a high air exchange rate will generally require a very sensitive setting for the detector. A detector sited in an engineering workshop where manufacturing processes are likely to cause some particles of combustion will require a much less sensitive setting. Skilled engineer should be aware of this and appropriate adjustments selected.
2. **Alarms verify function** – the detector constantly monitors the environment for smoke. If the level rises the detector interrogates the alarm signal for a few seconds. If the smoke levels then drop the alarm is not activated. This would avoid a false alarm caused by cigarette smoke being blown directly onto a smoke detector for example.
3. **Time related systems** – are programmed to suit the environmental conditions whereby the sensitivity levels automatically adjust or the alarm reverts between heat and smoke detection at different times of the day – most commonly between day and night. Increased sensitivity is often required at night as fewer people are around to either cause or spot a potential danger, however even at the lower sensitivity levels your building will still be protected.
4. **Drift compensation** – the sensitivity levels of the detector are automatically adjusted to take into account increasing levels of contamination between service visits. This feature is particularly useful where detectors are located in areas that become dirty more quickly.
5. **Multi-sensor detectors** – combine optical and heat sensing technology – in some cases ionisation – in one unit. These detectors can be very effective as they use algorithms to verify whether a fire is real before the alarm is activated. Fires create a number of effects, therefore using a detector which only activates when it has sensed a specific combination of factors can be extremely effective.
6. **Transmission Delay Units (TDU's)** alert an onsite, trained search team who have a short time frame to locate a potential fire before the full alarm is activated. These systems are particularly useful in large venues such as stadiums for example, where an alarm could cause panic and consequently other dangers.

The RRO

As part of the Regulatory Reform (Fire Safety) Order the fire brigade to issue URNs (Unique Reference Numbers) to businesses to allow them to monitor false alarm callouts. Although policies appear to vary from county to county if false alarms continue the fire brigade are likely to withdraw response or make a change for their attendance. It is therefore vital that in the event of any unwanted alarms close liaison with your alarm provider is essential.

Why choose Tecserv UK?

- As a BAFE SP203 accredited fire protection specialist we comply with all fire service and insurer requirements.
- We specialise in both security and fire protection – so we are experienced in balancing the opposing needs of these two crucial areas.
- Our customers stay with us – which speaks for itself.
- We are dedicated to protecting your people, your processes and your property.

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