

Clean Agent Extinguishers in Business Office Settings

By J. R. Nerat

From time to time, requests surface for the technical rationale behind recommending a clean agent fire extinguisher for use in general office environments. Usually, the best way to address such issues is to have customers determine this need themselves by simply asking a few basic questions related to their business operations.

Today most business owners will quickly acknowledge just how important the use of electronic equipment and data have become to the daily operation of their businesses. They seldom, however, stop to consider what the cost could be in terms of lost revenue or downtime if their equipment were lost or removed for several days.

Unlike a clean agent, dry chemical agent discharged within enclosed rooms will disperse and leave residues on just about every exposed surface.

To help customers and end users better understand how a clean agent fire extinguisher placed in an office can be cost-effective, it is important for fire protection representatives to understand and be able to effectively communicate the rationale behind this conclusion.

General Office Fire Extinguisher Requirements

Most general office applications are classified as a light or low hazard occupancy by NFPA 10 and therefore require a minimum 2-A:10-B:C extinguisher rating for establishing 50 ft travel distances. Because most general small business office requirements can be met with a single multi-class fire extinguisher, the basic cost comparison is often between a 5 lb A:B:C dry chemical and 15 lb A:B:C-rated halogenated clean agent model.

While fire codes don't mandate or require clean agent—types of fire extinguishers for use within general office occupancies, many business environments understand their value and elect to utilize them. The NFPA 75 standard, "Protection for Information Technology Equipment," which specifically addresses various risk factors associated with the protection of computer equipment, components, and records, does not permit the use of dry chemical fire extinguishers.

What to Expect After an Extinguisher Is Used in an Enclosed Room

Because many businesses may have never experienced the effects of extinguishing agents like multipurpose dry chemical

being discharged within an office environment, they have no idea what to expect. This is why it is always good practice to take a moment and explain such information in detail to customers.

Fire extinguisher sales personnel must be able to describe and effectively explain the after-fire cleanup problems associated with exposing delicate electric equipment like computers, servers, monitors, printers, registers, scanners, communication devices, and copy machines to various forms of fire extinguishing agents like A:B:C multipurpose dry chemicals.

Unlike a clean agent, dry chemical agent discharged within enclosed rooms will disperse and leave residues on just about every exposed surface. Electrical motor cooling fans typically draw these residues into delicate electrical contact areas, which will require various stages of

equipment disassembly to properly clean.

Effects Extinguishment Action May Have on Office Equipment and Business Operations

Fire extinguisher manufacturers have various forms of information and bulletins available to address issues related to the proper cleanup of dry chemical agent residues. While these agents are effective and relatively non-corrosive in their dry states, agent residues left on some types of surfaces may require special cleanup recommendations to avoid delayed exposure problems. Heated metal surfaces such as delicate electronic contacts, boards, and cooling motors can sometimes be very difficult to access and clean properly.

Even without factoring in simple replacement parts, the cleaning of electrical equipment will often require its removal from office operations for several days and cost hundreds dollars. Providing customers with some information and examples related to the actual time and costs associated with sending electronic equipment out to local service centers for disassembly and a thorough cleaning can help put some real perspective on these costs.

Insurance Coverage Issues

As insurance rates rise, many businesses often elect to raise deductibles to help keep policy costs down. Customers should be asked to check their current insurance deductible against estimated cleaning costs and consider how key equipment damage might impact their daily business operations, especially if critical data or documentation were lost forever.

Insurance deductibles and business interruption clauses are just two insur-



ance-related issues that business owners seldom contemplate when addressing portable fire extinguisher decisions. Even for those few companies who might have business interruption coverage clauses, this coverage may only apply after a specified period of business operations has been lost or limit of damage is established.

While various insurance policies have different provisions, learning the hard way after a fire can be devastating. Because establishing business losses can be difficult and complex, resolving claims might also take months or years. Finding out that only the physical equipment involved in a fire will be replaced and that critical operational business data replacement was not fully covered helps make a strong case for having clean agent fire extinguishers in business offices.

Summary

Whenever the cost difference between a dry chemical and clean agent halogenated fire extinguisher model is less than the businesses insurance deductible or the anticipated cleaning cost and any potential business interruption loss, it makes good business sense to offer and recommended the use of a clean agent fire extinguisher. ❖

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