

More Information on Electronic Fire Extinguisher Monitoring

BY PETE FRAYER

Recent changes to NFPA 10 have made all of us painfully aware that our basic fire extinguisher service business may be under attack. These changes will allow regular monthly inspections and annual maintenance requirements to be modified if an extinguisher is “electronically monitored.” I have read several excellent articles and had many serious conversations on the subject. Most of the articles and discussions revolve around the negative impact that these changes will have on our businesses. I really believe that is true; however I wanted to write an article that put the focus on the benefits of live and in person service and the benefits that a customer will derive from that kind of work. Rather than sing a sad tune I suggest we go on the offense and sell the benefits of using real people to do real work.

I am still old school – I define an inspection as a quick check and I believe that a business owner or an outside vendor can do this job. A trained and competent person with a basic desire to do this job monthly is vitally important. I further define annual maintenance as a thorough examination to be done by someone with knowledge, parts, tools and manufacturers manuals. I am not convinced that any electronic device can substitute for what a real person, with knowledge, parts and tools can get accomplished.

Here is what I think a real person can do; or an electronic monitoring device cannot do; and how this will benefit your customer.

Corrosion not only includes visible rust but it also includes corrosion



around the pull pin. If the pull pin is corroded in place, the extinguisher is a prop.

Insects build nests in the strangest places. Nozzle tips, around brackets, under carrying handles have all been tried by various insects. If an extinguisher never gets moved (hefted to insure weight or placed on a scale) spider webs can grow to adjoining surfaces etc. Many employees will not attempt to use an insect covered extinguisher for fear of being stung or bitten. A good technician has the same concerns but is willing to do a complete service job, which probably includes minor nest removal and insect control.

Obstructions that block an extinguisher from access or view will never be picked up electronically. A good service technician will know where extinguishers are hidden from view, find them, service them and either relocate them or clear a path so it is accessible for real fire fighting.

Physical damage is not limited to dents in the shell. If the operating handle is bent, it is unlikely that the pull pin can be easily removed. Physical damage can also make the labels and operating information illegible. It is commonly accepted that people need pictographic information to successfully use an extinguisher.

Placement and hazard evaluation are ongoing. There is really no such thing as a customer that does not change something during the year. Processes change, equipment is bought or moved, house-keeping declines or the business changes hands. All of this can go unnoticed unless a good technician with new eyes is invited in for service work. A service visit usually includes a hazard analysis.

Tamper seals should be broken once a year and replaced. This creates a documentation trail that says the technician did his job and that the pull pin can be easily removed prior to operation.

Training should never be forgotten. That is why we have an HMIS label and pictographs on extinguishers. People forget, new people do not always get good training and everyone needs a friendly reminder to reinforce past training.

Hydrostatic or Internal Maintenance date information can only be obtained by looking at the extinguisher

and making an evaluation. Cylinder requalification and internal maintenance are not revenue generators; this work is done because history shows that a pressure vessel full of chemicals needs periodic internal evaluation to insure serviceability.

Readability of operating instructions and HMIS label is important. Not everyone has been trained to operate an extinguisher, so give the untrained a little assistance. You sure cannot be at every fire event so at least put the instructions in writing.

Product updates and recalls do occur in every business including the fire extinguisher business. Only an informed technician will be able to keep up with all of this type of information. We had a recent replacement program that told us to put the extinguisher in a bag so no one could get injured. How many end users would have been prepared for that event?

Someone will be paid to watch the calendar, alert the owner when twelve months have elapsed and stick with it until it gets scheduled and completed. I do the annual maintenance here in our fire extinguisher shop and offices and cannot tell you how many times I get interrupted while servicing six extinguishers. We run a business (that's what we do), located in a building that has extinguishers hanging on the walls. We are not any different from your average customer.

I hope I have inspired someone to go sell service. We do service because it is valuable and helpful. It is only after we do service that there is a code compliance benefit to the customer. So go on the offense with the battle cry, "We are valuable to our customers because we use a real person to service your fire equipment needs." ▽

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