

Two-way mobile communication: more efficient routes, more business? A handful of pest control business owners says it works.

# Hooked on Radio

by Ron Hall



Office Manager Ramona Lundahl beams messages from A-1 headquarters in Chicago.



A-1 Pest Control Service Manager Shawn O'Hara receives route instructions.

**A**theists this past winter mounted a decidedly unholy crusade against a mountainside cross that even miles away in downtown Denver shines as either a sign of hope or an aggravating, glowing flow of electrons. The decision is one of faith.

Battles—even business battles—are decided from this same high ground; action more than faith often decides winners. Signals from atop nearby Lookout Mountain, bristling with metallic antennae, guide at least one Denver pest control businessman to what he feels is a more efficient way of doing business. Instantaneous communication. Radio communication.

"Why did I start to use mobile radios?" responds Gail Crawford, Scott's Pest Control, Denver. "It was because of a good salesman. He didn't pressure me. He said,

'Do me a favor, use it for a week.' When he came back to get his radio, I just wouldn't let it happen."

That was about three years ago. Each of his six Toyota service trucks now has a mobile radio.

Many other PCOs who could profit from this technology—old as Marconi really—have not tapped into what tow-truck operators learned decades ago. Radio communication can get them to jobs when there are jobs.

## Does it pay?

It doesn't have to be so costly as to be prohibitive, *Pest Control* magazine discovered. The most basic pager (beeper) can be leased (maintenance and unlimited usage included) for less than \$1 per day per unit in many major U.S. cities.

A mobile radio calls for a greater initial investment (Don

Dawson of Cleveland Communications, Inc. says a quality but basic unit starts at about \$650), but monthly repeater fees compare favorably with beepers thereafter. (A repeater, located on a privately owned tower usually on a hill or building, *repeats* and strengthens a signal from a mobile unit.)

It's unlikely pest control or termite technicians generate sufficient revenue to pay for cellular telephones because monthly and per-minute usage costs average between \$120-\$125 monthly. A few pest control owner/operators have them in their personal vehicles, however.

Prompter service, prompter responses—these are the obvious benefits of mobile communications, particularly two-way mobile radio communications.

"A potential customer needs



an answer within five minutes," says Crawford. "If you can provide it that quickly you will close 90 percent of your calls. If you wait an hour your closing rate drops to about 70 percent, tomorrow, about 10 percent. Most customers want the work done yesterday."

### One more stop

Robert O'Hara, 23 years in the industry and president of A-1 Pest Control Company, says better communications mean better business...and more of it. He has a Motorola radio in each of his three service trucks which prowl the north Chicago suburbs.

"We thought we could get another stop a day per person. Actually we do better than that," says O'Hara. "If one of our men is running ahead a little bit or if he's got questions about a stop then he can just contact the office."

"With the radio obviously you don't have to stop to get the information and there's no interruption. Sometimes we'll have a customer on the phone in the office and we'll find out that we've got a serviceman right around the corner from their house and he can almost be in their driveway before they hang up."

All of Vanguard Pest Control's sales and supervisory personnel are in radio contact with that company's north Miami, FL, headquarters, 16 radios in all, including radios on several larger-route and termite rigs.

"You just keep adding and adding and adding improvements to your company to make it more efficient," says Vanguard's Jay Levan. "That's how we view our radios."

Levan says the radios are particularly useful when Vanguard is busiest and for last-minute route or service corrections. Office personnel can pinpoint when a technician will arrive at a particular stop and have a customer there waiting.

### Think first

Buying (or leasing) a mobile communications system isn't,

## 'Have Pager, Will Travel'

Don George, string tie and all, feels downright unarmed without his trusty pager hanging from his belt at his side.

Have Beeper, Will Travel—the unspoken motto of the Colorado Pest Control Conference this past March. In fact, just about every PCO and technician at that Denver gathering had one of them durn tootin' contraptions loaded (a AA battery) and ready for action.

"I'd say they probably save us five times in wasted gasoline and service calls as what they cost us," says George a hefty man (and equally hefty handshake) with a round, florid face. Hmmm, he's talking a nice piece of pocket change since he figures he pays about \$140 per quarter for the three palm-sized pagers, one for each of the three routemen in his pest control company, Metro Pest Management Consultants, Inc. Included in that cost is unlimited paging.

Basically, here's how Metro uses pagers: a homeowner calls Metro's office on West 10th Avenue with an emergency pest problem. The office manager (in this case the wife of Don's partner) dials the telephone number that activates the pager of the serviceman closest to the potential client. That telephone number (each unit beeps to a different number) causes a signal to be sent from a nearby tower.

Since it's an emergency, let's say a nest of hornets, the office manager dials twice, making the pager "beep" twice (Metro's developed a code to distinguish the urgency of any message) and the routeman then telephones Metro's office as soon as possible.

Says George, "I can call the customer and say, 'Yes, I can be there right away.' It might give us 10 to 15 residential services more a month."

Terry Hadsell, president of Archer Pest Control, in Aurora, CO, agrees it's not hard to justify the expense of pagers. "One extra sale or saving one customer each month pays for it," he says. "It means you get your calls a little bit faster and you're going to close a few more sales."

While both George and Hadsell agree that pagers are valuable tools, they caution against becoming too dependent on them. They still have their people call into the office twice a day no matter what.

George's firm also uses answering machines and call forwarding to receive messages evenings and weekends. His goal, he says, is to respond to a customer or potential customer 30 minutes or less, anytime.

Have we forgotten anything? "Yea, you've got to remember to turn your beeper on in the morning," says George. □



Don George: customers can contact him anytime.



Terry Hadsell: technicians must keep in touch.



however, as simple as using one, usually just a matter of turning on the radio and keying the microphone.

"Selling the equipment is just the first step, just the start," says Don Dawson, a salesman with Cleveland Communications, Inc., which supplies mobile communication equipment and services to municipalities and businesses in Northeast Ohio. "Then you've got to make it run just right for the customer who is going to be using it."

Nick Redone, an engineering manager with Motorola, Schaumburg, IL, says those considering a two-way radio setup can: invest in a base station with its own antenna; use a community repeater



Gail Crawford says customers want answers "now".

service; or join a trunked system. Those on a community repeater system share channel availability with others (although each business has a separate access code). A trunked system is connected to a computer which scans several repeaters almost simultaneously to uncover available

channels more efficiently.

Whatever the choice, a business might want to establish some type of code, even a simple code, as a security measure in its inter-fleet communications.

These and other matters such as add-on features, coverage area and cost should be discussed with someone who knows the mobile communication market in your service area, suggest Redone and Dawson. **PC**

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