

Why Two-Way Radios Are Helping Move FM Professionals into the Next Age of Efficiency

By Ben Burns



When it comes to the world of higher education facilities management (FM), two priorities stand above the rest: 1) maintaining a functioning facility that enhances education, and 2) ensuring a secure and safe environment for administration, staff, and students. Both targets require an effective communications system to achieve these goals, and the proper tools to support it. That's why more FM professionals are incorporating the power of two-way radios as an important asset for improving educational productivity while simultaneously reducing the threat of unexpected emergencies.

THE EVOLUTION OF TWO-WAY RADIOS

Two-way radios have evolved significantly over the years, to the point where this technology has become indispensable for today's FM departments. From buildings and grounds maintenance to security,

fire safety, and cleaning, having reliable two-way radio coverage is critical for campuses that want to maintain campus performance, plan and supervise day-to-day activities more efficiently, and be better prepared for the unexpected. For example, professional-grade two-way radios include safety features such as emergency alerts programming that can be essential during a crisis.

In addition, they allow departments and classrooms to coordinate activities at the touch of a button, anywhere on campus. Finally, they include convenient features such as multichannel partitioning, text messaging, keypads, and global positioning systems (GPS). That's why today's top educational FM professionals are taking full advantage of the power of two-way radios.

THE WILLIAM ALVORD UNIFIED SCHOOL DISTRICT

The William Alvord Unified School District (AUSD) was ratified as a "unified" district in Riverside, California in 1960. Today, AUSD includes 14 elementary schools, 4 middle schools, 3 high schools, 1 alternative high school, and 1 continuation school. The district employs more than 2,000 teachers and staff and is responsible for educating more than 18,000 students.

Bob Turner assumed the role of AUSD's director of facilities and emergency management in 2014. He knew almost immediately that there was a need to incorporate two-way radios into the district's communications systems. As a highly trained electronic communications professional with both a bachelor's and master's degree in emergency and disaster management and technical communications, Turner knew exactly what the district needed: cost-effective, durable, and easy-to-use professional two-way radios that could be incorporated throughout critical areas of the campus.

IMMEDIATE COMMUNICATION IMPROVEMENT

“The improvement with the new two-way radios was immediate, and the quality is exceptional. Now we have radios at each individual site; we have radios for our security department, our school resource officers, and me,” says Turner. “Every campus and every classroom is also equipped with two-way radios. I also programmed all the radios the same, with each campus having its own channel, so that if we must evacuate to another campus, all they would have to do is turn the channel knob and everyone is communicating.”

ALWAYS SELECT PROFESSIONAL-GRADE TWO-WAY RADIOS

In the world of two-way radios, there are two distinct categories of radio: Family Radio Service (FRS) and professional-grade radios. Basically, FRS radios are consumer-grade radios that are made of plastic and can break easily in even the tamest environments. They are not meant to perform 40 hours a week. For serious industries like education, manufacturing, construction, and FM, investing in well-made radios that can withstand daily use will yield the best long-term strategy. In addition, commercial-grade two-way radios, such as RCA professional radios, offer the following benefits over consumer radios:

- **Durability:** Commercial radios are designed to hold up to abuse better than consumer radios. Consumer radios are usually built for infrequent use: weekend hunting trips, multiple car caravans, camping trips, and amusement park visits. They are lightweight with a thin plastic casing. Commercial radios are designed to be used for hours a day and are constructed with heavy-duty commercial housing. Many are built to military specifications and are also waterproof, with significant transmitting power.
- **Battery Life:** Never underestimate the importance of battery life. Most consumer radios include rechargeable batteries that are good for 8 hours of use or less. As is typical of batteries, this life will likely diminish slightly over time. Professional-grade radios by comparison will provide 12 hours or more on a single charge, and even longer when in digital mode.
- **Accessories:** Business radios typically have a far-better selection of accessories than consumer radios. If accessories such as headsets, earpieces, and speaker mics are important to your business, you should look at what accessories are available before you choose a radio. Accessories like rapid chargers and multiunit chargers are only available for business radios.

Although purchasing cheap, consumer-grade walkie-talkies may seem like a prudent communications solution in the short term, it will cost more in the long term than buying commercial two-way radios that are designed to be used in professional arenas.

FOUR REASONS WHY YOUR FM TEAM SHOULDN'T BE RELYING ON CELLPHONES

Chances are that nearly every facilities employee, from the front office to the laundry room, owns a cellphone or smartphone. However, while it might be tempting to rely exclusively on these devices, the truth is that cellphones can't compete with two-way radios in many aspects, including reach, reliability, functionality, durability, and price.

- **Reach:** Most maintenance professionals know that ultrahigh frequency (UHF) digital two-way radios provide a higher frequency than very high frequency (VHF) radios. As a result, it is easier for the signal to penetrate concrete and metal structures. Cellphones will frequently be unable to penetrate these surfaces.
- **Reliability:** Because cellphones will frequently encounter “blank spots” where they cannot transmit or receive, they can become liabilities rather than assets. Two-way radios operate immediately with just a push of a button.
- **Functionality:** While modern smartphones are chock-full of amazing features, they all require spotless reception and a lot of finger manipulation to activate them. Two-way radios, on the other hand, can connect with one or multiple people with the simple push of a button. In addition, with proper programming, each separate channel can be designated for specific maintenance responsibilities, thus improving the efficiency and functionality of most jobs.
- **Durability:** Cellphone fragility is legendary. Dropping them, allowing moisture to penetrate them, or inadvertently allowing software or application viruses to target them can make these devices inoperable. However, today's professional-grade two-way radios can be dropped on concrete or even in a puddle of water and will still respond, with rare exceptions.
- **Price:** Unlike cellphones that require monthly payment plans, two-way radios do not include monthly bills. 💰

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New technology and trends are emerging and evolving every day in facilities. Would you like to share a new technology or trend in this column? Please contact Anita Dosik at anita@appa.org for more information on submissions to this column.