

# Twist and shout.

*The history of emergency communications is inexorably linked to how well we make buildings – and how easily we can become trapped in them.*

For as long as there have been buildings there has been the need to prevent people from becoming trapped in them. Structures, by their very nature, inhibit movement. When an exit becomes blocked or leads into danger instead of away from it, people need to be directed to safety. Quickly. With intensified threats like



terrorism, hurricanes, and workplace violence, this is more important today than at any other time in history.

As structures become increasingly complex, so too does the means of escape. When fire destroyed London in 1666, people were able to get out of their homes and shops with little difficulty. Warning cries were heard in the streets. People made their way to safety because they could see the approaching flames and because they were able to communicate directly with those who knew the path of the fire. Yet despite the fact

that some 13,000 buildings were consumed by fire, few people lost their lives.

Two centuries later when Chicago burned, it was a different story. While a nearly identical number of buildings were destroyed, the death toll was immense compared with the Great Fire of London. Obviously population density played a part, as did the size

and relatively complex nature of the buildings. But perhaps the most crucial element lacking in the Chicago blaze was communication: early warning of the impending disaster; clear direction as to a means of escape.

Present-day architecture is as far removed from 19th Century Chicago as the buildings that burned in that city's fire were from 17th Century London. What makes matters even more precarious today is the scope of destruction now imaginable in this post-9/11 and post Katrina era; more people face a greater exposure to calamity than at any other time in history. Speed and clarity of communication is more important than ever; event notification is absolutely vital.

Cries of warning from the street and the sound of ringing bells have in their turn been rendered inadequate by developments in architecture. After the Great Fire of 1666, architect

*more...*



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Christopher Wren rebuilt London to resist fire. Similarly, fire codes were adopted across the United States in the wake of the Chicago blaze.

But we live in different times now, and the emergency communications challenges posed by modern high-rise buildings and sprawling commercial/industrial complexes have never been faced before. Nor have the threats to them. Clear instructions delivered quickly and efficiently will meet these challenges.

We don't live and work in buildings with highly combustible straw roofs any more, but then again, we can't just open a door to be free of them either.



imagination at work