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PoliceOne Exclusive
with Rachel Fretz

New Software Gives Agencies The Big Picture

More often than not, police and emergency response teams need to work fast. This means having simultaneous access to as much information as possible. But on too many occasions, precious minutes are lost trying to coordinate between agencies and command posts – time that should be spent executing a decisive plan.

In a bid to improve communication between agencies at incidents, Camden, N.J., company Drakontas LLC has developed a new integrated situational awareness application. Its DragonForce™ software augments traditional voicecom by integrating location, messaging and whiteboarding capabilities along with sensor and database information from a variety of platforms.

DragonForce integrates Blue Force Tracking – a location-based service using GPS technology – and text messaging, and has a "collaborative whiteboard" where images, drawings and other data can be easily shared by system users. The software utilizes a standard application, like Microsoft Word or Outlook, that can be loaded onto a variety of mobile devices, such as a BlackBerry, Treo, ruggedized PDA or cell phone, and appears as a clickable icon on the screen.



Command center aerial view (Image/Drakontas)

When first responders open the command center application, they'll see field operatives and other team members — anyone who is using the software — on a map.

To put this in real-world context, imagine responding to an active shooter situation at a school where all cross-agency emergency responders, from the command center down, are all looking at an accurate photo of the shooter, up-to-date floor plans of the building and GPS tracking of tactical teams' movements.

Take another scenario: A massive manhunt is under way and everyone is searching for the suspect. DragonForce can be used for large-scale photo sharing starting at the Command Center, which simultaneously pushes images of the suspect to all DragonForce-enabled devices. Two-way communication means that individual responders can then communicate back, via text message or "quick text" (a set of pre-defined text messages) to the Command Center.

“GPS is only one part of the picture,” said Michael Mitkus, marketing and sales manager of Drakontas LLC. “The array of features that we offer is the critical thing.”

One such feature is the ability to use CCTV to take pictures and screen shots, which is done by zooming a camera in on the suspect, taking the photograph, then pushing the image out into the field.

Drexel University in Philadelphia, for example, has made several successful arrests using DragonForce™ on a closed circuit device. Instead of giving a description, campus police simply distributed a digital photo of the suspect in question to all patrol officers in the field, which they could then view on their DragonForce™-enabled devices.

“Everybody is operating at the same level, looking at the same thing,” Mitkus said. “We provide a common operating picture.”



Dragon Force™
Handheld
(Image/Drakontas)

Ready, set. . .

But how realistic is it to rely on a small handheld device during a tactical mission? Clearly that’s not the time to fumble around with the latest gadgets. But according to Mitkus, it’s really just a matter of training.

“It becomes second nature due to its intuitive functionality,” he said. “During our various training exercises, we have witnessed time and time again that tactical teams quickly master the functionality and within minutes are able to train others on its capabilities.”

That said, DragonForce is part of an operational process that is used mostly for pre-entry intel — to help agencies get through the planning phase. In other words, you’re probably not going to use the device during the last 10 percent of the operation.

“Once they say go, and everyone’s in position, that’s when everything else kicks in. DragonForce helps response teams get ready for that moment,” Mitkus said,

Mass notification systems

To understand as many cross-agency needs as possible, the software has been tested during various different training exercises by SWAT and emergency response teams.

In this way, tactical teams dictate what key features are included in the DragonForce framework, Mitkus said.

In addition, DragonForce's logging capability makes for a useful training feature as all data being communicated to and from the command center to people out in the field is saved, meaning it can be studied later.

“You can review the training exercise, look at the history of correspondence and see what you could have done better,” Mitkus said. “Time is critical. With the logged data, you can go back and see where you lost the most.”

Upshot

It's easy to like change in theory, to get behind flashy new technology that's coming down the pike, but for agencies looking to move into 21st century tech, change will require a shift in training to make tools like DragonForce integral to their operations.

With this application, agencies can ratchet up their scope of mission planning to include multiple types of scenarios, from active shooters and hostage situations to general security features, like securing the perimeter, breaching and warrant service.

“It comes in handy in almost a limitless number of scenarios out there,” Mitkus said. “Whatever these teams are doing on a routine basis, our device can help.”

In the end, the best plan of attack is making sure everybody is prepared and on the same page.

About Drakontas LLC

Drakontas delivers communications tools, including software and integrated solutions, for law enforcement, emergency response, and security operations. The company was founded in partnership with Drexel University in 2004 to transition technologies developed at the Applied Communications and Information Networking (ACIN) Center for the Department of Defense to commercial, civilian and homeland security uses. In 2005, the company launched DragonForce™, its core software product, which provides situation awareness information to commanders and field deployed team members.

Drakontas was recently awarded a \$3.68 million grant from the US Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs' National Institute of Justice to establish the NLECTC Communications Technologies Center of Excellence (COE) to test, evaluate and demonstrate cutting edge communications tools and technologies. The COE will establish and manage a wide range of criminal justice pilot projects, involving software defined and cognitive radios, position location technologies, wireless data interoperability, and other communications tools and capabilities. The team will also support a Communications Technology Working Group, and provide specialized communications technology assistance to law enforcement, as needed.

More information about the company's communications tools and program administration capabilities can be found at www.drakontas.com.

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As editor of PoliceOne, Ms. Fretz writes on a broad range of topics that affect the law enforcement community, and provides cutting edge tactical tips and techniques straight from our Street Survival seminar experts.