

# Homeland RESPONSE

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## The Newest Weapon in Event Planning

### By Robert Wolf

After the events of Sept. 11, 2001, the requirements involved in securing an event have escalated.

Before 9/11, security at major sporting or entertainment events focused on crowd and traffic control. Today, the safety concerns include terrorist prevention and intervention. These potential threats involve intricate precautions, attention to the smallest detail and seamless communications between commanders and the officers on the ground. Lead agencies need to be involved in more partnerships and collaborate more closely with state and federal agencies.

Out of this need for heightened security stems a dichotomy between necessity and reality. The necessity of an organization to provide heightened security is oftentimes at odds with the reality of the entity's ability to furnish the needed man-power and absorb the costs associated with hosting a large-scale event. All too often, a city or county is given the designation as a lead agency to provide security for an event, but is given little-to-no financial assistance to make certain that the event takes place without a serious threat to the public.

When faced with such an enormous task, how can a host



city or county adequately plan and execute an event while at the same time meet budgetary and resource constraints placed on them for the event?

For a growing number of states, cities and counties, the answer has been found in technology solutions that enable multi-agency collaboration. Technology, if used correctly, can assist in the automation of business processes (thus freeing precious resources), provide situational awareness for all agencies involved and provide real-time information to users. This article reviews the uses and benefits of one such technology solution, E-Sponder, at two major events (The 2004 Presidential Debates held at Washington University in St. Louis and the 2005 Super Bowl held in Jacksonville, Fla.) as well as provides guidelines when choosing a technology solution.

### The October 2004 Presidential Debates

When President George W. Bush and Senator John Kerry squared off in their second debate in St. Louis, more than two dozen federal, state and local law enforcement and emergency agencies were involved in the security measures surrounding the event. Mike Smiley, deputy director, Office of Emergency Management, St. Louis County Police, was in charge of developing a security plan for public safety during the debate. Months ahead of the event, Mike met with Nick Gragnani, then deputy director, Office of Emergency Management, St. Louis County Police, who was in charge of designing the command center. They struggled with how the users from the 25 federal, state and local agencies would be able to share documents and other information in real time.

Furthermore, Gragnani had another problem to solve: designing a command center that would encourage all the commanders to remain in the room for the duration of the event. He knew from experience that as soon as commanders sensed that they did not have the entire picture of the event, they would leave the room in search of information. Somehow, Gragnani had to provide complete situational awareness in the unified

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command center. Both Smiley and Gragnani realized that whatever the solution, it needed to be robust enough to handle more than 1,500 security-related activities that would be involved in the event, such as investigating threats during the debate or assigning officers to certain check points.

Gragnani and Smiley immediately saw that E-Sponder – a collaboration and information-sharing portal developed by Convergence Communications based upon Microsoft Office Professional Enterprise Edition 2003 technologies – offered the potential for real-time collaboration because it delivers collaboration functions such as e-mail, forums, calendars, shared documents, task lists and messaging that allow stakeholders to efficiently work together remotely. Gragnani and Smiley knew that Convergence would be willing to work with them to customize the solution to accommodate their changing needs.

Weeks before the debate, user groups were integrated into the E-Sponder portal using a Microsoft program, Microsoft InfoPath 2003. Officers used InfoPath forms to fill out their

Incident Action Plans (IAP) online, which mimicked the paper-based forms they were accustomed to filling out. As more and more IAP's were completed, the system built up a timeline of pre-planned events, which gave everyone involved a global view of the event.

A few days before the event, a unified command center was created with 25 workstations. Each workstation was assigned to a functional group such as the local fire, police or FBI. The E-Sponder portal allowed command-center workers to share data, and have views of a checklist of tasks that needed to be completed. If the task was overdue, the item would flash so the commanders would know that action needed to be taken. Without the use of the portal, the command center would have been a plethora of

radio systems squawking, notes being passed and a maze of three-ring binders.

During the event, officers would call in through dispatch, and the information would be keyed into E-Sponder for real-time display. If the officer had access to a laptop

or mobile devices, information could be keyed in directly to the system by the officer. The unified command center was designed so commanders had the ability to view events as they unfolded on a big screen display board. A second large screen showing the pre-planned events was displayed next to the unplanned events screen. Together, these screens gave the commanders a view of what actually was happening versus what was supposed to be happening. With complete situational awareness, the commanders stayed in the command center, diligently watching the display boards.

E-Sponder was used to automate many critical business processes during the debate and consequently provided real-time information sharing and reduced resolution time for unplanned events. In addition, it gave complete situational awareness both inside and outside the command center to all of those involved in securing the debate activities.

All information in the system (every line item, as well as every change) was tracked by user name and time stamped, so it was available for all agencies



during and after action reporting.

From the viewpoint of Gragnani, one of the overarching benefits of the portal stemmed from the fact that the technology can be incorporated in future operations. The versatility of the system allows it to be tailored for other major events or even for daily use as a collaboration tool. "We know that we will also be able to incorporate this technology into future operations whether it be a debate four years down the road, a tornado next year or an earthquake next month. This technology directly increases our effectiveness," Gragnani said.

### **Super Bowl XXXIX, Jacksonville, Florida**

When the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office was designated as the lead planning agency for Super Bowl XXXIX back in 2000, Jacksonville had the typical concerns of crowd and traffic control. However, after the events of 9/11, the sheriff's office realized that planning for this event was going to be one of their greatest challenges. They would have to follow new government-mandated processes and practices like in-synch command. Dealing with the additional level of security needed to defend against the possibility of terrorist threats, they would have to adapt to communicating with additional federal and state agencies.

The sheriff's office began actively planning for the Super Bowl 18 months ahead of the game. They were creating plans on paper and building up stacks of binders, holding countless meetings and sending numerous e-mails. The communication streams were proving to be over-

whelming for the group, and it was almost impossible to organize and archive information. Everyone was working toward the same goal, but no one seemed to have the big picture. They needed a way to share information and see the evolution of the operation as a whole.

When the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office Information Technology Officer, Beth Horn, heard about the real-time communications solution that was used to manage security for the second presidential debate, she decided to investigate. After attending an E-Sponder demonstration, Horn was impressed by the solution's flexibility and ease of use. The Jacksonville Sheriff's Office had already implemented SharePoint Portal Server and their law enforcement officers were using laptops in their cruisers, which could be used to communicate with dispatch. She realized that E-Sponder didn't require a lot of training and could be quickly customized to meet the needs of her office.

E-Sponder's role in Super Bowl XXXIX was to provide critical information and enhanced situational awareness to both the command staff and the professionals in the field who were in charge of protecting the public during the event. Within a week, E-Sponder was up and running and 500 users were registered on the system. Users filled out a registration form, and, once approved, were automatically added to the backend sequel database, without the need for IT assistance, which was a definite plus for Horn and her staff, who were tasked with larger, more complex issues.

Just as in the presidential de-

bate, users became acclimated with the system while filing out their incident action plans. However, during this event, the large screen displays, which tracked planned and unplanned events, were shown in 13 different emergency operations centers, effectively tying 53 different local, state and federal agencies together during the week-long event.

As the Super Bowl activities progressed, the sheriff's office wanted a way to track an officer's hours and tie them to payroll electronically. In the past, officers would sign in and out using paper-based timesheets, and all data would be manually keyed into the payroll system. Convergence built an interface with the sheriff's office payroll system that could look up each officer's information, determine his or her rate of pay and calculate the officer's cost in real time.

Lieutenant Randy Russell, lead resource planner for the Jacksonville Sheriff's Office, marvels at how his agency, with extremely limited resources and budget, was able to seamlessly manage Super Bowl XXXIX while staying in budget.

### **Conclusion**

The main driver in executing a successful event is a dedicated group of individuals. Events can be successfully planned, executed and reviewed without the use of technology. However, there are affordable technology solutions that can ease the burden and provide enhanced situational awareness during an event.

If the decision is made to

work with a technology solution to assist in securing your event, it is important to remember a few key points:

■ **Do your homework: investigate, prepare and implement.** Take time to assess your exact deliverables and what you are going to be held accountable for. Assessing your deliverables and requirements goes beyond the obvious: How are you going to manage and archive e-mails, meetings, conversations, images and plans? Implementation of the correct technology solution will assist you in this process and keep your staff free from much of the administrative burdens found in planning large-scale events.

■ **Don't just choose technology, choose a technology partner.** Planning an event is a dynamic task. Make certain that the company you choose is willing to understand your business processes and work with you to marry technology with your most challenging issues.

■ **Don't learn your technology during a crisis.** Pick a technology solution that is extremely user friendly. As the dynamics of an event change, you may need to collaborate with a community of users you did not anticipate in your initial planning. These new users will need to quickly learn and adapt to your communication solution.

When securing an event, everyone is working toward the same goal: An event where the public does not think twice about security. The right technology solution can quickly put more accurate information in the hands of those who need it, and allow people to focus on their mission, not on paperwork.

Randy Russell shares his experience with using technology to secure Super Bowl XXXIX, a sporting event that is second only to the Olympics in size and scope: "What's exciting to me, as a veteran law enforcement officer who is interested in innovation and technology, is to see the police, fire, emer-

gency medical and public safety community begin to embrace technology as a way to make the public safer. The new collaboration solution helps make us more effective, informed and able to carry out our mission more capably and more efficiently," he continues. "It changes the way that we've been operating and really improves the processes on which policing has relied up to now. We're right on the bubble of a paradigm shift, following the business community in its use of technology, with technology now taking a lead role in the advancement of law enforcement best practices." **HLR**

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