



By **Mike Parilac, Publisher**
mike@underspace.com

Managing to Mismatch Ticket Management

The advent of technology has impacted almost every industry or business environment. The utility locating industry is no exception. Some technological advances have made positive impacts while others have been less than favorable.

For locating technicians, the introduction and use of digital utility maps meant that there was no longer a need for production of paper maps or boxes of microfiche. All you needed was a computer in the locating technician's truck. Every locator could now have maps of the entire system, not just his area. There were no more lost microfiche cards or missing map pages. You did not have to wait for years to get updated records. Just burn forty or fifty new disks every few months and give them to the locating technicians.

The utilities that located facilities with their own employees were the first to use computers in their vehicles, not contract locators. Soon enough, contract locating companies were told to get computers for their technicians or else. "Or else we'll find a contractor that will." The locating instrument was no longer the most expensive tool on the contract locator's truck. If you had to have a laptop computer in every truck, why not get more use out of it?

Back then, NorAm Damage Prevention was just a blip on the contract locating radar screen. I'm not sure that NorAm was the first contract locating company to employ

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mobile ticket management, but they could have been. It's safe to say, though, that they were the first to drop a ton of money on this system. In the mid-to-late 1990s, writers of mobile ticket management software crowded about the multiple benefits of mobile ticket management: enhanced productivity, tighter management, increased accountability and lower cost of operation. NorAm marketing made it clear that technology was their calling card.

The laptop computer loaded with mobile ticket management software eliminated the need for printed one-call tickets. Before mobile ticket management, technicians either had to report to an office and pick-up their printed one-call tickets or these paper tickets had to be couriered to the technicians. Mobile ticket management eliminated a lot of the "dead time" associated with the distribution of one-call tickets. The locate technician merely needed to plug the laptop into a phone jack at home, dial an 800 number and wait for the paperless tickets to download.

I single out NorAm in this column not because of the money they spent on mobile ticket management. Someone had to be the first to jump into it in a big way. The reason I focus on NorAm is the marketing approach they employed (Yes, there was a day when contract locating companies used marketing in an attempt to differentiate themselves from their competition). NorAm's marketing message was simple: more technology equals better damage prevention. This message resonated with the utilities. Technology made things easier and would certainly reduce the utilities' costs on many fronts. It would even reduce the cost of contract locating. NorAm even said it was so.

How would NorAm using mobile ticket management improve damage prevention for the utility customer? Oh, the list was endless: no more lost paper tickets, no more

lost or incomplete written log sheets, time-stamped site arrival and ticket completion information and creation of irrefutable evidence used to win damage claims. Furthermore, the utility could anticipate accurate and timely billing information. In general, mobile ticket management could relieve the contract locating customer of many of its administrative and oversight headaches.

NorAm's marketing message to the utilities was clear: "We embrace technology just like you. Shouldn't we be your contractor of choice?" And so they did, but that could not keep the company in business. Because internally, NorAm envisioned their ticket management system as a system for managing their entire operation, from supervision to payroll, from accounting to accounts payable. But the writers of the software could not account for the human element of the business, much less manage it. NorAm Damage Prevention sold their assets to Central Locating Service before they could celebrate their second birthday.

Soon after NorAm's demise, mobile ticket management was used by all sizable contract locating companies. Within the last few years, there have been several successful labor lawsuits filed against the larger contract locating companies on behalf of locate technicians. Much of the contention concerned pay for working from home, performing tasks such as "downloading, sorting and routing their daily work assignments." Millions of dollars have changed hands as a result of these lawsuits. It's odd to think that the use of a mobile ticket management--a tool designed to give a company oversight of its entire operations--could itself be so difficult to manage. **UF**

Publisher's note: Upcoming issues of Underground Focus will study the total impact of technology on one-call locating.