

RAINING RESULTS

Texas-based WaterLogic uses technology to deliver resource & cost savings

BY BRANDI SMITH



Inside the Observation and Response Center at WaterLogic's Houston headquarters, John O'Donnell is focused on the computer screen in front of him. The company's vice president of technology is setting up a new irrigation controller that was just installed the previous day at Sienna Plantation. Before it comes online, O'Donnell first has to program its surroundings, which are laid out in a multi-page document.

"When we install the controller, we go through a station-by-station evaluation to tell us exactly what is out there. For example, we note what the slope is, whether there are flowers or turf," O'Donnell explains. "It's pretty in-depth."

Most of the properties where WaterLogic operates have multiple controllers, so they're organized by program. For example, some landscapers want their shrubs watered at different times than turf. Or maybe those along the street are set to turn on at the same time, while those farther back come on later.

"I have to make special arrangements for those particular zones," says O'Donnell.

He can do all his programming from his computer because each controller he dials in is outfitted with a SIM card, just like the one in your cell phone.

"This is one that's online, that I've just dialed in to this particular controller," O'Donnell says, while pointing to his screen. "We can see what that controller is seeing out in the field and if there are any issues, it'll show up and tell us, 'Hey, I've got a problem with a wire path or a short that may have developed.' It'll populate here."

Technology has changed significantly since WaterLogic got its start in 2002. Back then, most sprinkler controllers were akin to an egg timer. They were set at an arbitrary time and would go off at that time every day, regardless of the weather conditions. WaterLogic,

however, used one-way pager technology to send weather data to the controller, allowing it to make a decision about what to do. An issue that arose was that the controllers couldn't communicate back.

"I couldn't see if it had a problem. Maybe it didn't receive that signal. Maybe there was a short. I can't see that unless we were physically onsite," says O'Donnell. "Now, with the two-way technology, we send that same weather information out, but if there's an issue, it tells us. We can get that information to the landscaper to get it fixed proactively instead of reactively."



Two-way communication is a key part of what WaterLogic does. Far beyond programming these controllers and letting them run, the staff here communicates with them multiple times a day to ensure water is being used judiciously.

"The first time we talk to the controllers is an

hour before their run time, so they know if it's raining, hot, cold, humid, windy or whatnot," says O'Donnell. "Then at 7 a.m., we get reports back about any issues that may have occurred overnight."

The final report comes in around 3 p.m. each day, letting WaterLogic analysts see any changes the landscapers made.

"We aren't trying to override them, but sometimes people make mistakes and we're a second set of eyes," O'Donnell says. "We found one set for an hour the other day, while another was set for 12 hours. We're able to catch something like that and if doesn't make sense to us, we can call the landscaper and ask, 'Are you sure you want to do this?'"

This time of year, he says, it's not uncommon to find controllers turned off because they're not needed during the rainier months. Come August, however, if WaterLogic staff notice a shut-off controller, they'll make a quick phone call to make sure that was intentional.

In the other extreme, a freezing forecast, WaterLogic has the ability to turn off a sprinkler system before it coats sidewalks and streets in a layer of ice.

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CHARLIE RACUSIN
FOUNDER, CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



"If we know there's weather that's going to hit us, we can shut everything down ahead of time," says O'Donnell, offering Hurricane Harvey as an example. "We turned everything off ahead of time because there was no reason to water before the storm came in. We didn't know it was going to drop 59 inches, but we didn't need irrigation systems contributing."

The company's hands-on approach to monitoring the controllers has a significant impact on its customers' water use and water bill. For example, University of St. Thomas in Houston, which signed on with WaterLogic in June 2010, has saved 21,562,000 gallons of water, a cost savings of \$143,567.

Howard Rose, the university's associate vice president of capital projects and facilities, says once WaterLogic founder and chief executive officer, Charlie Racusin, explained how the system worked and installed it, the process went very smoothly. He says he would absolutely recommend it to other property owners.

So would Bill Higgins, president of Crest Management Company, who has encouraged nearly 30 of his properties to adopt WaterLogic's management system.

"Whenever we take on a new community, that's one of the first things we recommend to them. We ask them to at least let the WaterLogic folks come in and put together a proposal to see what the potential things can be and then, go from there," Higgins says.

That part of the process is crucial, says Estelle Plastiras, the company's director of customer service. If WaterLogic won't be beneficial to a property, it will let its managers know it isn't a candidate for this technology.

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- Charlie Racusin

"I send the savings reports out to the clients, so it's really important to us that we don't take clients that we cannot help. We are very selective in the ones that we choose because it's more important for us to show the savings results," she says.

It's an approach you don't often see in business these days, a company that's more about results than dollars.

"When it comes to the initial capital investment, we want to be able to give them a real return on that investment. If we can't, we won't sell them something that we don't find to be a very satisfactory return," says Racusin.

That's why clients like Higgins stick with WaterLogic, who has seen some of the properties he manages cut water usage by 40 percent.

"Water is a precious commodity that we need to use wisely. We don't need to waste it. Also, over-irrigating landscaping is expensive and it's counterproductive. It's bad for the landscaping," he says. "What pays for that capital investment is the fact that you're saving so much money on water. There are other advantages as well. Because their operation center allows them to monitor these irrigation controllers from anywhere, we don't have to worry about them going off when it's raining or freezing."

Watching other, less responsive, systems battle the weather is one way Plastiras scouts out potential clients.

"If it's raining, I'm known to pull over and take a picture when I see the sprinklers going. Then we come back to the office and call," she laughs.

WaterLogic's clients to date range from massive master-planned communities, such as the 2,000-acre Aliana in Fort Bend County, to retirement communities, including those managed by Atria Senior Living, to hospitals, universities and multi-family properties. The focus, always, is results.

"Crest Management tends to, as a company, build long-term relationships with vendor partners and we do that because of the results that they achieve for our clients," says Higgins. "WaterLogic certainly fits in that category of a long-term vendor partner, one that benefits our clients every day and we work to continue that."

For more information about WaterLogic or to schedule a complimentary water management analysis, call (877) 322-4222 or email info@WaterLogic-Texas.com.