

MOBILE TECHNOLOGY: AN ESSENTIAL PART OF FIREFIGHTERS' GEAR

RUGGED MOBILE TECHNOLOGY IS NOW STANDARD FIREFIGHTING EQUIPMENT, CONNECTING TO CRITICAL DATA AND CREATING A MOBILE COMMAND CENTER AT THE EVENT.

Firefighters break ax and sledgehammer handles routinely. They are so notoriously tough on equipment, jokes are made about them being able to break bowling balls in padded rooms.

While they may not be totally “firefighter proof,” Panasonic TOUGHBOOK® rugged laptops, tablets and handhelds—at the heart of Panasonic mobile solutions for first responders—are doing their best to meet the challenge.

Panasonic has been a trusted supplier of rugged mobile technology to firefighters for decades. One reason for that: Fire companies can customize a complete solution that includes hardware, software, connectivity and services. While rugged devices are the heart of mobile solutions for firefighters, Panasonic goes beyond the equipment to offer reliable connectivity options and services that keep critical data flowing to firefighter devices.

Hialeah FD: ruggedly mobile

The Hialeah, FL, Fire Department (HFD) clearly sees the value in a complete solution. With 20 fire and rescue units across eight stations, answering 30,000 runs a year, HFD knew it needed a tough mobile computer solution.

“We’re rough on our equipment,” said Hialeah Fire Department Lt. Urbano Menendez. “Even our TOUGHBOOK computers take a beating.”

More than a decade ago, the HFD recognized the value of purchasing Panasonic TOUGHBOOK tablets. Today, the department continues to invest in TOUGHBOOK devices as the hardware at the heart of the company’s mobility solutions to improve communications capabilities to fire and rescue teams.

Warranty and repair services for peace of mind

A complete solution goes beyond the hardware. Even with rugged equipment, Menendez said what gives him and his department peace of mind is the warranty and repair service Panasonic offers.

HFD opted into Panasonic’s ProServices Protection Plus coverage, which augments the standard warranty with no-fault accident coverage, a good decision for first responders facing the most extreme work environments. In the event of a hardware issue, this comprehensive warranty and service solution ensures that the device receives prompt repair or replacement, avoiding unexpected costs and getting HFD firefighters back up and running swiftly.

“What makes the difference for us is knowing that when our devices do experience issues, Panasonic is there to get us up and running quickly and responsively,” Menendez said. “The service is professional and rock-solid. Even when things go wrong, they go right.”

He continued, “The most impressive thing we’ve seen is the turnaround time. When something does go wrong, we make a quick phone call, send out the device for repair and have a repaired or replaced device in just three days.”



Easy to use and reliable

Panasonic TOUGHBOOK devices don't fail very often and are designed with industry-leading durability and reliability. Panasonic's National Director of Sales, Alex Nollmann, summed up the company's dedication to reliability by simply saying: "It has to work. When someone's life and property are on the line, your mobile device needs to turn on and connect. You might have a half-million-dollar fire truck and well-trained staff, but with access to critical data via your TOUGHBOOK, you can answer the call faster and with better information."

Taking that concept a little further, Jason Oppenheim, Panasonic's Northeast Sales Manager, who is also a volunteer firefighter, said, "It needs to be easy. It needs to be second nature."

Purpose-built mobile devices for firefighters

Panasonic has refined its TOUGHBOOK designs for firefighters' benefit to help make sure they work simply and conveniently. Nollmann said that over the years, the buttons have been enlarged and spread out to make them more easily accessible to gloved users. Speakers have been moved from the bottom of the unit to top for convenient use and the "call for help" button has been colored red and surrounded by a raised bezel to make it easier to find.

"These devices are designed to be used in fire apparatus," Nollmann said, adding that many competitors use third-party vendor components to ruggedize their laptops—with mixed results and failure rates of up to 20 percent.

"We are also hyper-focused on quality," Nollmann said. He added that Panasonic recently filled an order for 100 laptops without a single failure.

Houston FD: Emergency telemedicine

The Houston Fire Department opted for TOUGHBOOK tablets to implement an innovative new program—Emergency Tele Health and Navigation (ETHAN)—that links medical patients with emergency physicians and addresses low-acuity calls in the 9-1-1 community.

"ETHAN gives the firefighters, EMTs and paramedic crews on scene the ability to directly connect, via video conferencing, to an emergency physician," Dr. Michael Gonzalez, Medical Director for Houston Fire Department, said. "This allows first responders to get an immediate response from a physician who can speak directly with the patient."

"The use of ETHAN has really allowed us to disposition patients appropriately, when possible, to clinics," the doctor said. "We can help reduce overcrowding in our busy, already overburdened emergency departments."

Panasonic prides itself on creating partnerships with its clients to develop solutions that make life easier for fire companies and first responders.

Gonzalez said he was impressed with the effort Panasonic put into having ETHAN succeed.

"ETHAN was really the first of its kind in the world," Gonzalez said. "Panasonic deployed a team of experts as well as other industries and partners that we were able to use to design a truly elegant solution, and something that was revolutionary."

Critical connectivity

Project ETHAN could not succeed without reliable connectivity. Video conferencing and access to real-time medical data is crucial in first responder situations.

Connectivity is often overlooked as a critical component of a mobile solution. First responders rely on their rugged computers and tablets to work everywhere from the concrete canyons of the urban cities to the rolling valleys and hills often found in the most rural and remote portions of the nation. While network quality matters, so does the quality of the device and its support.

TOUGHBOOK devices provide a broad range of connectivity options—broadband, Wi-Fi and GPS—and are built with internal components specifically engineered for increased reliability and outreach.

"Connectivity is everything," Nollmann said, adding that firefighters and high-value equipment are only as good as the TOUGHBOOK that helps them get to the scene and work.

Signal strength where competitors fail

Nollmann said Panasonic has the second-largest wireless testing facility in the world at its factory in Japan, which is open for customer inspection and touring by appointment. "Its core purpose is to test our devices," he said.

Panasonic, according to Nollmann, builds its TOUGHBOOK devices around the wireless modem to maximize the signal strength from the moment the laptops are powered on. The TOUGHBOOK is designed to minimize technical noise and interference with the wireless signal, which means Panasonic can deliver connectivity where its competitors fail, Nollmann said.

Panasonic also achieves a better signal by running the antenna to the roof of the apparatus, he explained. All that attention to detail makes the difference and allows Panasonic to offer superior connectivity.

Jason Oppenheim added that Panasonic has high-level certifications with providers like Verizon, AT&T and Sprint that allow the company to deliver better service to its customers to get them connected, even in the most challenging, remote areas where signal strength is weak and in urban areas where buildings block line-of-sight connections.



Going beyond the warranty: Deployment services

To make sure that the technology works as it should, Panasonic ProServices has a team of consultants and deployment and installation experts that can make sure everything is up and running in short order so first responders can focus on saving lives and property.

Panasonic Deployment Services ensure everything from software to third-party accessories and the battery is configured and fully tested. That means departments can get started quickly right out of the box. This can reduce IT headaches getting the technology properly configured and means responders can focus on the tasks at hand instead of the technology.

With Panasonic ProServices, customers get far more than a fleet of computers. Mobile solutions can require various products such as keyboards, antennas, cradles, brackets and power distribution systems, to name a few. Panasonic can help responders get the equipment that works for their circumstances.

For more information on Panasonic mobility:

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Vehicle mounting and installation

"Mobile Mounts is essentially part of the Panasonic ProServices team that delivers mobility engineering to develop TOUGHBOOK-based solutions for different verticals for operations across the business," said Chris Humphrey, Vice President of Sales at Mobile Mounts.

Before a TOUGHBOOK is installed, customers must have the correct mounting solution to ensure that the device will be properly supported. However, many TOUGHBOOK customers lack the necessary time, expertise and hardware to do the installation themselves.

To address this challenge, Panasonic ProServices and Mobile Mounts analyze the specific needs of a customer and engineer a custom mounting solution with the correct parts for a secure installation that optimizes utilization of their TOUGHBOOK. Leveraging the Panasonic team, TOUGHBOOK customers are able to deploy their devices in a variety of vehicles to improve efficiency, safety and communication.

"Many times, fleet operations have other priorities and initiatives, and installing the mounts or docks in the vehicles for a tablet or laptop refresh is just not something they can take on," said Humphrey. "When they bring Panasonic ProServices and Mobile Mounts into the process, we're able to offset their time constraints and make sure that the installation gets done correctly and on schedule."

Nollmann said it is possible for fire departments to "grab a mount and bolt it on" and be done with installation, but that is not how a reliable—or safe—system is built.

"Every fire truck is different," Nollmann said, adding that mounting equipment properly is an art form. "It's got to be bolted in the right place and wires can't interfere with each other. A successful deployment means the equipment is also mounted and installed correctly."

Partner with Panasonic

From supplying the hardware and software to connectivity options, mounting in apparatus and service after the sale, Panasonic seeks to partner with fire departments and emergency responding agencies to help them respond more quickly and work smarter and safer.

"For departments interested in enhancing their responses, and improving fireground safety, we can assist them," Nollmann said. "We can leverage what we've already done, so it doesn't always have to cost a lot of money. We can always help agencies do more."

TOUGHBOOK®