



BETTER COMMUNICATION IMPROVES SAFETY MANAGEMENT FOR STARGAZING CUSTOMERS

RELIABLE AND MORE EXTENSIVE COVERAGE MEANS BETTER SAFETY AND SERVICE FOR CUSTOMERS



Between 17,000-20,000 visitors every year take a guided day or night stargazing tour at Mount John and Cowan's Observatory. Located in the small township of Lake Tekapo in the heart of New Zealand's South Island, the region is renowned for the clarity of its sky and freedom from light pollution.

Such popularity brings a high level of responsibility to ensure the safety of all visitors at every stage of the tour: from the bus trip to the summit, the café on the top of the mountain and throughout the night tour.

By installing a Motorola repeater and portable radios, Earth & Sky improved its health and safety risk management by providing access between head office, staff members and tour buses at all times. Customer service has also improved, particularly in the pick-up service where tourists catch the courtesy bus to the peak.

CUSTOMER PROFILE Earth & Sky

Industry Name
Tourism

Technology Partner
TL Parker Ltd

Product Name

- DP3400 VHF digital/analogue portable radios
- DM4400 Series digital radios
- DR3000 VHF repeater

Solution Features

- Extensive coverage
- Simple operation

Key Benefits

- Improved safety management
- Reliable coverage
- Staff satisfaction
- Better customer relations
- Potential income stream



THE CHALLENGE

Tens of thousands of tourists flock to Earth & Sky tours to see the southern stars and transient phenomena such as aurorae, meteor showers and the zodiacal light in all their glory. The company started operations in 2004 and has rapidly flourished since. Tours take place on nearby Mount John, a large mass of bedrock 1031 metres above sea level and approximately 300 metres above Lake Tekapo. On the summit is the University of Canterbury's Astronomical Research Observatory, internationally recognised as one of the best-situated observatories for viewing the southern night skies. Earth & Sky also operate the Astro Café on the summit, described by Lonely Planet as "possibly the best place on the planet for a café"!

Prior to the solution from Motorola Solutions, Earth & Sky relied upon portable handheld radios combined with mobile phones on tours, buses and in the main office.

Margaret Munro, general manager at Earth & Sky, describes the challenges of the existing communications system:

"As the crow flies, the office is very close to the summit. However, during the 15 minutes that it takes for the tour bus to reach the summit, for approximately half of that time the bus was completely out of range for communication. This is because the trip travels around the back of the hill so coverage was lost on both the radios and mobiles. Being unable to contact the team for this period of time was an occupational and safety issue if there was an emergency, or just difficult if plans changed or we needed to retrieve a vehicle for any reason. And we only had contact with staff on the mountain as long as they were within our line of sight."

THE SOLUTION

The project included a base set in the office and new radios to communicate between the buses, office and the mountain. A digital/analogue repeater installed on top of the observatory extended coverage to the back of the mountain and Lake Tekapo.

Earth & Sky chose to partner with TL Parker, a family business formed in 1968 and now one of the largest privately owned radio two-way radio companies in New Zealand.

"The best benefit from a business perspective is that the new system has removed any risk due to a lack of communication that might arise if there is an incident. While it doesn't prevent the incident from occurring, it means we've put measures in place to address them – measures that weren't there before."

Margaret Munro, general manager, Earth & Sky

“Now this is completely streamlined, because the driver can contact base immediately and ask them to send another driver. We can assure customers that the next bus will arrive within minutes – which is a huge improvement.”

Chris Monson, astronomy guide and assistant manager, Earth & Sky

Munro found the experience of working with TL Parker extremely positive:

“The team from TL Parker was a really good crew: very helpful and nothing was a problem. They really helped throughout the whole process over the last year, which included testing to see if coverage was possible in the area. They were personally very interested in the range achievable, as we are located in a basin.”

Chris Monson, astronomy guide and assistant manager at Earth & Sky, also had high praise for the team at TL Parker:

“They were fantastic, and came out here frequently to sort out wear and tear or maintenance issues. They’ve also been very supportive in offering innovative solutions even though we are not a big organisation. For example, TL Parker suggested a number of novel ways to extended the capabilities of the radio units installed in the buses to allow our drivers to remain in constant with everyone, even if they temporarily leave the bus to attend to various customer related services on the mountain top. They have always been keen for us to expand and try out new things.”

THE BENEFITS

Improved health and safety risk management

“The best benefit from a business perspective is that the new system has removed any risk that might arise if there is an incident. While it doesn’t prevent the incident from occurring, it means we’ve put measures in place to address them – measures that weren’t there before. This is a source of satisfaction for clients on the tour as well, knowing that they are being looked after at every step in the whole journey,” says Munro.

“Businesses these days are heavily reliant on communications, and our business is probably more reliant than most,” concludes Munro.

“It gives peace of mind. In all aspects it has elevated customer safety and provided the assurance that we are always there for the customer regardless of what happens. Recently we had the great snowstorms that knocked out towers, however, radios were still functional so we could send someone up to start clearing the road. You need to know you can manage the risks and contact someone before you send them up the mountain, and we could,” adds Monson.

Reliable coverage

An immediate benefit of the solution is gaining complete and reliable coverage of Tekapo.

Munro reports that the solution brought “complete coverage that was reliable and didn’t drop out, with exceptional quality. We now have contact with all staff at all times,” says Munro.

Staff satisfaction

“Staff are keen on the new equipment and think it’s good. It’s unobtrusive, simple and easy to use, and staff can talk to each other at any time, without imposing on the customers,” says Munro.

“Radios are more discrete as they use them with Motorola earpieces, connected to a microphone attached to the lapel,” says Monson. “The earpiece cuts down on wind, so staff spend less time battling against the wind. Your own message may be a bit garbled because of the windy background but the response from the office or buses is clear.”

“In addition, on a mobile phone you need to fiddle with all sorts of menus to get the required number, but with radios you simply switch between channels. You know that your message gets through and it makes your involvement with the equipment much more efficient,” concludes Monson.

Better customer relations

A major benefit for customers is the improved bus pick-up service which Earth & Sky offers from local accommodation spots.

“The bus can arrive and there may be more people at the stop than planned because of ad hoc attendees, as well as booked parties. If there are too many people to fit in the bus, we used to rely on spotty service on a mobile phone to call a backup or, alternatively, ask the customers to wait for the next bus which was only dispatched when the driver arrived back at the base.”

“Now this is completely streamlined, because the driver can contact base immediately and ask them to send another driver. We can assure customers that the next bus will arrive within minutes – which is a huge improvement,” says Monson.

CASE STUDY

Earth & Sky



Some unanticipated benefits for staff and customer relations emerged from the change in gear.

When using mobile phones previously, Earth & Sky staff used to feel rude using mobile phones in front of a tour group of people wanting to talk to them and ask questions. Staff have reported feeling more comfortable using the radios.

Monson explains: "It's about being professional. If you have told a tour group you're going to educate and excite them for the next hour, it sends a mixed message if you are on the phone. You want to engage with the customer, but it's easy to interpret a mobile phone call as personal. For all the customer knows you could be talking to your Aunt Sally about lasagna! It's therefore difficult to convey that it's a business call and in the customers' best interests."

"Plus, the customers have been asked to refrain from using mobile phones on the mountain as white light disrupts the sensitive research telescopes at the observatory. It's not ideal to ask customers to forgo mobile phone usage only to have our guides use them!" adds Munro.

Potential income

With a variety of businesses in the area such as other tourism operators, farms and a power company, Earth & Sky are looking into the potential of selling channels on the repeater.

"As the region grows and develops we expect the repeater to become a valuable piece of equipment. This will be a significant cost saving if comes about, and it's great to be the owner of it," says Munro.

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