

# Research “Successes” to Improve Damage Prevention

/ BY HOYT LOWDER & WAYNE JENSEN

Sunshine 811 caller data in Florida from 2011 shows 55% of the 61,000 distinct callers made only one ticket for the entire year. This group of people (who call once a year) is the hardest of all to reach. Logically, if a person calls one time the chance of them calling again increases dramatically. We found that over 10,000 people called 2 times in 2011, for 17% of the total calls. We believe that knowing 72% of all callers requested either 1 or 2 tickets in an entire year is important information to use in formulating outreach strategies. As dramatic as it is to know that 72% of all the callers made either 1 or 2 tickets, it is even more dramatic to know that they were responsible for only 7% of the total number of excavations for which a call was made.



At the other end of the spectrum for damage in Florida, we found that 75 callers were responsible for 19% of the total ticket volume, with each caller responsible for greater than 1,000 tickets in 2011. This group certainly has the largest risk exposure based on numbers of excavations. The truth is that this group probably has the highest success rate for preventing damage. If one simply applied the damage rate for the state (approximately 1 damage/1,000 tickets) to this group, they would have had about 161 damages for 161,000 tickets.

Researching every detail of this group's damages would reveal virtually nothing about what this group needs to know in order to prevent future damage. The message of this article is that we need to research how this group of 75 callers can be as successful at damage prevention as to “only have 161 damages” for 161,000 excavation sites. We know who they are. Many, if not most, are utilities or contractors working for utilities. What we learn of the successes for damage prevention from this 75-member group could become valuable to pass along to the 16,000 callers, or 27% of all callers, who called in more than 2 tickets, but less than 1,000 tickets.

Should we focus additional research on this group of 75 callers? This group knows to “Call 811 Before You Dig.” Do we try to teach them how to improve their excavation practices to reduce their potential for at-fault damage? Or, do we focus research on their successful practices that actually prevent damages 99.9% of the time?

Currently, we research several hundred thousand data points of damages in DIRT to

uncover very general failures like “insufficient excavation/locating practices.” If all we can do as a result of that research is improve excavation/locating practices with little or no actionable specificity, we have limited useful information for improving future damage prevention. **We absolutely will not decrease damages by only researching failures. We must research successes using the hundreds of millions of “success data points” -- tickets without damage.**

There are possible avenues which can provide additional data to support the value of researching successes. For example, by encouraging documentation of the details associated with “near misses,” it will be possible to more specifically define the practices/actions taken which did prevent damage to one or more facilities. The opportunity is available through the process of closing out a completed excavation dig ticket. Enhanced information could be gained through surveys of completed tickets documenting how damage was prevented. Another possibility is to segregate the sources

of potential damage by the severity/danger associated with those particular types of excavation, and survey callers about which work practices were used to prevent damage.

In terms of utility damage, a lot can go wrong that would lead to damage. What can go wrong depends on who we are talking about. If we are talking about the homeowner who is planting a tree in their front yard, "what could go wrong" may be that they never heard the "Call 811 -- Call Before You Dig" message. Most of our national outreach campaigns focus on getting that simple message out. Research done by Sunshine 811, the One Call system in Florida, of first-time callers to determine how they found out they needed to call 811 has shown that the two most effective means of outreach are: (1) utilities communication with rate-payers regarding responsibilities to Call 811 Before Digging; and (2) a friend or neighbor passing on the information to Call 811. Just learning the power of outreach mechanisms used by the utilities could in itself be one of the greatest revelations for damage prevention uncovered to date.

The concept of outreach by utilities to all rate-payers transcends all other mechanisms for outreach because it reaches all excavators, including business owners, operators and laborers who are our greatest challenge for preventing catastrophic damage by backhoes. The outreach to rate-payers also helps us tackle more difficult groups to reach, including businesses like fence installers and irrigation installers, because rate-payer outreach gets to everybody.

What we do have in all states is caller data that is nearly 1,000 times greater than the damage data we have. We have much to learn about why damage did not occur or the successes of damage prevention. We actually cannot learn what we need to know about damage prevention by only looking at failures resulting in damage, and we believe the First Time Caller Survey by Sunshine 811 dramatically proves the need to look at success data, starting with researching how a caller learned to "Call Before You Dig."

Therefore, gaining industry commitment to "research successes" holds far more poten-

tial for advancing the cause of damage prevention than merely continuing to study the fewer incidents that actually resulted in damage. **DP**

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