



By **Mike Parilac, Publisher**

Giving You the Business

Contract locating—where should I begin? I think back to my second-ever column in this magazine, “What’s in YOUR Contract?” For those of you who did not rip that column out of the magazine and tack it to your office wall, I basically stated that the one-call process is like a conversation and a conversation is like a contract. For a productive conversation, two people agree that the first one talks while the other listens. Then, the second person has the floor and the first person listens. Bingo! A contract!

The one-call contract is this: You tell me where you want to dig and I—the facility owner—will tell you where you can expect to find my line. Contract locating puts a bit of a different spin on things. Now, you still tell me where you want to dig but I hire someone to tell you where to expect to find my line. Pretty straight forward, huh?

I have problems knowing where to begin because I have so much to say on the subject of contract locating for I’ve been around the business for quite some time. I know many of the principals of the contract locating industry, both past and present. The stories I could tell. And that’s why I’ve decided to dedicate all nine 2008 columns to the subject of contract locating—because I have so many stories to tell.

One day, a couple months ago, I got an e-mail from the CEO of an underground utility construction firm. In that e-mail he stated, “Before one call laws were passed we had accidents. I cut it and you fixed it, end of story. One-call laws simply changed accidents to billable events for the facility owner/operator.” He went on to say that he heard a representative of a utility say, “I love contract locators because now it’s never my fault and I always have someone to send the bill to.” Once I read that, I knew my 2008 columns had a starting point.

Is it really that simple? Was everything OK

before one-call laws? No, it wasn’t. Do utilities really love contract locators because now it’s never the utility’s fault? Well, depends who you ask. Ask the man that works for me today and he’ll tell you that is exactly right. He used to work as a manager for the phone company and that is what the company communicated to him when they told him that his men would no longer perform locating.

My firsthand observation of the policies, practices and procedures of the underground utility industry only dates back to 1981. Many one-call laws predated me. But for two years in the early eighties, I worked side-by-side with a gentleman who started at the gas company in 1947. He, too, had stories to tell. In fact, after hearing most of his stories seventeen or eighteen times each, I have become convinced that I was actually there, not him. So that gives me sixty years in the underground utility business.

And way back when, sewer contractors would knock live gas services out of the way to accommodate the construction of the new main. It was just easier to do it that way. We’d be right there. They’d cut it, we’d fix it. We’d stick a rag in the end of the pipe until we could make the repair permanent. If the pipe broke somewhere else and we didn’t know about it until later—such as when someone had a lot of gas in their house—we’d drill holes in the street and then place standpipes over the holes.

We’d place a lit match over each standpipe. Wherever the gas burned the highest is where we’d dig to find the leak. Sometimes, while drilling the holes to find a leak, we’d hit a water line. We’d hit it, the water department would fix it. We’d have to wait for them to fix the water leak before we could fix the gas leak. And then one time things went bad...

You know the end of this story. And other stories like it. Did we need one-call laws? Oh, my yes. I do not take the CEO’s words so literally and I’m sure many of our excavating readers would echo his sentiments. Me personally, I smiled when I read them. I had my starting point.

I’m here to talk

about the contact locating industry. It’s not just companies like CLS, UtiliQuest, SM&P, ELM, Consolidated and Premier that comprise the industry. The industry is made up of these type of companies AND their facility owning customers. After all, there can’t be contract locating without each other, can there?

Do we have accidents anymore or are they just billable events? If it is really a case of utilities really “loving contract locators” because now damages are never their fault then I would have to conclude that there is little in the way of business ethics in contract locating. I think there is such a thing as business ethics in contract locating but these ethics are getting minimized over time. Is there such a thing as business ethics in the damage prevention industry at large? Well, I think our CEO’s vote is “no.” I say “yes,” but as with contract locating, business ethics in damage prevention are being minimized over time.

I have a question for our readers that are part of the contract locating industry: Can you validate for me an example of what you would consider business ethics in action within the contract locating industry? Please e-mail me such examples at mike@underspace.com and I promise to bring them forward.

For my next column, I’ll do some talking to folks who were around at the dawn of contract locating. I hope you’ll enjoy reading it as much as I know I’ll enjoy writing it. **UF**

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