  
  
**The Squirrels**

**Conundrum**

**OXEMS Blog  
April 2014**

**GETTING STRAIGHT TO THE POINT**I took my hat off to a squirrel the other day. I was watching as one enthusiastically tried to locate the nuts he’d buried somewhere in my front garden and I realized that he shares some of the same frustrations that utility companies face. I call it the squirrel’s conundrum: He knows roughly where he buried his assets (somewhere in my garden), he knows pretty much how deep they lie (within a few inches) and he knows he can reach them by digging (& digging & digging & digging). All the time he took and considerable energy he expended in finding each nut-specific location might be acceptable to this self-respecting squirrel, but for utility companies such an inexact, approximated way of locating asset-specific locations comes at an increasingly unacceptable cost to them and the communities they serve.

**INNOVATIVE TECHNOLOGIES COMBINED**

Little did I know when I studied engineering at Oxford or as I built a career in cable TV that both of those strands would come together in OXEMS, the underground asset experts who’ve cracked the squirrel’s conundrum by deploying technology initially developed by Oxford’s Engineering Science Department. But taking complex technology and making a commercial product out of it is where my passion lies, especially when that product can bring dramatic benefits to an industry, which affects every household in the developed world.

**UTILITY COMPANIES AREN'T STUPID**

And that leads straight back to the conundrum. Utility companies aren’t stupid – they know approximately where they buried an asset (somewhere in your front garden for example), they know how deep it lies (to within a couple of feet) and they know they can reach it by digging (& digging & digging). Moreover they have to overcome additional frustrations not of their own making, as they replace existing metal pipes with plastic ones for example. Metal pipes are difficult to find and even when you do find them you don't know if you've got the right one. Why? Because much of the metal pipe infrastructure is so old that there are no records going back far enough. And even those records that the utility companies do possess can be frustratingly inaccurate - even the newer records.

**HATS OFF TO UTILITY GANGS**

That’s why I take my hat off to the ground crews. The utility company gangs who work their way around the squirrel’s conundrum day after day. They are experts who have learned through repeated experience how best to locate subsurface assets. Once they are in the right proximity – to within a few meters of where the asset should be – they switch on their killer app - their intuition. They just know, because they have done it so many times before, that through a process of elimination they can assess where the asset is most likely to be. Often they are pretty much spot on but at other times they are not, and in those cases they know that just like the squirrel, they can reach it by digging (& digging & digging & digging).

Sadly I haven’t the faintest idea how to help a squirrel find his nuts, but OXEMS does have the perfect solution for any utility company that needs to pinpoint its assets time after time without ever even digging a hole.

This Blog was first published on April 22, 2014

To receive carefully selected relevant information, and to stay informed about OXEMS,

please go to www.oxems.com and provide your contact details.