

Organizing Scanners for General Monitoring
Presented to the Radio Monitoring Net on Tuesday, August 25, 2026
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Option 1 - Geographically

Federal
State
County
City
Local

This option is useful in border areas. It can also be helpful for traveling. It is one of the most basic ways to organize a scanner.

When using this method, I find it useful to sort place names alphabetically. You could also go by proximity, but that makes it a little more challenging to find a particular place in a hurry, whereas using the alphabet allows you to decide immediately in which direction to change channels.

Option 2 - By Service (optionally sorted by usage)

Police - Dispatch, Administrative, Car to Car, Tactical
Fire - Dispatch, Administrative, Fireground
EMS - Dispatch, Administrative, Ambulance to Hospital
Medical Transportation
Hospital Operations
Other Governmental
Other PS Related
Many other things that use radio – security guards, buses, trains, taxicabs, aircraft, fast food drive-up windows, ham radio, GMRS, etc.

There are a few useful methods for organizing the channels within these categories.

Method 1 - Alphabetically by Location. This is pretty basic. Each agency is entered in alphabetical order so moving directly from one to another (to follow an incident or to get to a department that is more relevant to the scannist) is only a matter of following the alphabet.

Method 2 - By Subcategory (within each agency). I generally put primary dispatch first, then other channels that have dispatchers (such as administrative or information/data channels), then car to car channels. There is no specific reason to say that this particular ordering is superior to any other; it's only my personal preference.

Method 3 - By Official Designator. If you know what each channel is called, then they can be sorted by those names. This makes finding a specific channel simpler. You can also subdivide the subcategories (e.g. Dispatch 1, Dispatch 2, Admin North, Admin South, Info/Data, Car to Car).

NOTE: "Data" channel for a police department usually refers to a channel where information is requested by officers and read out by dispatchers, such as vehicle registrations and driver license information. I prefer to label them as "Information" channels (unless the official designator includes the

word "data") so as not to confuse them with channels that carry digital data (such as MDT transmissions).

Option 3 - Geographically by Service

This option improves on Option 2 by adding another layer of separation that helps in focusing on specific agencies or locations. It can also be useful when traveling as you can change areas as you move and listen to what is closest and therefore probably most relevant.

Again with this method, I prefer alphabetical sorting for the locations.

Option 4 - By Service, sorted Geographically

I included this option for completeness. I am not sold on its general utility, though.

Option 5 - Multiple Scanners, divided into the first 4 options

The more fortunate scannist can add a hard separation between any of the above organizing principles by using separate scanners for locations, frequency uses, or other purposes. For example, I have separate scanners for police, fire, EMS, and various other services. Most are far less busy than police frequencies and having them in different receivers means missing less traffic.

In a border area, one might use separate scanners for different states or counties, organized according to one or more of the above options.

Option 6 - By Radio System Type, divided into one of the first 4 options

Conventional

Trunked (optionally by type)

I find this option particularly useful for "forensic scanning" - research into the uses and occupancy of different radio systems. Among my many Favorite Lists for the SDS series scanners, I have one list for each of the trunking protocols that is currently in use in this area - EDACS, P25 Phase I and II, LTR, MotoTRBO, Connect Plus, Capacity Plus, DMR Tier III, and NXDN/IDAS. This is useful for finding new users and for discovering which systems have gone silent or switched to a different form of trunking.

NOTE: One interesting side effect of having digital frequencies in a separate receiver from analog frequencies is the echo effect caused by the slight delay in processing an analog signal into digital for transmission when the same traffic is being sent both ways. Depending on the amount of lag, this can range from a very cool effect that sounds like you're in a very large room to an incomprehensible muddle.

FINDING SPECIFIC CHANNELS IN THE BASIC SCANNER

Channel Ordering

Every scanner on the market allows you to put whatever frequency you want into any channel. This is especially useful for following local traffic, and for separating local and distant traffic.

Banks and Channels

Larger capacity scanners break up their channel memories into fixed-size groups, called Banks. Putting different locations or communication types into separate banks makes your organization clearer. It also provides the advantage of being able to enable or disable scanning of entire locations or categories in a single control operation, instead of enabling and disabling a number of channel lockouts.

FINDING SPECIFIC CHANNELS IN THE ADVANCED SCANNER

The newest scanner technology is totally based on memory management. They can mimic the older bank-and-channel organization, but are far more flexible (and admittedly complex). The best way to set up these scanners is by computer. Some manufacturers provide free custom software for their scanners, and these are the best to use with the scanners for which they are designed.

Quick Keys

A Quick Key is a number that can be assigned to a memory slot (channel), a group of memories (bank), or an entire set of memories associated with a particular listening target (system). Each level of memory allocation can have its own set of Quick Keys (sort of like having banks of banks).

Quick Keys are accessed the same way as channels in a scanner with Direct Memory Access. Just type the number(s) on the keypad (and sometimes Enter). The scanner also needs to be told which type of QK it is being sent to as the numbers can overlap. Depending on the scanner model, this can be done by using the Function button or by prefixing the number with some other character (like a dot).

Favorite Lists (with and without Quick Keys)

The Uniden SDS series of scanners support Favorite Lists, which can be any organization of frequencies, locations, radio systems, etc. that you can think of. (Whistler scanners have a similar feature called Libraries.)

Within a Favorite List, one can build a configuration based on any or all of the first 5 Options described above. Any level or individual memory channel can be locked out if needed (Uniden calls this Avoid).