



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Another Dimension of Public Education

QUESTION: What happens when a businessman fails to promote his business?

ANSWER: Nothing.

QUESTION: What happens when a fire department fails to promote its services?

ANSWER: Worse than nothing. The department is taken for granted, is grossly misunderstood or, worse yet, and is shrugged off because nobody knows or cares.

In the last several years there has been an upsurge in interest in public education. The inference is that the better educated the public is, the more likely it is to respond appropriately to its own fire problem, thereby assisting the fire department in controlling the community's fire problem.

A corollary of public education is the concept of public relations. The generic term *public relations* means having a good relationship with the community, and thereby enjoying its support. In this sense, public relations are the result, not the process.

More closely identified with a fire department's credibility in the community is its "media relations." The public learns about a fire department through what it reads in newspapers and magazines and hears broadcast over radio and television. Over the last decade, we have become a media-oriented society. And, to borrow Marshal McLuhan's phrase, "The medium is the message."

First, let's distinguish between public relations and media relations. Public relation is a reflection of the public's perception of your organization as competent, efficient, credible, and worthy. Media relations, on the other hand, are the mass media's perception of your organization as accessible, responsive, and of interest to the reading and listening public.

A book published a year or so ago was titled *How to Publicize Yourself, Your Family, and Your Organization* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1983). The author is J. Sutherland Gould. The book is an excellent handbook on how to build media relations to improve public relations.

How do people develop an image of an organization? The answer is, they develop it slowly over a period of time. It's like watching a painting emerge, stroke by stroke, from the painter's brush. No one event can destroy your organization. On the other hand, no singular event can make a fire department the foremost concern in the minds of the community. Rather, there has to be an on-going process of feeding information to the media to publicize what the organization is, what it does, and how it responds to a wide variety of stimulus in the community.

Mr. Gould's book provides an excellent overview of how a fire department can approach the problem of accomplishing this goal. It includes chapters on preparing news releases, contacting the press, getting an article written about your organization, arranging radio and television publicity, holding a press



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

conference, utilizing picture publicity, publicizing speeches, and a special chapter on “How to Make News.”

The book also has a section on helpful directories and services that a fire department can use in setting up a good media relations program. Finally, the book contains a glossary of terms that will help even the most inexperienced individual to sound like a veteran when talking to those who work in the media. And we do need to “work” with the media.

The media have their own point of view about what is newsworthy. However, one of the reasons they seem to publicize our mistakes and our disasters more than anything else is because we are not feeding information to them except when operating in a crisis mode. The media operate with a totally different set of needs than we in the fire service have. They also operate under a totally different set of deadlines.

Let me give you an example. Many fire departments change shifts at 7:30 or 8:00 o'clock in the morning. Frequently a fire department will be called out at night to fight a fire that isn't brought under control until the early hours of the morning. The off-going shift, which is made up of the individuals who fought the fire, often leaves the station at just about the time the news reporters are arriving to get the information about the fire.

The net result is that the fire department's information is not yet available. The reporters, because they have deadlines to meet, turn to other sources, such as witnesses - private citizens who may or may not have accurate information - or, worse yet, the police department log, which tends to downplay the fire department operations and emphasize the law enforcement role.

So what is the solution?

We can approach the problem by establishing a good media relations program that would include developing a news release format as part of the department's operations manual, and by appointing a media relations officer.

One of the finest examples of this particular approach to working on the media relations problem can be seen in the Phoenix (Arizona) Fire Department. Considerable time and effort have been devoted there to establishing written policies and procedures for the dissemination of fire department information.

In developing a good media relations program, it is also essential to thoroughly examine all media opportunities in the area. Most fire departments are conversant with the local newspapers. It takes a little more research to uncover and make contact with the local radio stations, local cable television station, regional magazines, house organs published by local companies, and the bulletins and newsletters circulated by service clubs like Kiwanis and Rotary, the women's clubs, chamber of commerce, and other nonprofit and public-spirited groups.

There is one situation that can sound the death knell for a fire department's media relations program. That is the spectacle of a fire officer standing in front of a burned-out hulk of a building facing a bristling crowd of reporters and their menacing microphones. Frequently the most commonly heard statement



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

at this time is “No comment.” He who defends himself in a court of law has a fool for a client. By the same token, he who tries to be his own media relations officer during a time of stress creates a target for criticism.

The lesson to be learned here is simple. When dealing with an emergency, it is always advisable to appoint a public information officer who can remain detached and uninvolved in the emergency. This person, if given a copy of the preplan and adequately briefed on the nature of the emergency, the actions that have been taken to date, the scope of the problem and, for that matter, the weather conditions, can do a better job of explaining the emergency than can the officer who was actually in charge of the situation.

The department's information manual should include a section on the appointment of a public information officer (PIO) and provide some definitive guidelines for their utilization during emergency conditions. There are three basic ground rules for releasing sensitive information at such times:

1. Don't try to bluff the press into accepting something that just isn't so.
2. Don't guess about specifics. If you don't know the answer to a question, simply say, “I don't know.”
3. Always give the media much more information than they can possibly use so they won't find it necessary to go out and create their own.

To get back to the original question posed at the beginning of this article. If a businessman fails to promote his business, nothing happens and sooner or later he goes out of business. It is unlikely, however, that the fire department is going to be allowed to go out of business. But if the fire department doesn't have an effective media relations program, it can find itself on the defensive under circumstances of high stress.

One of the best examples of good media relations at work that I know of involved a small volunteer fire department. The members had worked hard to maintain an effective, ongoing media relations program. Late one night, the local lumberyard caught fire and devastated one square block of the community before it was brought under control. The story in the local newspaper the next day began: “Despite the valiant efforts of the fire department, an entire block was lost....”

If you want good public relations, then you need good media relations. Build them.