



# CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

## LOW-TECH, HIGH-TOUCH COMMUNITY RELATIONS

Does everything have to do with a computer these days? It seems like almost every application that we have incorporated in fire protection finds itself back onto a computer somewhere. I am not going to approach that concept as being a technophobe but rather to ask for your consideration of the fact that we may be losing touch with our very customers when we rely on the computer to be the media.

Again, I am not going to take on social media and argue with the idea that having your picture on Facebook is desirable or not. Nor am I going to argue against the fact that being linked in with 10,000 people might be a good idea. What I am really going to talk about is you and your community. How much face to face contact do you have with them?

If the answer is that most of your one-on-one relationship is based on incidents then you have a very small portion of your community that knows who you are and what you do. Granted, most people are really happy to see you when they have dialed 911 and you show up to start resuscitation and start putting Uncle Henry back on the cycle of life by breathing. Unfortunately that gratitude is also linked to a very negative experience that may or may not result in your long term impact on that person.

Maybe we ought to consider going back to some really low tech answers to community relations in the context of this type of contact. First off let's do a little calculation. How many people do you see every year through the lens of emergency services operations? I am not talking about the number of incidents; I am talking about the number of people.

For example, you might go to a medical aid with a large contingent of firefighters. You actually have more people on the various apparatus than there are in the residence in which you are performing your services. I personally recall an incident once where I was in a crowded bedroom with four firefighters, four police officers and two ambulance attendants. While we were doing a heroic job of keeping an individual alive, I also recall the distress of the family because they couldn't get into the room to see what was going on. Not that it was a good idea anyway.

So what am I talking about with low touch? Here is a question, how many fire departments provide business cards to their firefighters when they are in the field so that when they provide a service they have an opportunity to leave a "calling card"? I am not talking about a fancy embellished business card. I am talking about something that you can purchase at Staples for practically nothing. Certainly not much more than a coffee break at Starbucks.

How many fire departments have that business card in hand of the person who is providing the service? It is not uncommon for the fire chief and all the staff to have business cards to distribute to their points



# CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

*Ronny J. Coleman*

---

of contact and now that at the most rudimentary level of our service we hardly ever “reach out and touch someone”.

I once had a Japanese firefighter who was on an internship staying at my residence. She told me a story one evening about how they had a standardized program that every time a fire occurred in a neighborhood the following day there would be a crew that returned to that same house and passed out information to everybody who lived within one block of that location. What the information consisted of is essentially a description of the fact that an event had occurred and that it had an outcome and if the property owner was paying attention they might be able to avoid the same fate.

Does your fire department do any kind of follow-up or point of contact card on incidents? Many fire departments have created a postcard that asks basic questions that is routinely mailed to the incident location for feedback. I know right now some people would say that is not a good idea always because the outcomes are not always favorable. That may be true. But what I am talking about is the idea that if you go to someone’s house to help them and you manage to do so in a very good way, then you have some follow-up with them to let them know that you care about the outcome there will be a remote possibility that their level of support for what we are doing is going to be a significantly improved relationship.

I also visited with a volunteer fire department once that had door hangers that they would have on their apparatus to distribute to people on either side of fire incidents. The door hanger did not condemn the property owner for having an incident but rather just advise the property owners that an event had occurred in their neighborhood and that they should be doing whatever they could to be more cautious in the future.

As I was explaining these one-on-one kinds of contacts, I can almost anticipate one of the reactions. There are those out there who will say they simply don’t have the time to do all this “touchy feely stuff”. Well, if you don’t have time to do it, do you have any expectation of what will happen when those same people do not vote to support our efforts in improving fire protection? Loyalty is a two way street. By engaging in one on one contact with these people in a very short timeframe, we can often build relationships that will last a lifetime.

As you may have noticed here, I am not talking about the fire prevention bureau. I am talking about the boys and girls over on the operational side. They are the ones that need to be carrying the message out there. that doesn’t keep us from using fire prevention people and public educators from doing one on one contacts themselves, but the main emphasis is on using the opportunities that are already present when people dial 911.

So, now I have said it. I am implying that we ought to get up from our computer desk once in a while and go out and talk to real people. Face to face contact may not be as technologically sophisticated as



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

*Ronny J. Coleman*

---

pushing the enter key on your laptop but I believe it has a more meaningful and more relevant impact on how people perceive the contemporary fire service.

Maybe, just maybe if people get the idea that we care about them, they may care a lot more about us.

First published Fire Chief, September 2012  
© 2012 All Rights Reserved