



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

America Used to Love Its Firefighters

Does America still love its firefighters? One can hardly turn on the TV anymore without seeing a firefighter in the background of some ad. Ever since the day Jack in the Box had an aerial apparatus driving through one of their fast food restaurants, the firefighter has been a popular figure to sell commercial products. US Today once published an article that said that the firefighter image was one of the most trusted in our country. That was right after 9-11. On the other hand, newspaper and magazine editorial pages are brimming over with accusations of in-appropriate benefits being given or taken by firefighters. In some parts of the country it is resulting in considerable conflict.

Both sets of circumstances must be true! People still want to be associated with the fire service if it meets their needs. Otherwise, why would all of these politicians want to have at least one of their ads showing them surrounded by members of the fire service? How many politicians have ridden on the backs of fire trucks in local parades? If you look at the ads on national television, many of them have an inference that the fire service is a good place to hang out, merely by the location in which the image is shot, i.e. in a firehouse or around a fire truck.

So if that is true, then why is it that our ability to leverage that into political clout is so limited when we become a target? I am not talking about the idea of us going out and getting people elected for purposes of solidifying our support at the local and even the state level in government. No, what I am talking about is the fact that the fire service is losing ground in the ground swell of change that is based upon the current backlash against cost of governmental services.

Don't tell me that we are not losing ground. There is just too much evidence of it. I collect news article that focus upon criticism of the fire service and I can name times and places. It is increasing daily.

In addition to that, the focus upon "homeland security" has turned into a law enforcement stampede for federal funds and the politicians who like to wrap themselves in the umbrella of the fire service image have now become the advocates of Homeland Security. The process of reaching down into the ranks of the fire service and start to populate some of the key positions has not seemed to materialize in that world. .

I wished I knew why. In all candor, I think it is much our fault as it is theirs.

My library is full of documents in which we have gathered together the leaders in the fire service to talk about things that need to be done. Among these would be such documents as the America Burning, America Burning Revisited, and America Burning Recommissioned series. Then of course there are these documents called the Wingspread Conferences.



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As you go through all of those documents you can't help but be struck by the fact that we are really focused upon ourselves more than we are on solving the problems in our communities. Almost everything that we have attempted to do to change the nature of our national fire problem had to do with us changing. And the fire service has changed considerably over the last forty years.

What is missing in all of those documents, is a sense of political awareness and a critical mass of thinking in the political arena. We have had our shining stars in the fire service. Who can ever forget Mason Lankford. What about John Eversole? What about Warren Isman. All made a difference in the political world

But where is our overall political clout at the National Level? Some of our states have done an outstanding job. All you have to do is go to the congressional fire caucus dinner once a year and listen to the politicians stand up in front of us and declare that they are afraid to do something at their state without checking back with their fireman's association. Really! Then why is it that we still don't have the ability to get fire personnel well placed in the upper levels of government to influence major policy?

The answer may lie in the fact that we are a profession that speaks of unity and acts in a divisive manner. I am not going to get too specific in this particular area because I realize that any specific example I use may only raise more elements of conflict. But, I would ask all of the leaders of our organizations in the fire service to examine their agendas and determine exactly what they are doing to create that strong unified singular voice for the fire service?

I may be asking for the impossible. However, as I observe the law enforcement community it certainly appears to me that they have been more successful in coalescing themselves into a fairly powerful and influential group to take advantage of the rapid change that is occurring in the public safety sector today. Maybe we should recognize that and merely take a step backwards and decide that we do not wish to become that visible in policy, but rather we need to gain control of the impact of all of these changes upon our profession.

That in itself may be a worthy goal for the fire service. If in fact, fire protection is a local responsibility and that there is no state and/or federal focus on this problem then maybe it is time for us to start taking care of our own. Failure to develop an overall strategy I believe is going to ultimately result in the fire service evolving into something that it doesn't want to be; irrelevant. Going back to the opening of this article we may be loved by our society but we have also been snubbed by it. Not unlike children that are loved by a father who refuses to pay child support we should probably not be as concerned about the affection of society as we should be concerned about respect from society.



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What you do for your community is important. What people think about it is a matter of speculation. While they might think of you as being the neighborhood hero when it comes time for political decision-making, if you fail to be treated with respect, the image means nothing.

But, we have to walk a careful line. When we are on duty the fire service cannot be waiving political banners. We are not authorized to put politics as part of our responsibility to the community. Yet, we have a terrific need for the fire service to develop knowledgeable and competent people to move into a political arena to move our agenda forward.

Let's get out of the firehouse and into the statehouse. Let's begin to convert our "customer relations" into the development of constituency. Let's stop selling candy bars and Viagra with our image and start selling ourselves.

As I was contemplating writing this column I happened to be on a shuttle bus leaving an airport. I was coming home from a state fire chief's association meeting. During that meeting we had some dialogue about this issue and that is what prompted my thought process. However, I looked up on a reader board inside the shuttle bus and there was a product being sold.

I would like to steal a page from the ad mans art and use his punch line. The product had to do with solving problems. They were of a financial nature. The catch phrase was "problems? Consider them handled!"

Perhaps we need a motto that is stated similarly. Emergencies? Consider them handled by your fire department!