



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Are We There Yet?

If you have children or grandchildren, and have ever gone a long trip with them, I bet you have heard this statement, “are we there yet?” Sometimes that inquiry starts practically as soon as you have just gone out of sight of where you left from. Most of the time, you will hear the question when you still have a long way to go to your destination. Other times it is reflected when the kids are just bored, exhausted, tired and ready for a break.

How do you normally answer to that question? If you have just started on a trip you probably are downright irritated. You will give a curt answer. But if you are tired, and worn out like your children are you may answer “soon”. Unfortunately, soon is a relative and somewhat elastic component of time. Count on the question being asked several more times in the next hour or so.

This thought came into my head recently when I was discussing the idea of when will the public finally be completely educated on the concepts of fire prevention in the home, including such important aspects as sprinkler technology, smoke alarms and other forms of built-in fire protection. My answer to that question was also - soon!

But, maybe not tomorrow! The process of educating the public on built-in fire protection is a journey that started a long time ago. In fact over 100 years ago. We are nowhere near the end of that journey are we?

However there are signs that we are making progress. One of the things that I keep in my office is a clipping file reporting on fire losses and/or specific fire events in which sprinkler heads were involved. An interesting phenomenon that is beginning to emerge is that whenever there are tragic fires these days more and more newspaper reporters are reporting that automatic fire protection was not present in the building and was a contributing factor to that loss. In fact when I was preparing the first draft of this column I was listening to a TV reporter described a fire in my home town area of Sacramento, where a reporter gloomily noted that a building was not equipped with sprinklers and suffered a total loss. Not unlike a single drop of water in the Chinese Water Torture, those comments will, sooner or later, make a difference. This is especially true, if those kinds of drops of information continue through the media from professional sources. Over time, they will have an eventual impact.

The significance of this that the only way that happens is when local Fire Chiefs, Fire Marshals, and even Operations Chiefs out in the field constantly remind the public of the role of built-in fire protection in protecting them.

The question that I would pose to you as a fire professional is what are you doing at the local level to educate the various target audiences that need to be co-opted? Public education in most fire



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departments is a relatively low priority. Yet the public's knowledge is absolutely essential to selling the solution. It is unfortunate that very few fire departments have effective public information or public education programs that are funded on a full time basis.

If you went back into your handout material that you give away during fire prevention week and when you engage in public groups, how much of that information is aimed at shaping public opinion on built-in fire protection? The following matrix is a brief illustration of how public education strategy in the community might be oriented towards getting people to understand the role of built-in fire protection.

Target Audience	Message	Media
Preschool	What is a sprinkler system	A coloring book
Grade School	What is fire prevention	Classroom curriculum
High School	How can we reduce the number of fires	Classroom homework assignment
Community College	What is built in fire protection important	Class projects
Community Activists Groups	Why should the community support codes and ordinances	Public education campaigns
Development Community	How can you make your neighborhood safer?	By choosing to have built in protection in homes
The Elderly	What can you do to be safe	Campaigns aimed at rest homes and awareness of smoke detectors and sprinklers
Housewives	Protecting your most valuable asset – your family	Door to door campaigns
Business Owners	Protecting your economic interest	Brochures and cable television programming

As I was preparing this column I picked up an article in a local newspaper that more or less justifies why these varied strategies are important. The article came from a community that had a very, very good fire department, however they have recently experienced a series of tragic loss of life fires in which smoke detectors were not properly installed nor were they being properly maintained. At that point in time the newspaper article focused on the failure of the department to educate the people in the complex about the consequences of that behavior.

Shortly thereafter the mayor issued a proclamation regarding the issue and the next thing you know there is a considerable amount of energy being put into a door to door campaign to assure compliance with smoke detector regulation. Again, this is a classic example of a catastrophic theory of reform.



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Wouldn't have been a lot better to have some kind of an ongoing, incremental program? If a program could blanket the community with public education material that would then place the burden of responsibility back on the property owner instead of the fire chief for the tragic set of circumstances.

Knee jerk campaigns are often used as a stop gap measure after there has been a failure of the system, but a systematic strategy of educating the public on a year round basis is probably much more appropriate. Fire departments should be utilizing all of the holidays to continue to release information to their citizenry regarding appropriate behaviors in the maintenance of fire and life safety in their homes. No holiday should be exempt. No one message and no one media application constitute an effective public education program. This strategy also implies that a fire department should engage in the development of a network of allies to raise the level of penetration and comprehensiveness of a public education effort throughout the community. This could include such things as church groups, school and educational special interest groups and other special interest groups that are widely disbursed in the community.

For example, I am aware that at one time the Junior Women's Club, which is a national organization that is aimed at young female adults, had a strong emphasis on public safety and was heavily engaged in the distribution of information on fire, EMS and disaster planning.

As I was preparing this column I was also reminded of the concept of preaching to the choir. If you read this magazine you are likely someone who is already trying some if not all these techniques. However, I think it is equally important that success stories on public education need to be highlighted more and more. If everyone is not going to do what needs to be done, then we ought to be recognizing those that are doing an effective job and giving them a pat on the back – or a high five! They deserve it. In our business peer pressure is often more important than any other specific motivational factor. If I enumerate these suggestions I can't help but feel that there are probably hundreds of more that are lying in the background awaiting discovery.

The theme in this column is that education is something that you will have to continually do because as people go through various age cycles they learn about different things at different rates and learn to behave in accordance with what becomes the norm in their component of society. Public education cannot just be a public relations program trying to convince people that they need to support the fire department. It has to be focused on improving their knowledge of what they can do to help the fire department help them. The ultimate outcome of an educated public is *informed consent* which means that people agree to a certain type of condition and behavior because they fully realize it is in their best interest.

No we are not there yet – that is not the goal anyway. There is no there. We will likely have a need to continue to educate the public on the nature of fire safety with the birth of every new generation in our society. Over time it might get easier to do. But, it is not the destination we need to worry about right



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now, it is the journey and the actions we are taking right now to make a more fire safe future for our communities.