



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Can You Hear Me Now

Depending on your tolerance for advertising jargon, one of the most repetitive messages that is blitzing the airwaves today is “can you hear me now”. It has the possibility of achieving the same cult status as the proverbial “where’s the beef” from a few decades ago. Sometimes advertisements take on the connotation of being a classic, because they often find their way into conversation between individuals. Or, it might be vice versa. The common phenomenon of breaking a connection on a cell phone probably spawned the advertising campaign in the first place. However, there are serious consequences of what cellular phones mean to emergency services that need to be constantly re-evaluated.

A broken connection on a cell phone could mean life or death. But, that is not really the key issue associated with cell phones. It is the inundation of emergency services call centers by people who use cell phones and 9-1-1 as a personal means of dealing with their daily lives.

A broadcast on a major television network recently alluded to the fact that a single traffic accident on a freeway resulted in hundreds of telephone calls to an already beleaguered 911 center. Some continued long after the emergency crews were in place as angry motorists placed calls to the communications center trying to find why there was a delay. Unfortunately, that type of frequency and density of calls is actually counterproductive to providing effective emergency services. What can or should we be doing about that? The first thing that we ought to be re-evaluating is what we are telling the public about the use of the 911 emergency reporting system. My city, San Clemente was one of the earliest adopters of 911 clear back in the early 1970’s. I have heard that there are several cities that claim to be first, so I will restrict my brag to the idea that we just one of the early adopters of the technology.

If any of you can still recall at that point what most dispatch centers had as a telephone number it was a seven digit telephone number. In the fire station most of us had a box full of little tiny phone tags that we used to hand out to the public that says in an emergency call: and that was how our seven digit phone number got plastered on the phone.

The basic public education theme of emergency reporting in the 1970’s and 80’s was that the citizens were encouraged to call us first and let us sort out what the emergency was. As a result the vast majority of people felt perfectly free to call the fire department to report any number of “emergencies” that were going on in their home that they were doing it from the privacy of their home or business. At that point in time our public education campaign was to try to encourage the public to provide us with early notification of fires. With the onset of an increase in emergency medical services the desire increased to shorten the intervention period to be as short as possible.



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Fast forward to the turn of the last century. Now everybody has a cell phone. Phone companies are even suggesting that you should give up the hardwired phone at home and only use the cell. If you are driving down the street and there are a thousand cars on the freeway with you, the probability is that 8 or 9 out of every 10 cars have access to a mobile cellular telephone. And, the public is being programmed to dial 911 for practically everything and anything they see on the street that constitutes some sort of inconvenience. We are encouraging a ground swell if not a tsunami of telephone calls for even the most minor of incidents.

There are no little orange tags affixed to most cell phones. It doesn't say in an emergency call 9-1-1. Instead the premise is that the average public is if they see something, anything that looks amiss to them they feel free to use the cell phone to report it. If it keeps growing at the current levels of impact it could become a serious problem for dealing with real events

Perhaps it is time to change our strategy. Perhaps our public information campaigns need to become a little smarter in terms of informing the public of what they could or should be doing when reporting "emergencies".

We should be developing packages of information that go out to the public that let them know that 9-1-1 is a special consideration for an emergency in which life and property is being threatened not just if something doesn't look right. Perhaps we ought to be providing information to people as to what constitutes a real emergency and we should be giving them better information on what to do if they are witness to an accident in which emergency services personnel are likely to have already been notified thereby attempting to prevent the ground swell of 911 calls on obvious incidents.

I had a recent experience with that myself. I was proceeding down the highway when I actually observed a traffic collision forcing a vehicle into the center divider on I-5. I was only about 100 yards behind the vehicle and was therefore pretty sure that I was the first person to report that incident. I did so. But I had to wait almost 2 minutes for the phone to pick up at the California Highway Patrol. When I did get through I started to describe the incident and the dispatcher cut me off with a curt – we go it.

A couple of days later I was on Highway 99 northbound in which a traffic collision occurred in the center lane in which there were hundreds of automobiles surrounding the event all of which were going by at a creeping pace of about 1 mile per hour. I did not call 911. In the latter case due to the obvious fact that many people were on their cell phones starring at the accident as I approached the event.

Now there are those who might express a caution about me not placing that call with my background in emergency services. Some folks there should NEVER be any limitations on the reporting of emergencies. But, common sense tells me that if there are 100 vehicles and people are stopping and gawking at the



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scene it is unlikely that they are calling their mother to tell her about it. They are more likely reporting it to emergency services. In fact within less than a minute a police officer arrived. And, just so you won't think us retired guys don't care...I pulled over to the right and stopped to assist.

That particular scenario may not be all that comfortable to some folks. Nonetheless, I think that we must begin to start changing the message we give to the public about how to properly respond in notifying emergency services using cellular phones.

As stated earlier, many telephone companies are now encouraging people to completely get rid of their hard wired telephones and rely totally on cellular technology. When they are at home they answer they answer their cell phone at home. But when they are on the highway they might find themselves in a different set of circumstances. Our messages in our public education campaign should try to be a little bit more specific then they have been in the past.

For those that know me, I have a cell phone in the palm of my hand the vast majority of the day. I am probably one of those individuals who are contributing to the considerable amount of systems overload going on with telephone systems. Yet, I have serious concerns about what cellular technology is doing about the ability to really transmit effective messages regarding emergency services.

Like all other things, change comes about as a result of advances in technology. Our public education campaigns, our alarm receiving technology and our effectiveness as an emergency services are all intertwined. We need to consider making some changes to keep the system from collapsing into a morass of over-utilization.

Perhaps it is time for us to re-evaluate all of those circumstances at the lowest possible level; how the citizen interfaces with emergency services and start a new public education campaign about responsible use of the 9-1-1 system. The next time someone wants to reach out and touches someone in a dispatch center that emergency should not have to compete with someone who is merely concerned over backed-up traffic, or wants to know how to cook a turkey. Lives could be at stake.

Maybe we aren't putting little stickers on the phone like we did in the past, but we sure could be developing media materials and distributing those messages to our various constituencies. We need to get society to understand that there is a difference between an in-convenience and an emergency. I'll say it again. Lives could be at stake.