



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

A Dear John Letter

In many World War II movies there was a scene in which an individual in combat received a letter from a loved one back home. The letter was a sorrowful experience. Usually it announced the fact that the combatants mate had suddenly found a new companion and was interested in ending the relationship. Invariably in the dramatic fashion of movies, the person who received the Dear John letter usually became a combat casualty shortly thereafter or suffered some other tragic setback.

This got me to thinking the other day that maybe we ought to reverse the Dear John letter syndrome. Right now every time we have a fire in a building, we have had a tragic outcome of some sort. Granted, a significant number of fires are extinguished before they destroy lives and property. There are a variety of reasons for that happening. They range all the way from smoke detectors, exit drills, sprinklers, rapid response times, to others. Others go on to wreck havoc with a property owner and in some cases the outcome is not much different than those World War II dramas. Someone pays the ultimate price.

However, we seldom ever communicate with either of these parties. Generally speaking at the time of the fire we ask them for lots of information. We want to know if they can tell us a lot about who they are, their identification, their demographics as we dutifully fill out the NFIRS document. But, whatever happens to that information. More importantly are we building any allies at all by merely using these reporting mechanisms? Perhaps we ought to take a more direct approach. I know that there are a lot of fire departments that have service cards that they give out at the end of events. These service cards are often given to property owners asking a few simple questions. Not uncommonly these inquiries will ask if the person was satisfied with the performance of the department, the level of service, etc. However, these service letters are really more about us than it is about them.

I am suggesting that we reverse that trend and take the opportunity every time we have a fire to communicate directly with the property owner and tell them the truth about what really happened. What would happen if we started sending letters to everybody's whose homes caught fire with a brief reminder that early notification and dispatching of the fire department and a rapid response time made a significant difference in their fire. What if we had a letter that started off by saying nothing more than

"Dear John; we are sorry that you recently experienced a fire in your dwelling. However, our investigation revealed that a smoke detector was activated early on in the event which resulted in your notification of your fire department so that we could respond to your location in a timely fashion.

Our department's goal is to respond to 90 percent of our emergency's within a 5 minute response time. In your particular case that is exactly what occurred.

As always, we are here to serve and are grateful that you had a smoke detector in your home that resulted in our ability to demonstrate a positive outcome – signed the fire marshal."



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Or, how about if we started sending letters to people who had successful fires that were controlled by residential sprinklers that could go something like this;

“Dear John – let me be the first to express my condolences about your experience of having a fire yesterday. However, the fact that your apartment possessed an automatic sprinkler system resulted in the fire being contained within the area of origin. Our experience because they are confined to this locale is that they seldom ever result in significant property loss and moreover are extremely important in reducing the loss of life to accidental fire.

While you may not have been totally aware of the existence of the sprinkler to your fire we hope you are ultimately satisfied that your family and your possessions have been retained, signed the fire marshal.”

I am not sure how many of these different kinds of letters you creative writers can come up with. But, the theme is the same. How about if we started sending a Dear John – or Dear Jane letters to everybody who has a fire reminding them of four specific things.

These four things are:

1. The role of the manual firefighting forces in response time having a positive outcome;
2. The role of smoke detectors in clearly identifying that a problem exists allowing a manual system to be activated for people to leave the dwelling;
3. The existence of automatic fire sprinkler systems and their role in restricting a fires growth;
4. A combination of all of these methodologies.

I think that if someone was assigned this type of letter writing responsibility within organizations that after a while we start to begin to see an army of supporters for what we are doing. Right now, we are constantly being told by our adversaries that the public doesn't care. I disagree with that intensely. I think the public does care. They just don't know what they care about.

Maybe we won't send this letter to every fire. Maybe you will have to exercise some discretion. Perhaps you might want to not be too quick to send the letter out unless you are sure that the property owner had a positive experience. But, the idea remains. Communicate with John and Jane so that they can join the ranks of those people who clearly know that risk mitigation does work.

This coupled with community surveys about how most people feel about the fire service can perhaps begin to alter that constant criticism for home builders that the public doesn't care. I have yet to talk to a property owner who experienced a bad fire that didn't have opinions one way or another about our success.