



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

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Giving Out Is Not Getting Through

How many trees have died for public education? What I am in reference to is the fact that a significant amount of our “public education materials” are paper documents in which we distribute a wide variety of events in hopes of influencing public opinion. A significant number of trees I am sure have been fallen that contribute to the publication of such documents.

But is giving out getting through? If you were to develop a method of keeping track of how many people actually retained a piece of paper for more than a couple of days that was distributed in public education you might be startled. As a matter of fact I have actually seen cases in which public education materials haven't made it any further than the walking distance from the point of distribution to the closest trash can. What a tragedy. Moreover, why wait?

It is not that I am against printed publications. As a matter of fact I strongly encourage the development and distribution of printed materials myself.)(Hopefully you are reading this in a printed publication. However, I think that we need to take a look at another element of those printed materials or we are going to kid ourselves into believing that we are actually educating the public by giving information out. This article might offend some people in public education. On the other hand it might also get a few positive responses. That is because some of the things I am about to share with you are not necessarily my ideas but ones that I have heard by discussing these concepts with others.

First off, let me ask you a question. Why is it that we give out public education materials in the first place? If your answer to that is that you want to change human behavior then you are moving down the right path. There are other possible alternative responses to that including the fact that public education materials are often used as a way of transferring liability. In the latter case its when individuals respond to criticisms about a particular event by pointing to the public education material stating that it is not the departments fault that information has been passed out and whether people read it or not is another question.

So, if you have an answer to that question you are partially on the way down the path of determining what degree of effectiveness your public education program actually has. If giving information out is the performance metric then it is an awful lot like keeping record of how fast you were driving. Miles per hour does not necessarily indicate that you have a destination.

However, if you do want to look at human behavior then you have to ask a second question and that is what specific behaviors do you wish to alter? Public education materials that are overly complicated and do not address specific behavioral changes are not particularly effective. However, if you intend to get a specific behavior such as getting a smoke detector installed or obtaining community support for



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enforcement of sprinkler requirements and/or some other form of activity then you must make sure that your public education material asks them to perform that behavior somewhere in the context of the written material.

This may seem pretty simple at the outset but I am amazed at the number of pieces of information that I have reviewed that simply do not ever get around to asking the reader to do anything. A salesman calls that the close. And what a close is when you get done with reviewing some material a good sales person asks the question of, can I take your order now! The lesson that I think needs to be incorporated here is that public education materials that don't have a closure statement into them are easy to discard or disregard. Public education materials that call for an action specifically those that call for someone to do something that can be measured can actually be used to evaluate shifts in human behavior.

That leads me to point number two about public education materials. What if we are telling people things they already know or think they know and they don't care? Sometimes we in the fire service think that we already know the answer to the question that they should be concerned about when in fact we don't even know what question to ask them. It is my belief that is the strongest reason to employ market research before you spend an awful lot of money on printed materials. Community surveys are not often taken by the fire service regarding public attitude. We tend to use the customer survey to talk about how happy they are with regard to our latest response to their neighborhood. However, we know very little about what the public actually thinks about fire protection practices in general.

I would propose that one of the best ways of improving upon that is to conduct customer surveys that are based upon community demographics. What is that you say? Community demographics. What is that all about?

The answer is found in the US Census Bureau. If you live in a clearly identified community it is very easy to go the computer to find out what you need to know about your communities demographics. Unfortunately not to many fire departments avail themselves of this information. There is a tendency in many communities to treat all customers as if they are absolutely identical. The fact is they are not. I can almost guarantee you that elderly citizens living in an assisted living facility are not exactly the same as the young married couple living in a start up house. The portion of your community in which people are at the median income is not the same as the area of your community where people are living in the poverty level. Moreover, go to the parts of the neighborhood where high-income housing exists and you will find a totally different community attitude.

The idea that one size fits all of these markets is certainly a naïve one on our part. If we were going to steal a page from the more successful marketers in the private sector we would recognize that demographics drive purchasing decisions. And, providing responses to fire protection programs is a



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purchasing decision. How well do you know your community? Well, if your answer to that is you can give me your population but cannot describe for me the distinct and diverse complexities of that community then you have an overly simplified version of it. Granted, many firefighters have developed a lot of this information intuitively. It is not uncommon for example that emergency medical services program in a community drives a lot more of the department's knowledge of demographics than fire does.

Taking this idea back to the concept of conducting surveys I believe it is all together appropriate to gage a random sampling of that demographic information to determine what it is that people know and what it is to people who don't know. This is a time in which a fire department ought to be looking into its actual statistics. I know that firefighters hate filing out incident reports with a purple passion. As a matter of fact I have often heard firefighters express opinion that they think that incident reporting is a total waste of their time. Well, I can make the argument that they may be partially right if nobody is using that information to do anything. Any fire department that is not examining its database to determine three things is taking money under false pretenses. The first of these is you should be measuring the performance of your response system. The second is you should be identifying those trends and patterns that are leading to loss of life and property within the community and, thirdly, we should be examining our fire reporting system to determine what programmatic changes we could make to provide a higher level of service to the community within economic constraints.

So how often should you do a customer survey? The answer is: before you waste a lot of money shipping information out to people who may not read it. In other words the time to do a survey is when you are making a determination as to how to get to the community to change a specific behavior. For example, let's just use a hypothetical case that you have a series of fire in which disconnected or dead battery smoke detectors play a factor. Before you pump out a lot of information on smoke detectors on a citywide basis it might be a good idea to find out why you are having the problem. That could be the genesis of a needs assessment.

In a short column like this I don't have time to really explore how to do these kinds of things. However, this is not rocket science. I am amazed by the number of fire departments that have firefighters who are on light duty who could be utilized to conduct these kinds of surveys who are essentially underutilized. If a department has a couple of unanswered questions sitting in a portfolio and the have an individual who is on light duty what better time t explore a community needs assessment?

This brings to my third contention distribution of public education materials. I'll use a hunting metaphor. When you hunt big game you don't use hand grenades you use rifles. Targeting an audience is much more important than providing large amounts of material for an audience that doesn't care. This is where the fire service misses the boat a lot. We ought to be availing ourselves of information about how to identify target audiences by working with allied agencies. Another good example on this



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could have to do with things like EMS. For example, working with a local organization that deal with the aged is often a real good way to get information to the elderly. If you are pursuing a juvenile issue then perhaps you ought to be working with the Boys and Girls Club and other entities that know about those target audiences. I can tell a real world example of this one. In conducting a mapping research project for Wilson North Carolina we identified a particular neighborhood that had a very serious number of kitchen fires. In examining the data even more thoroughly we discovered that these were time specific having to do with the preparation of meals in the community. Mining a little deeper we determined that the particular neighborhood involved had a particular ethnic background and that language was a barrier. In working with this department a public education program was targeted for that neighborhood utilizing language specific information. Within a relatively short time there was a complete reversal of the negative statistics. The amount of public education materials that was actually used to leverage this situation was relatively insignificant in comparison to the benefit to be derived by eliminating the fire problem.

Of course there are ample opportunities to do broadcast type information also. I am not suggesting that we should give up our things like fire prevention week or any of the specific events that allow us to interact with the average citizenry. However, if you are going to put published material in the hands of people who really need it using a targeted audience approach is much more cost effective than broadcast distribution.

Lastly, we need to give serious consideration to how often we need to actually evaluate changes in human behavior. One of the best tools that we have available to do that today is the Internet. Many fire departments have begun to use the Internet to put information out but very few of them are using it to get information back. This is an underutilized tool. The technology of putting a community survey on an Internet and making it topic specific is not all that difficult. Furthermore, by using a PDF format it is really easy to provide additional information to support the findings of such a survey. My last observation has to do with a concept I call excess inventory. In visiting many fire departments I will often find that they have paid for pounds and pounds of publications that are sitting shrink-wrapped in a warehouse and they are not out in the hands of the public. Any publication that is sitting in a warehouse is a waste of a community resource unless it is utilized within a reasonably short time frame. It doesn't do any good to hoard paper. Public education materials need to be distributed as quickly as they can possibly be. They have a very short shelf life.

There, there is your challenge. If you are really serious about dealing with human behavior in your community then look at printed publications as a day-to-day challenge.