



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Have Gun- Will Travel

If you were a business person in your community you would very likely have a business card to hand out to your customers. Why? Because it helps your customers identify you with your product or service. When they need you, they look you up.

People don't usually have trouble looking us up. They dial 911. When we take Big Red (or whatever color of apparatus your department uses) into the field we often do not leave any form of calling card that helps our customers relate back to us in any significant way about their perception of how well we have done serving their needs. Perhaps it is time to change that.

Many fire departments have created a feedback mechanism that asks some basic questions that is routinely mailed out to an incident location for feedback. Sometimes the card or form is handed out at the scene. I know right now that some people would say that is not always a good idea because the outcomes are not always favorable, especially on EMS calls. That may be true. But what I am talking about is the idea that if you go to someone's house to help them, and you manage to do so in a very good way, then you should have some follow-up with them to let them know that you care about the outcome. If you do this often enough and with enough people there is a possibility that their level of support for what you are doing is going to be significantly improved. It can be the beginning of a longer term relationship.

Remember that you only have one chance to make a lasting impression on someone. We focus a lot of attention on how we do things to make it right for the customer from an emergency perspective, but we often fail to ask them how they feel about the service. One point we should remember is that often the handling an emergency is being done in front of an entire neighborhood. In many cases how we relate to our primary customer often becomes a conversation over a backyard fence among a much larger group of people. We ought to be taking every opportunity to educate and inform our clientele so that they become an informed user of our services instead just someone who has had a bad day.

I once visited a volunteer fire department that had created door hangers with some public education messages on them. They kept them on their apparatus to distribute to people on either side of fire and EMS incidents. The door hanger did not condemn the property owner who called for help for having an incident, but did advise the property owner's that were neighbors that an event had occurred in their neighborhood. It encouraged them to be more cautious in the future.

As I am explaining these one -on- one kind of contacts, I can almost anticipate another one of the reactions. There are those out there who will say they simply don't have the time to do all this "touchy, feely" kind of stuff. Well, if you don't have time to do it, then do you have any expectation on what will



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happen when those same people do not vote to support your efforts in improving fire protection by passing a funding ballot measure?

Loyalty is a two way street. By engaging in one on one contact with these people in a very short timeframe, we can often build relationships that will last a lifetime.

As you may have noticed here, I am not talking about the Fire Prevention Bureau carrying out this task. I am talking about the boys and girls over on the operational side. This column is in a magazine that is aimed mostly at fire prevention folks, but the idea here is to share this discussion with the shift responders. The Operations people are the ones that need to be carrying the message out there. That doesn't keep us from using fire prevention people and public educators to do one on contacts themselves, but the main emphasis is on using the opportunities that are already present when people dial 911. Giving out information while people are still standing around watching you roll up the hose is a very teachable moment.

Well, now I have said it. I am implying that we ought to get up from our computer desk once in a while and go out and talk to people. Face to face contact may not be as technologically sophisticated as pushing the enter key on your laptop but I believe it has a more meaningful and more relevant impact on how people perceive the contemporary fire service.

I believe that having effective one-on-one contacts like this reduce the possibility that an event will be critiqued in the press also. Some of the same techniques of keeping the press informed are closely related to this field of activity. In the field of management science they will tell you that the receivers of messages are not just passive absorbers of information, but tapestries of different behaviors. Feedback may be oral, it may be from body language, and it can sometime be written. It doesn't make any difference how you get it - as long as you are getting it. The message need be transmitted that we care and the feedback we need to hear is that they appreciate it.

Many years ago I was lucky enough to meet a movie actor that handed out a business card that said it all - His name was Richard Boone and all the card said was "Have gun- Will travel." His message was simple, but the impact was profound. Perhaps our business slogan should be - Have fire truck - will travel.

Maybe, just maybe, if people get the idea that we care about them, then they may care a lot more about us.

Visit these websites to get more ideas on public education activities.

http://www.usfa.fema.gov/fireservice/prevention_education/



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Home Safety Council

<http://www.homesafetycouncil.org>

Sparky the Fire Dog® (National Fire Protection Association)

www.sparky.org

Risk Watch

<http://www.riskwatch.org>

FEMA for Kids

<http://www.fema>