



# ***CHIEF'S FILE CABINET***

***Ronny J. Coleman***

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## Ouch! That Hurt

In one respect I am a television salesperson's worst nightmare. I don't really watch television – the best I can do is to listen to it once in a while as I am working on something else. I use it as background noise. I am sure some of you have picked up the same habit. You turn on the TV. And, then you go about your business doing other things not really paying much attention until something really grabs you audibly.

The something that grabbed me the other night actually stopped me in my tracks. It was a special report on television about the fact that smoke detectors are not waking up children. I am sure many of you saw the same show. Therefore, I am not going to repeat anything that was stated in the show. Rather I would like to focus on what does it mean to us?

Does this announcement make any difference to you? I don't see how we can possibly avoid it making a difference to the fire service. After all, we are the advocates. We, the fire service, have been out there telling society that they need to have smoke detection if they stand a chance surviving a residential fire. We have been saying the same thing about residential sprinklers. Now it appears that both of these technologies may have a flaw within the technology. Who should we blame? Them or us?

Well that is not exactly news anyway. Over the last twenty years I have heard lots of arguments about the flaws of built-in fire protection. We all know how much of a reaction we had to the problems of sprinkler heads a few years ago, and, now it's smoke detectors.

I remember the original arguments over smoke detectors. Suggesting that smoke detection was a reasonable means of protecting life and property fell on deaf ears originally. There was the debate over the source of power. There was an ongoing debate about what smoke detection actually is capable of detecting and now you are hearing the controversy that the sound level is just not satisfactory to raise children's awareness.

Parallel that argument with the idea that a sprinkler just may not work and you have the beginning of a certain amount of paranoia on our part.

Here is where you and I come in. We can either choose to engage this dialogue with debate and choose up sides over who is right and wrong or we can go into full retreat stating we made a mistake by advocating smoke detectors and sprinklers in the first place – or we can engage in meaningful dialogue about what these temporary setbacks really mean.

The first two strategies are useless to us. I have often used the term that explains that. It goes like this – "it is pretty hard to un-ring a bell." That television show probably communicated to more individuals in



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one evening than most of the individual fire departments in this country can do in ten years. When I first listened to this news broadcast an event sprang into my mind. Some of you may recall some of the public relations disasters of the past in which a medical product had resulted in severe consequence. Those entities that seemed to suffer through those events best were those that recognized that had a real problem and did not go into a state of denial.

The International Association of Fire Chiefs did the right thing. They immediately put out a press release to their member suggesting a calm, very reasoned approach on how to handle the media if they came ringing at the fire house. If you haven't seen it you should get a copy. It is an excellent example of how to handle the situation.

Looking further down the road, one thing that we should start monitoring is what is going to be the response from the manufacturers. I think it is entirely appropriate for those who find themselves in an advocacy role, especially those that have gone out on a limb and pursued programs that were even out in front of the codes we should ask the manufacturers to address the issue. I am not suggesting a letter writing campaign. Instead I believe that this should rise to the level of an organization such as the International Association of Fire Chiefs. This is a significant event that could result in a black eye if it is handled improperly. The high road on this is very simply to not ignore the problem but rather to face it.

Another thought that went through my mind was that probably provided a considerable amount of incentive for individuals who suffer fire losses to seek legal remedies through lawsuits. That is another form of tragedy. In the first place I don't believe that there is a single manufacturer in the business that wants to produce a defective product. For the most part what we have in our ceilings today is a direct result of some very idealistic work on the part of advocates and some very intense engineering efforts back in the 1970's. However, once we mention the word liability we also have to recognize that we have a role to play here.

Fire departments that respond to incidents that result in loss of life in which smoke detectors or sprinkler are present had better do a really good job of conducting the investigation. I am not talking about just the cause of origin investigation. I am talking about the scenario investigation. I can't tell you the number of fires that I have been to in which I have seen firefighters casually discard smoke detectors during the overhaul stage. I do have a couple of samples that I have retained on fires in which batteries were not present and I retained the detector just to be able to keep that fact firmly established. In another incident I recall keeping a smoke detector that did function in spite of being badly distorted by heat at the ceiling level in the room.

Firefighter investigations of fires involving this kind of technology should be much more focused than they have been in the past. Perhaps it is time for us to take some of those little boxes on our fire reports



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very seriously. No fire in which human life is lost should be considered to be thoroughly investigated until its determination has been made of how and when alarm devices have functioned.

Another strategy we ought to be considering is that this is the time in which residential sprinkler technology may need to be reinforced. I know that there are many of you out there that have got scar tissue on the back of your head and knife wounds in your back from attempting to get residential sprinklers installed. One of the defenses that I have often heard given is the fact that smoke detection and compartmentalization should be able to more than the sprinklers. Personally I don't buy that. I have already had a couple of experiences in which I have actually witnessed a sprinkler head doing its job in spite of all sorts of obstacles being thrown in its way. It should not however be construed as a battle between smoke detection and sprinkler systems. These two technologies are like the right hand and left hand of fire protection that does us no good to pit them one against the other.

Instead the emphasis needs to be on how these two technologies reinforce one another. I am of the opinion that there is no 100 percentile of protection. It is virtually impossible to put together that will stop everything from happening. The very idea that smoke detectors don't wake up small children is frightening in and of itself. But more frightening is the idea of no protection at all. I cannot visualize that anybody who watched that show would be encouraged to go in and rip out smoke detectors merely because they did not awaken children.

I have been on fires in which pets have been accredited with awakening people. I just read about one in the Fremont California newspaper in which a small Yorkie saved a 76-year-old woman by jumping up on the bed and barking at her because she had a fire. The article did not even mention whether there was a smoke detector or not. And I doubt very seriously whether UL is going to come out with an approval standard for Yorkie fire alarm systems.

Moreover there are other conditions under which I think we can reach the 100 percentile. Individuals who are heavily drugged or under the influence of alcohol are unlikely to respond even if the decibel level is loud enough to shake the windows and wake the people up next door. We should try to keep the pendulum from moving the opposite direction, which is dispose of all technology because it doesn't reach the maximum value.

Then our last consideration ought to be that of realistic expectations. As we engage in public relations projects and respond to situations that happen in town we should be sensitive to the fact that this information is now into the public's eye. Perhaps our public information officer should be drafting up some model press releases right this very moment. That way you would be able to have an appropriate remark regardless of the condition that you find when you get to the scene of a residential fire.



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My last thought about this television show was how it may play in with the recall discussion of sprinkler heads a few years back. The fire service has had some painful hits. Yet, on a national level the introduction of a more sophisticated fire protection technology has had an impact on the loss of life and property. As advocates of fire protection technology we cannot allow ourselves to become depressed over temporary setbacks.