



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

Previews of Coming Attractions

If you arrive at the movie theater a few minutes early you are going to be forced to endure a process called “previews of coming attractions”. The movie industry taking some of the best parts out of the movie puts together a real short clip in which they hope to entice you to spend your money on in the future as soon as it is up for release. Then, they sit back and wait and determine whether or not you vote with your dollars as to whether or not their movie is worthwhile seeing.

Unfortunately many of these trailers promise more than they often deliver. I am not a movie critic but I make it a habit of reading movie critic columns and comparing them to what I am interested in. I remember one such individual critic stating that you didn't need to see the movie because there were only three exciting things in it and all three were shown during the trailer. When I saw the movie I enjoyed it anyway

Nonetheless the concept of a premiere does serve a purpose. If you have an interest in the genre then you can start thinking about putting it on your schedule. If you like that particular actor then you might start thinking about doing some reading of the movie critics. If it is part of a series or a serial that you have seen before you might go back and refresh your memory on the previous movies anticipating what the new movie is going to be all about. On the other hand you may totally ignore the premiere and just wait until it comes.

For real movie buffs the anticipation is often more of a thrill than the movie itself. And the reason why is that you have the opportunity to put your own interpretation of what you think is going to happen. What most people fail to realize, is that there are premieres of coming attractions that surround us on a daily basis about things much more relative to our lives. Specifically I am talking about the fact that there are previews of coming attractions in our profession also.

The common practice in the fire service is to talk about master planning and strategic planning and accompany it with some kind of an indication of a time frame. Generally it is more than one or two years, at least five and seldom is any kind of a planning effort worth much beyond a ten or twenty year horizon sometime in the future. Part of the process of doing effective master planning and strategic planning is to be watching out for those things that are going on in modern society that are eventually going to have an impact on the fire service.

This has been going on for hundreds of years. Unfortunately it has not been looked at in a very systematic way and we have spent some portion of our professional lives playing a game of catch-up in society. One of the best examples that I can project is a simple technology. Without telling you the time frame of this occurrence, I will tell you a story of rejection. I put a fax machine in the headquarters fire



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station where I worked. I was literally laughed at by my own staff and somewhat ridiculed by my peer fire chiefs because “who the heck is going to communicate with you by fax machine?” In the process of discussing the adaptation of fax technology I wasn’t basing it on the fire service I was basing it on society. The thing that prompted my idea of buying a fax machine was an article that I had read in business week about the significant increase in the use of fax machines to hasten communications between business ventures.

Going one-step further I suggested to a couple of professional organizations that they install a fax machine and faced a severe amount of resistance. The initial statement was “why put in the machine when nobody out there has one?” My answer was, “well I had one and I wanted to use it to communicate.” In a matter of months my fax machine was ringing everyday and the professional association had finally put one in and found that the fax became an instrumental source of communications in a very short period of time.

One of the hallmarks of an organizations ability to survive in the future is that it has some degree of respect for trends and patterns that are coming towards the organization. Contrary to predicting the future, organizations that are paying attention to “coming attraction” are doing nothing more than extrapolating the real world with the potential down the road somewhere.

The story I just reflected on about faxes has been duplicated in other forms of technology over the last twenty years. Seldom has the fire service ever found itself on the leading edge of change. As a profession we tend to be very conservative and subsequently are a late adopter in many cases for technology that has already been proven elsewhere. That doesn’t diminish the fact that we should be paying close attention to things that are going through our society because they will eventually impact the fire service.

You might already be familiar with the concept of the wave of change. That wave as it goes through society has a leading edge, a high point and a trailing edge. For purposes of this article I am only going to focus on the leading edge. It makes no difference whether or not we get to excited about any trend or pattern once it becomes a mainstream because that means that it has already found wide spread acceptance and is not going to have much of an impact on us other than just going along with the crowd.

If you are paying attention to trends and patterns know that there are opportunities in which we can see this event horizon looming up in front of us. One of the ways that I use to monitor it is by going to annual conferences and walking through the exhibit floor. I often classify almost every booth as falling into what we refer to as SSSD or WIWIT. The first acronym stands for “same stuff different design” and the second acronym stands for “what in the world is that!”



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The ratio in many cases is about 99% - 1. I will let you chose which of the two is probably the more common. The vast majority of people at conferences spend most of their time looking at the SSDD's – when in fact the organization that is plotting to change its future ought to be looking at the WIWIT's.

Another excellent source to look at the future is magazines such as Popular Science and Popular Mechanics. I have reviewed both on a monthly basis and am always startled if I can actually find an article that has something to do about fire departments inside of it.

And then there is actually the idea that there are three determined ways of change in the fire service that are driving technological adaptation in our industry. I would submit that the cycle that is used to change modern fire and building codes and the cycle that is used to change technical standards such as the NFPA and ASTM and other standards making organization is a form of very subtle pressure for crafting future conditions. If you actually plotted out these various wave changes in our profession they would look like a multiple sine wave. Sometimes codes precede standards and in other cases standards push codes. I once got into a very extensive debate with a manufacturer who wanted me to adopt a standard for something that did not exist. His rationale was that if we created the standard it would force the technology to move in a specific direction. While that might be true the more logical thing would be for standards and codes to be based upon technology that is proven itself.

The greatest wave that impacts the fire service that we have done a fairly good job of ignoring is the wave of society. There has been a lot of ink spilled over the concept of generation x and generation y. There has been a lot of dissention over generational issues yet the reality is that society has always been a driving force behind what the fire service is or was going to turn out to be. We derive our members from our society. We take a significant number of our values from our society. Granted we tend to be somewhat self-selective in that we do choose people with specific values that in the past have created a certain culture. But even that is changing.

I don't want to give the idea that I think that everything that is happening means that is going to happen to us. Instead what I am saying is that everything that is happening has the possibility of having to be dealt with by us. We have to start thinking in terms of anticipated responses to trends and patterns that are going on in society. Some people are good at this. Others haven't got a clue. I am raising up the context of this type of a column because I think it is a professional skill that anybody who wants to talk about the future needs to hone to a more specific level. If you accept the idea that we need to develop future plans then you should simultaneously accept the idea that everybody is really good about talking about future events.

After facilitating lots of meetings with firefighters I can tell you that many people feel that the future is nothing more than a duplication of today. There is ample evidence in the premieres of coming attractions that is simply not going to be true.



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One example I could use recently was a discussion on land use development. We in the fire service have almost always had the philosophy; if they build it we will protect it. But some of the current trends and patterns of land use are beginning to run up against some of the ways that we have had of protecting buildings. For example, have you heard about the concept called “walkable communities”? We have electric vehicles that are out on the highway today. How much longer will it be before fire departments are being requested to use electric vehicles to preserve fossil fuels?

The crystal ball is not so crystal clear. I always cringe when I hear someone use the word prediction in a sentence. The world has seen a significant number of predictions by very intelligent and well-celebrated thinkers go completely array. Instead I think what we ought to be adding to our vocabulary is I wonder if? And applying that to things that we observe going on around us.

Not unlike the movies that we are disappointed in after watching the preview some things that we get excited about never materialize. On the other hand sometimes the trailer in the movie does entice us to watch something that we wouldn't have watched ordinarily and we are delighted by that experience. If you are going to think strategically start looking for an opportunity to do that kind of preview of your life in general.