

Strive to be a Purple Cow



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The day after Sept. 11, 2001, practically every news outlet in the world was referring to firefighters as heroes of the finest kind. Songs were written, poems were penned and T-shirts were screen-printed. The era of the fallen hero was initiated.

We now are seeing a reversal of fortune. Today, there are headlines attacking the image of the fire service in a wide variety of ways that are inconsistent with us being regarded as America's heroes. There are criticisms of our pay, our benefits, our lifestyle and even our rights as public employees to engage in collective bargaining.

What happened? Is our job different today than it was before 9/11? Do we deserve the current criticism? How long is the cynicism going to last? These questions, and a lot more like them, will be conversation fodder for several more years. There are absolutely no simple solutions; there are only options to exercise that will either restore the fire service to a level of credibility or see it deteriorate further in the public eye. Which is it to be?

The outcome will depend on the economy. Simply put, if it doesn't get better, things are going to get worse. Consequently, you need to stop reading material about budgeting and start reading books on economics. Instead of worrying about staffing formulas, apparatus specification and program costs, you need to focus on gross income, per-capita expenditures and equity allocations. The days of writing next year's budgets by merely increasing every number according to the Consumer Price Index is over.

Here's a quick test to gauge your economic acumen. Answer the following questions from your knowledge base — don't look up the answers.

- What is your community's economic engine? What drives its ability to support government activity?
- What is the per-capita cost in your jurisdiction? Is it above or below the national average?
- What is the average annual income of your permanent population? How does that average relate to your costs of putting a firefighter into a position, with complete benefits included?
- What is the distribution of your population and what inferences are there for your response demands and deployment plan?

- How many businesses exist in your jurisdiction and which are the three top employers? Secondly, what are the three top sales-tax producers?
- What is the cost of an average home in your jurisdiction and how many homes do you protect?
- What percentage of your citizens is unemployed?
- What percentage of your population has graduated from college?
- What is the percentage of actual working structure fires?
- How many miles of streets and highways do you protect on which accidents and incidents occur?

If you can't or won't answer the above questions, then you won't really know your problems, and when the economy rebounds you might not be able to get back what you lost. Worse, you will forego the opportunity to become a purple cow.

And, just what *is* a purple cow? Let me give you a hint. If you have ever driven down a country road, you will begin to notice cattle in the fields, especially if you are a city person. At first, they are interesting, but after a while you begin to pay less and less attention to them. At some point, you begin to ignore them and after a while, they almost are invisible.

But, just imagine that some farmer out there has dyed his cow purple. I bet you would pay attention that. I remember having a similar experience that involved spotting a giant Texas Longhorn in a field of Herefords. Different means visibility.

This whole concept is better explained by another Seth Godin, in his book, *The Purple Cow*. On the very first page is this phrase: "If you are not remarkable, then you will be invisible."

Right now is when we all should start looking to become more remarkable. This current crisis is an excellent opportunity for the fire service to reinvent itself.

As the system starts to come back into equilibrium, we are likely to get some of our resources back but the level of service may never be the same as in the past. It is incumbent on us then to develop a newer, more flexible fire service model to ensure that when the next cycle occurs — and it will — it will be more difficult for our critics to further reduce our essential service. ■