



CHIEF'S FILE CABINET

Ronny J. Coleman

What Color is your Sacred Cow?

Remember the book: *Sacred Cows Make Good Hamburgers?* (Kriegel, Robert, and Brandt, David, Warner Books) The idea was that sometimes our over protection of something we consider to be sacramental results in its destruction and turns it into something else. Right now, many fire departments are really being confronted with the potential slaughter of sacred cows. Let's not take the time to enumerate these in this short column but recognize the fact that many of the things that we have fought long and hard for are now being put on the chopping block. I have discussed this idea in other columns, so it is not new.

But what if your sacred cow was one of a kind? What if it was a purple cow? Even the most cynical amongst our politicians would have to think twice before sacrificing a purple cow. Why, because there are really very few purple cows out there.

I found out about this by reading a book with that name, *Purple Cow; Transform your Business by Being Remarkable*, by Seth Godin. (I alluded to this in a previous column about Paradoxes, Pareto Principle and Purple Cows) I am not going to do a book review. I will let you go buy the book and read it yourself. But, I think it is a proactive book. He makes a very interesting statement right on the opening flap of the book. According to Godin, you are either remarkable or invisible.

Which one are you? Which one is your department? What if your services are invisible? For sake of clarity, I am going to repeat the admonition: You are either remarkable or you are invisible.

Another term for remark-ability is called a distinct competency. A distinct competency is something that you can do that nobody else can do and therefore that puts a lot of value behind what you are contributing to an organizational effort. So, let me continue with my examination of the phrase remarkable. What distinct competency do you have that nobody else can do? Is there anything that your department should be doing that other people would have a difficult time matching you competency for competency?

Or, do your programs look like a herd of Herefords on the way to the slaughter house? This is a lot more challenging than the average contention because most fire departments can take a great deal of pride in who they are and what they are but in fact may not be that remarkable. Remarkable means noticeable. Remarkable means absolutely essential. When I refer to the purple cow, I am not talking about the color of your fire apparatus. I do know that somewhere out there in the American Fire Service is a gigantic fire truck that is painted purple. I have a picture of it in my collection and I am not suggesting that you go out and paint your fire apparatus purple either. However, I am suggesting that Godin is on to something. I am not going to lead you down a primrose path by telling you everything that Godin suggests in his book. You can go buy the book and read it yourself. What I am suggesting is that we



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need to make sure that in all of the planning and analytical activities that we are engaged in right now that we start asking ourselves what is it that we are going to demonstrate that we are remarkable. What is it that makes us different than everything else?

The first thing we can start doing is getting rid of the attitude of same old – same old. I used to have a fire captain that every time I asked him how things were going that was his standard answer. If everything is the same in your organization as it was six months ago with regard to your visibility in the community then shame on you. I recently read an article about sending people away to school and then watching what they do when they come back. The article theorized that knowing about a technique and knowing that it can make something change in your organization and actually having the courage to attempt to adopt it are two different skill sets. Another words, you can send people away to school to learn how to do something but if they don't come back home and do something with it, it is a big waste of their time and yours. Using a human brain to be nothing more than a reservoir of good ideas but failing to put them into action can amount to invisibility in and of itself.

So, let me ask you just a couple of questions that only you can answer:

1. What is your fire department doing to put itself out in the public's eye as much as it possibly can under these stressful times?
2. What is your department doing in terms of enhancing public communications with the clientele base that you were dealing with on emergency operations on a day to day basis, i.e. do you fill out the report and that is the end of the discussion?
3. What are you doing in your fire prevention bureau to let people know that you are interested in preserving jobs and protecting property tax?
4. How much face time are your individual firefighters having with community groups in your organization, i.e. are you actually engaged with the community or are you waiting for them to have an emergency so you can go help them?
5. What behavior is your department exhibiting today to make you more visible than you were five years ago? Notice I didn't say, how much money are you spending? I said what behaviors you are exhibiting. What activities do you have your people involved in that raise the level of visibility in the community?
6. What are you doing in the public education arena to address the two most sensitive groups that we protect? Children below the ages of 6 and elders above the age of 65.
7. Who have you said thank you to recently that is out there supporting you in the first place?
8. What kind of evaluation have you conducted recently to find out what the public actually thinks about your department?
9. When your fire truck goes down the street do you people take its presence for granted or is there anything unique that causes them to pause and look at your apparatus in a new eye?
10. Do you have an idea on your own that fits into this category that I have failed to mention?



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In summary, how can you create a purple cow? You can remain as docile white faced cattle going down the chute, heading towards the slaughter house or you can do everything you possibly can to become more and more visible. If you would like to find out more about this concept, read the book. It is full of other attitude adjustments with regard to the purple cow syndrome. Perhaps you can use some of the techniques Godin suggests as part of your communities survival plan.

Yes, I used the word survival plan. Not strategic plan. As a long time advocate of strategic planning, I feel that those departments that have engaged in that process are already further along than most but I believe that trying to write a strategic plan in today's environment is locking the barn after the horse has been effectively sold. In a future column we are going to provide you with another concept to put into your thinking cap called a survival plan. In the meantime, you might want to go out and paint one of your cows purple – or paint one of your white cows with purple dots. I will guarantee you someone is going to stop and ask a few questions.