

IS WHAT I SAID WHAT YOU MEANT?

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One of the great challenges in communication is actually communicating. My recent article on the public information officer is a great example of writing about an issue, but some readers perceiving something else. In this case, the article was about the function of a public information officer or PIO, the emergency operations center and the joint information center. The topic was based on the foundation of a train derailment exercise and two well-known train derailments. The article was not about the indicated incidents or train derailments. It was about the function of the PIO. Nonetheless, some readers focused on the specifics of the railroad incidents.

To be specific, the 2005 Glendale train derailment occurred on January 26, 2005, at 6:03 AM. The event started as a southbound Metrolink train hit a SUV that was intentionally parked on the tracks in an apparent suicide attempt. However, the driver changed his mind and left his vehicle parked on the tracks prior to impact. The train hit the vehicle causing several rail cars to jackknife. These cars hit a northbound Metrolink as well as a Union Pacific freight train that was parked on a siding. Both the Los Angeles Fire Department and Glendale Fire Department responded in force. Eleven people were killed. About 200 people were injured. The exact number is not known because not everyone was treated by EMS. The SUV driver Juan Manuel Alvarez was later convicted of eleven counts of first degree murder with special circumstances. He is currently serving eleven consecutive life prison terms.

The Chatsworth train derailment occurred September 12th, 2008 at 4:23 pm. The westbound Metrolink had just departed the Chatsworth Station towards Simi Valley when it hit head-on a southbound Union Pacific about 1.25 miles west of the station “at approximately 40 miles an hour.” Subsequent investigation revealed that the contract locomotive engineer Robert Sanchez was “texting” as he left the station, failing to stop for a red light. His last text message was 22 seconds prior to impact. Sanchez was killed in the collision. The County of Los Angeles Chief Executive Office report of April 13, 2009, reported that “this collision resulted in the worst multi-casualty train incident in California in 50 years.” The cost of the collision is in excess of \$7,100,500.

25 people were killed, including a veteran Los Angeles Police Officer. These victims were processed at the scene by the Los Angeles County Coroner’s Office utilizing a temporary morgue and refrigerated storage unit. The most critical patients were transported to eight of 13 designated Level 1 and 2 trauma centers.

The injured included 62 immediate patients and 19 delayed patients who were transported to various Los Angeles area hospitals. An additional 13 immediate and 4 delayed patients were transported to Ventura County hospitals. Of the 62 patients classified as immediate and transported to Los Angeles hospitals, 55 were transported to trauma centers.

Out of the 110 available private ambulances, only two were required. Helicopters were used to transport 34 patients to trauma centers. The Los Angeles County Fire Department transported 14, the Los Angeles Fire Department transported 12 and the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department transported 8 according to after action reports.

As you can see, this begins to read more like a police report or deposition summary, not a newspaper story. Facts are great, but they can also be boring and not particularly informative. How much do you the reader need to know? What do you want to know? When does the reporting of facts just become noise? What one reader may think is important, is junk information to another. These are just some of the challenge of effective reporting. Time, space and reliability of information are other constant challenges for a PIO or reporter.

Ponder for a moment the number of people required to respond and handle these horrific incidents. Law enforcement, fire, EMS, railroad staff, health & safety, coroners, risk managers, NTSB and FBI investigators, media, public officials, the list goes on and on. Imagine the impact that such an onslaught of injuries has to local hospital staff.

Consider the backfilling required to enable the police and fire departments to continue to respond to the everyday calls that continue to come in despite the gravity of the incident. For a bystander, the numbers may seem excessive. However, if you were pinned under a bench inside a collapse rail car, you may think differently.

As you think about numbers, consider the passengers who were on the train but not injured. What about the hundreds, if not thousands of others who were stranded throughout the rail system? How are they going to get to wherever they were going? How many buses will be required to transport these people back home or to work? Who is going to notify the families?

Think of those who had friends or family on the train wanting to know the status of their loved one? Who takes care of that? Watching local television video loops provides limited information. Family members want facts.

The roll of the public information officer becomes critical in such situations. Clearly, the need for a broad base of information by many different agencies, the media and the public becomes a daunting task. It takes time to establish a command structure to pass information on to those in need for this vast amount of information. Priorities must be established.

The media needs are not the same as the agency needs. What comes first? What about the impact these events have on local traffic? Staging areas for responding emergency vehicles needs to be established. The staging of ambulances is a priority. Creating landing zones for aircraft takes space and personnel support. Overhead, media helicopters eat up precious air space. This needs to be coordinated. The public information officer is only one small component of a rapidly expanding incident.

Consider as a firefighter, you are sitting in your station when the alarm is received. What do you think based on the limited information received? For the dispatcher, how many resources should be sent to the call? Can two people handle it or will it take 500?

As a young police officer working a local radio car and you receive a dispatch to a reported train collision. Is this just another report call, or are you going to be directing traffic or taking statements for the next 15 hours? Or, you are an investigator on your way home when you are paged to respond to the collision. Is this a quick call for a couple of simple statements and evidence collection, or is this going to take a team of investigators from local, state and federal investigators from various disciplines months to investigate? You don't know until you get there.

How many of these questions matter to the casual newspaper reader? I suspect not much. Do you even care? I doubt it. Communicating what is important is a priority. The rest is just noise.