



MEDIA MATTERS

How—and why—to take control of department publicity



AP PHOTO/STEW MILNE

BY ROB ROSS

Fall River (Mass.) Fire Chief David Thiboutot answers questions about a fatal fire that occurred on June 15, 2006. To properly deal with the media when discussing incidents, especially those that involve fatalities, you must have a plan and be well prepared.

I sat down recently to watch some TV with my 13-year-old son after a long day at the firehouse. No more than 30 seconds and 54 TV channels later, he and I settled into watching a police pursuit, live on TV.

For the next 30 minutes we joined in on the pursuit from the comfort of our family room. We watched as the suspect, who robbed a dry cleaning business, fired a round or two at the pursuing police department and drove across highways, side streets and even a golf course in an effort to escape a team of the state's local finest. Finally, the police managed to flatten both front tires of the suspect's pickup, and he drove into a drainage ditch. The chase was over.

As I was driving to the firehouse the next day, I couldn't help but think about the pursuit, the war in Iraq, the recent hostilities between Israel and Hamas—and how fast the media can bring us information. Today's media continues to put itself at risk to bring us the news from wherever the news happens to be—an active war zone, in the neighborhoods destroyed by a hurricane or across the street from the burning remains of a building blown up by its owner so his soon-to-be ex-wife didn't win it in a divorce settlement.

The public, more than ever, is into news. We get the news dropped at our door, cabled to our house and e-mailed to our computers, cell phones and PDAs. Is the U.S. fire service prepared to deal with this media?

Given the fact that the media can cover so much, so fast, when it

happens in your town, you must be prepared. *The bottom line:* If you don't have a plan to deal with the media, somebody else will end up doing it for you. How many times have you seen a major incident commanded by the fire service on the news—and they are interviewing a police officer? Admit it, I know you have and I know it drove you crazy. Maybe it's from my years as a public information officer (PIO) in my previous department, but every time I see this happen I sense a lost opportunity for a department to promote the good work it does. Why does it happen? Usually one reason: The department was unprepared to deal with the media, so they let law enforcement personnel do it.

WHY MEDIA?

With all the training we're currently receiving focused around the National Response Plan (NRP) and the National Incident Management System (NIMS), along with all our other responsibilities, it can be easy to push the idea of working with the media to the side. But we can't forget that it's a very important function for the fire service, a fact that's underscored by the NRP's ESF-15: Emergency Public Information and External Communications. Crisis and risk communications is now more than ever an important part of the first-responder community, and the fire service should be a leader in informing the public.

I admit the media can be a pain, but they are a necessary evil during an emergency situation. And even in non-emergency situations,

Where to Go for Help

Resources for learning more about managing the media

1. The National Information Officers Association (www.nioa.org) is dedicated to training and supporting PIOs from various local, state, federal and commercial first-responder organizations. I've attended its conferences in the past and have found them to be very informative and productive.
2. Action Training Systems' (www.action-training.com) PIO Training Program. I've used this program in the past to train PIOs for the Connecticut Fire Academy. It's a great entry-level program you can purchase and use for individual or group instruction. The program covers the role of the PIO, public disclosure laws, media relations, writing press releases, conducting press briefings and handling emergency scene interviews.
3. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (www.bt.cdc.gov/erc) and the Center for Mental Health Services (www.riskcommunication.samhsa.gov) feature a number of resources available online for self-study.
4. Peter Sandman's Crisis and Risk Communications Training Program (www.psandman.com). Sandman conducted training for the PIOs involved in the TOPOFF 3 National Disaster Exercise held in April 2005. In addition to his training programs, Sandman offers a number of books well worth reading in your preparation for a large-scale disaster.
5. NFPA 1035: Standard for Professional Qualifications for Public Fire and Life Safety Educator includes job performance requirements for the PIO. This is a great place to start when adding a PIO position to your organization.
6. The International Fire Service Training Association's (IFSTA) Public Information Officer Manual is an excellent resource for PIOs new to the job.
7. Capt. Mica Calfee's Web site (www.captainmica.com) features comprehensive information on fire service history, terminology and tactics. This site is useful not only for fire service PIOs, but also as a place to refer media folks for more information.

the media is valuable. The challenges your organization faces—budgets, staffing, funding—all require public support. How do we reach the public when a disaster is *not* happening? The media.

MAINTAINING CONTROL

For you to succeed in promoting the good news of your organization, you must tap into the media's power and ability. Think about what it would cost to put out a mailer to every residence and business in your response area. How difficult would it be to visit every home in your area? Good media relations give you the ability to bring your message to every doorstep, every kitchen table or every family room.

In my former department, years ago, I was a lieutenant/PIO. We had a fire in which two teenage fatalities captured a great deal of statewide news coverage. We scheduled a news conference for 4:30 p.m. to announce the cause of the fire. The broadcast media requested that we move it to earlier in the day, but the powers-that-be at the time refused.

We opened with a 4-minute statement containing information the news media already knew. When it was announced that a "juvenile" had accidentally started the fire while playing with matches, very few questions ensued.

Prior to the news conference, we committed to protecting the identity of the juvenile by not identifying their gender. Within those few questions the child was referred to as "he," and at that point the cat was out of the bag. The media cleared the room to do their teasers for the 5 p.m. news "live from Middletown" with the scoop on who started the fire.

We failed miserably. We lost control of the media based on the time of day of the press conference. With so many news stations featuring 5 p.m. news broadcasts, 4:30 p.m. was a horrible time. We also failed to keep the child's gender confidential. Finally, our spokespersons for the conference sat at a table and then slid their chairs to a set of fixed microphones from the news stations on the table. A lectern would have worked much better and given the seriousness of the incident, would have made for a more professional presentation.

Let's consider two of the most notable news stories that affected our nation in recent years: Sept. 11, 2001, and Hurricane Katrina. Both were major news-making events, and both were handled locally by

mayors, Rudy Giuliani and Ray Nagin. If you were to examine these two incidents from the outside looking in, you might say one was handled well and the other miserably. On closer examination, however, these are both incidents where media was well handled.

Giuliani took a stand, saying, "This happened on my watch and I will handle it." He was the front man with the media through the event, and still gets credit for his performance. Nagin took a lot of heat from those outside New Orleans and was accused of casting blame everywhere but on himself. At first, it seemed like he was failing at getting his message out. But eventually he got the help he asked for. He fought for the residents of New Orleans. Did he succeed in handling the media well? I would conclude yes, as he was reelected the following year.

THE GOOD NEWS

Most of us, thankfully, will never have to respond to a 9/11 or a Katrina. Instead, where we must be able to work with the media involves the day-to-day stuff, the good news. How do we get the media to cover the good news? Here are a few tips that have worked for me:

- Make it a point to know your media and to have them know you. By this I mean the local papers, hometown radio stations, public access program groups and TV stations. Don't worry about the major networks; if it's a big enough event for them, they'll find you.
- Be accessible to the media and keep in mind they have deadlines at different parts of the day. Find out their deadlines. For morning papers it may be by midnight and afternoon papers by 11 a.m. TV stations usually hit deadline about 30 minutes before they go on air, unless they're going live from your incident.
- Don't be bashful about giving reporters your cell phone number, pager or even your home phone number for after-hours follow-up. There's an old saying with PIOs: "Never say 'no comment.'" But if they can't reach you, you can't comment at all.
- If you want the media to report your organization's good news, you must work with them when they're reporting the bad news as well. This is also true when the news deals with controversial issues within your organization. Being truthful, while staying

Remember to clearly define who from your organization can speak to the media, and what they can and can't say. Here, Danvers, Mass., Fire Chief James Tutko speaks to reporters on Nov., 22, 2006, after an explosion at a chemical plant sparked a massive fire in Danvers.

AP PHOTO/CHITOSE SUZUKI



within the appropriate limitations, will gain you a great deal of respect with reporters. Reporters will remember how you treated them during difficult organizational stories when you come seeking their help in covering a “good news” story like a staff promotion or a grant awarded, or in getting the budget message out for a favorable vote.

- Develop a media policy for your organization, clearly defining who can speak, what they can say and, more importantly, what they can't. The policy should include who replaces them when they're unavailable. Design your media plan to be flexible enough for any situation.
- Give the media new and interesting things to write about. If you're doing creative things in your organization, the media will want to cover it. We recently added an electronic mailing list to our Web site in an effort to keep our very active taxpayer groups connected and informed about our department. This was reported through a local paper and because it was new to this area, the story was picked up by the local CBS affiliate. We got great coverage for several days, which eventually helped us get our budget passed on the first vote for the first time in about 5 years. The media coverage was priceless!

Finally, a final word of advice from my good friend and colleague Lt. Paul Vance, PIO of the Connecticut State Police (Yes, police and fire can get along!): “You can feed the dogs or you can let them eat from the trash.” Now I am not suggesting that Lt. Vance or I think the media are dogs! Instead, this saying means you can give the media the information they need to do their jobs, or you can let them go find it for themselves. Which one leaves you in more control?

CONCLUSION

If you work with the media, I guarantee, you will have success. If you choose not to, then you should be ready for the result: poor or wrong information being distributed, little organizational recognition and a misinformed public. And if you choose the latter, once the information is reported, you might want to disconnect your phone for a while! 📵

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