

On-Air Anxieties

Crisis event media interaction is a must for fire departments. Your public spokesperson needs to be able to communicate difficult information in a way that increases the public's confidence. **By S. Christopher Suprun**

Listening to a comedy CD recently, I paid attention as Jerry Seinfeld described two fears that most people have every day. The first fear everyone has is death. The poll cited it as being the second-biggest fear most Americans have. The number-one fear, he claims, is speaking in front of a group of people. He made the conclusion that if people had to be at funeral, most of us would rather be lying in the casket than delivering the eulogy.

This is funny until you consider that in a terrorist event, real people are dying, creating a "tinsel town terror" for many fire department officers who fear the media and its mission.

Right to a story

The media, like the fire service, is filled with Type-A, action-oriented people. They are supposed to get the story. Similarly, many front-line reporters have long hours, tough deadlines and demanding audiences. The

Constitution of the United States grants a freedom of the press that is designed to allow journalists to get information out to the public without limitation. Government scandals helped create sunshine laws and the Freedom of Information Act, which provides further avenues for the public to learn about what is happening in their communities.

This demand for information is not dissimilar to the public's demand on public safety agencies in a crisis. As most fire department officials know, we don't always have information. In the Columbine school shooting in Littleton, Colo., initial information was sketchy and unreliable — as it is in many crisis events — leaving public safety officials to formulate their plan of action based on incomplete, and perhaps false, information.

This lack of information leaves the public with unanswered questions. Reporters are the mouthpiece for the public's interest in events happening in their backyard.

With Columbine, how many questions would you have asked? Are my children ok? Who did this? Was it a student, a teacher, a crazed lone gunman? Was this the act of an international terrorist? Am I safe at home? Any number of other questions might be asked, but they can all lead to lesson one: Be responsive.

"The fire department has to be responsive in a terrorist or crisis event," says Amani Ali, a reporter for Colorado radio station KHOW. "We don't wait for the networks to drop in news." The media is interested in getting good information for its audience and getting it quickly.

Ali says he would rather have a PIO call him and tell him that an incident is happening even



if he or she doesn't have specific information yet. If the PIO indicates an event is occurring and he or she will get back to the reporter, the department is fulfilling the reporter's need to relay information and the public's need for news while building a relationship of trust with both the reporter and the public. Fire departments shouldn't avoid the media or consider the interaction adversarial.

PIO duties

Ali says he wants to be able to speak to "someone willing to talk no matter how bad it is." He also says that "no PIO wants to hear a broadcast where it is reported that calls

er so that there is one voice and one message being put out," Tallman says.

This leads to lesson two: Have one voice that the public and media can identify as the spokesperson for the event. Speak one message about the event. We have all read in the paper or seen on the news where one person has to correct another on the team when information trickles out from multiple sources.

Both Tallman and Ali give credit to the parties for getting a single story out earlier in this event than in most, even though initially there were several different people speaking simultaneously. This multiple-information format only confuses the public and other responders

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placed to the department weren't returned." Nonetheless, reporters in your area do have a job to do, and by helping them get the story out by providing information, you are much more likely to be successful.

One story that exists is that of a business reporter who tried to stop a CEO to ask a question. The CEO replied "no comment" and continued on with his day. The reporter became interested in what the CEO was hiding and started an investigation. Soon thereafter, other reporters became interested. Robin Cohn's book, *The PR Crisis Bible*, continues that the CEO simply may have been afraid of the media. Or he may have had something to hide. Either way, he dramatically changed the perception of his organization by not listening to the reporter's question; all the reporter was trying to do was simply get directions as he was lost. Being responsive is the best way to make sure that your version of the story gets out.

Deputy Sheriff and Public Information Director Jackie Tallman, who was one of the PIOs at the Columbine shooting, strongly encourages PIOs to get together to develop the message that is going to be reported.

"It is best to get all the professionals together

who may be listening to commercial radio traffic and news en route to respond.

Media safety

Many fire departments may be familiar with these basics as well as another: Keep the media safe. But how do you keep the media safe when they are participants in the crisis?

On Sept. 11, 2001, Americans were glued to their TV sets as they watched the awful attacks on the World Trade Center. Many gasped in horror as smoke billowed out of those two buildings, but for most of us, we didn't see the attacks in person — we were watching them unfold on television.

That morning a live broadcast between New York City and Washington, D.C. was happening with NBC reporters Jim Miklaszewski and Katie Couric about the military's preparation for a response to these terrorism attacks. Shortly after going off the air, "Mik" as he is known to many, returned to the airwaves to report what turned out to be the airliner attack on the Pentagon. He says that he not only heard an explosion, but the windows rattled. Things shook and people were running from the E-ring as smoke filled the hallways.

"It gives you a better perspective, being at the event," says Miklaszewski. Just like firefighters re-telling an event at the firehouse after the fire, reporters are relying on their own experiences for information, not second-hand accounts.

Miklaszewski was literally in the middle of a terrorist attack on American soil, but like members of the fire service, he wasn't running from the event, but to it, answering his call of duty. As a veteran journalist he continued seeking information from his sources in the Pentagon to report to the public. "Anyone who deals in public health and disasters, you forget after a while the disaster is happening because you are doing your job," he says.

In a crisis, the public will want to know that the government is operational and working to correct the confusion. The public also may need specific instructions about evacuation routes or shelter-in-place instruction, and the media, television in particular, can be useful and provide a major supporting role. Miklaszewski takes it one step further and notes that it is not only useful "but it is essential to get information out to the public."

Miklaszewski, whose career included time as an affiliate reporter in the Dallas-Fort Worth area covering fire and rescue issues locally, was able to provide a very personal and up-close perspective of that day.

"PIOs are always helpful, the firemen did a great job, but reporters want the guy on the line" to give that first-person news perspective, Miklaszewski says. That brings us to lesson three: Always provide the media with that first-person, human perspective of the event.

Lessons from government

The voice that most Americans will probably remember from Sept. 11 is that of White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer. Fleischer reported events to the public, acknowledging the tragedy officially on behalf of the U.S. government. He discussed our potential responses to the events themselves and the criminals guilty of them. He set the tone for the days to come.

Lesson four, which comes from Fleischer, is that "you must get facts" in a crisis situation and not speak haphazardly. Initial reports from Sept. 11 indicated that 25,000 to 50,000

people were dead in the World Trade Center collapses. While we did suffer a greater toll that day than ever before, these numbers were obviously greatly exaggerated. Facts are important so that you can give the public some reassurance that your organization has a handle on the event. The ability to describe specifics is very important in being able to tell the story of your event.

Another public figure very active in the weeks following Sept. 11 was Bill Frist (R-Tenn.) the Senate Majority Leader and a former cardiovascular transplant surgeon. During the anthrax scares, Frist often was called on to address the nation about the medical and public health issues facing the public from bioterrorism agents.

Lesson five is to strengthen individuals with accurate and practical information. Frist said that "we need to empower individuals. We need to give them the information that they will need to deal with these new threats to our society."

Some of this empowerment comes from appropriate information that doesn't emphasize dangerous solutions to problems such as duct-taping windows and air vents, but instead fosters understanding of the specific dangers of a given event and the concrete, effective ways for citizens to care for themselves and their neighbors. Helping individuals to understand that inhalation anthrax can be stopped with respirator masks may be a simple message that is easy to deliver.

Effective PIOs

Bob Davis, a reporter for *USA Today*, has covered everything from the anthrax attacks to cardiac resuscitation statistics across the United States. He says effective PIOs are those who "know how to get their hands on accurate information fast." This statement sums

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up all of the basic lessons that PIOs should understand.

As you can see, the media does not have to be a secondary attack on your fireground should a terrorist or other crisis come to your community. The media is a ready and willing partner to both assist the fire community with its response to crisis events, not an

added stressor. Fire chiefs, officers and PIOs should seek out opportunities to use the media as a resource. With these suggestions from those who have provided information or told the story of recent terrorism events, it is clear that the B movie *Tinsel Town Terror* can instead be a source of support, not something to be feared. [FC]

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