

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



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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