

# TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR A POSITIVE PUBLIC PERCEPTION



**International Association of Fire Chiefs**

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# Introduction

Over the course of the past several years, the fire service has been subject to increasing scrutiny. Economic pressures, evolving communication technologies and changing social norms contribute to an environment where we in the fire and emergency service find ourselves struggling to maintain a positive image.

While much has been said on this issue, the IAFC established the Fire and Emergency Service Image Task Force to examine the problem and develop a resource that empowers fire department officers and others to address the issues that threaten to erode the public trust in the fire and emergency service.

## A Universal Problem Calls for Universal Action

The perception of the fire and emergency service is universal, and therefore the issues discussed in this paper are applicable to all of us, regardless of department type or rank.

As a whole, we must remember that the public perception of the fire service doesn't typically allow for distinguishing between career and volunteer, chief officer and firefighter, etc. Bad news is bad news, and we often don't have a level of information sophisticated enough to hold separate perceptions for each section of a group. That is not meant to be a judgment, but rather a reflection on human nature. Don't we typically make generalizations about the general public or politicians the same way?

There are certainly portions of this document that you may find more or less relevant to your personal experience; however, there may be lessons learned that you can apply with a little stretching or an example that may serve as a cautionary tale.

## Moving Beyond the Blame Game

Pointing fingers and playing the blame game is part of the ongoing challenges with our image. The difficult truth of the matter is that the fire and emergency service shares a good portion of the responsibility of the current environment, and only through accountability for our own actions and taking ownership of the issue can it be fixed.

This document provides a frank discussion on trends that must be addressed. Once again, the document is meant to be collective in nature. Not every negative behavior will apply to each reader or even each department. Not every solution will be required in every department, and how the solution will be applied will vary depending on a department's unique environment. However, if we are to move forward, we must have the courage to reflect honestly on the situation and confront ourselves as well as others.

The intent of the document and the companion resources are to empower fire chiefs to take a leadership role in enhancing the fire and emergency service image both in their own communities and on a larger level, and to support all fire and emergency personnel in taking individual action to support a positive fire service image.

## We the Chiefs

Throughout this document you will see the words *we* and *our* used repeatedly.

While some departments may have more challenges than others, none of us—including those who contributed to this report—are exempt from self-examination or the responsibility to ensure the fire and emergency service image is one of trust and professionalism.

## Executive Summary

Generally speaking, the fire and emergency service remains an honored and valued profession, but the day-to-day decisions and behavior of fire and emergency personnel at all ranks contribute to a constantly evolving public perception. The increasing public scrutiny of our budgets, operations and behavior has led to growing number of negative perceptions that is slowly tarnishing our image.

The good news is we have the ability to turn the tide before it's too late. If we are to be successful in maintaining a positive public image—which enables us to secure the public's trust—we must reflect honestly, talk openly, work collaboratively, act professionally and take responsibility.

While it's easier to point fingers at the media, elected officials and the public, the first and hardest step in this process is taking a good look in the mirror. How has our own arrogance or unwillingness to keep pace with our changing environment contributed to this decline in public perception? How did we become out of step with those around us?

The point of this honest assessment is to allow us to move forward by identifying what works, figuring out where good intentions went wrong and applying our best attributes to addressing our image flaws. For example, with very little effort—a professional demeanor, a compassionate word and few pieces of sound data to back up our opinions—the negative perception of arrogance becomes a positive perception of confidence.

Each department will be different, and that's good too. In understanding that this report is not an indictment of *all* aspects of *all* departments, we can conclude that some departments must continue their commitment to, while others must begin to, build new models that support a positive public image. With each success, more departments will want to do the same.

Hopefully, this document will help. Recommendations include:

- Assume cultural leadership.
- Discuss your image.
- Review department policies.
- Adopt best business practices.
- Train and listen to future leaders.
- Develop relationships with the media.
- Proactively demonstrate value to the community.
- Develop a social-media policy.
- Focus on labor-management.
- Listen.

By taking action and sharing what we've learned, we can all continue to build the tools and resources to improve our collective image and maintain the level of trust we have enjoyed for generations.

### What Is the Problem and Where Does It Most Often Exist?

Our customers trust us to take care of them when an emergency exists. This trust has been earned by generations of positive customer contact, from simple acts of community care to the ultimate sacrifice of laying down one's life to save another. This trust is vital to the fire and emergency service's ability to uphold the public's safety and therefore vital to our existence.

It's most often cited that our image problem is one of trust, but firefighters are consistently named as one of the most trusted occupations in public-opinion polls both in the U.S. and beyond. For example, the fire service consistently tops the annual Trust Index<sup>1</sup>, in nearly 20 countries.

This, of course, raises the question, is the image of the fire service really getting worse or does technology (mainly the internet) just allow us to see the few bad apples more easily?

If public-opinion polls consistently list firefighters as most trusted, is there really a problem? The answer is yes, though the root of the problem is not trust, but perception.

In general, the perception of government officials everywhere has deteriorated, and the fire department is increasingly seen as just another government agency. Moreover, the fire service is often subject to competing perceptions, with the life-saving highs casting the low-points into sharp contrast.

Trust and perception are certainly related, but they aren't the same. Trust relies on a system of facts, personal beliefs and emotions to predict a future outcome; it is often deeply personal and developed over time. Perception is a perpetual process that includes how you analyze both personal assessments and the external environment around you.

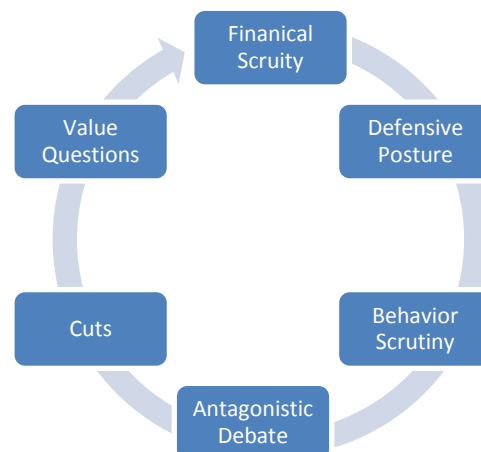
Perception is easily influenced, which can be both good and bad, but even fleeting negative perceptions can significantly erode trust.

The constant push and pull of competing perceptions is wreaking havoc with our public image and with our image of the public. The following examines the common issues contributing to a negative public perception.

### Increased Scrutiny: A Spiral Effect

Over the course of the past several years, the fire service has been subject to increasing scrutiny from the press, elected and appointed officials, and our customers. Driven by economic pressures, a spotlight was put on fire departments that has never been lifted and in some cases is becoming brighter.

The environment of scrutiny can create a spiraling effect where scarcity of



funds creates scrutiny, scrutiny influences behavior, a combination of angry debate and cuts turn to question of value—which fuels more scrutiny, deeper cuts, etc.

Regardless of whether the fire department is career, volunteer or combination, financial scrutiny often goes hand in hand with broader department scrutiny when the discussion turns to the question of value. Unfortunately, the further the spiral continues, the more detailed and personal the issues become and the harder it is for any party to be objective.

At first, financial scrutiny remained in the relatively abstract world of local government budgets, but it wasn't long before the issue became more personal. Scrutiny of fire-department personnel compensation and benefits can provide a lucrative line item for much needed cost cutting as well as a powerful argument that resonated with a cash-strapped public.

Early on, many fire departments and their personnel took a strong defensive posture, failing to empathize with the larger public—many who may be experiencing layoffs, foreclosures and retirement and benefit losses of their own. Higher education may also factor into the mix, particularly with young people (and their parents) who may be heavily in debt from higher education expenses and underemployed or unable to find a job at all.

The public expects compassion from fire and EMS personnel, but in many cases, it experiences the opposite, either by fire service-based organizations who may use fear to get their message across or by individuals posting insults on public websites. With neither compassion nor education about the fire and emergency service system, it's easy for community members to feel bullied, angry and perhaps even betrayed. Suddenly, those who were meant to stand between them and danger can be perceived as presenting a danger to their financial—or even physical—wellbeing.

The fire service is under increasing pressure as well. Unlike other budgetary issues, compensation and benefits offer territory for prolonged scrutiny and continuous examination of different patterns of spending and behavior: individuals, groups, retirement, lifestyles, labor unions, second jobs, education—the list of possibilities is endless. Successfully defending one portion of the budget may mean that a different news story is waiting next week. Constantly on the defensive, there was little time and energy to be on the offensive. Many departments have few other resources to help.

Unfortunately, in order to meet immediate life-safety needs in such a financial environment, public education and outreach programs are often first on the chopping block, cutting off critical demonstrations of public value and opportunities to educate the public on the department's responsibility, workforce demands and financial needs.

## **What the Public Is Watching**

### *Career Departments*

- Overtime costs
- Shifts/hours worked
- Retirement benefits
- Personal use of department equipment
- Lawsuits; union grievances
- Unprofessional or "boys club" behavior

### *Volunteer Departments*

- Tax breaks
- Fiscal oversight
- Personal use of department equipment
- In-fighting; department politics
- Unprofessional or "boys club" behavior

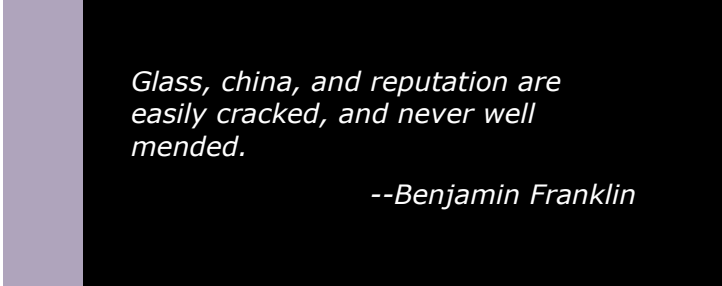


## Lack of Context

Without opportunities to connect directly with the fire and emergency service in a positive way, more moderate politicians and community members can be swayed by a growing number of vocal or politically charged opponents. Unlike in the past, opponents can come from any angle. Changes in technology and social norms have provided opponents a great amount of information, large and immediate public forums and little to no accountability for their claims or statements.

This can be exacerbated by politicians who see an opportunity to change the fire service as they see fit or to deflect political pressure or scrutiny from themselves or simply don't have the political will to support the fire department.

With opponents or political agendas often driving the discussion, a vacuum is created in which the public doesn't understand—and eventually doesn't appreciate—the scope and value of the department's services. The public scrutiny, fear and frustration that follows, creates tension that can culminate in fire/EMS personnel lashing out publicly, which only continues the downward spiral.



*Glass, china, and reputation are easily cracked, and never well mended.*

*--Benjamin Franklin*

## Dwindling Community Involvement

Involvement in the community is one of the fastest ways to develop the broader context needed to positively influence public perception and build public trust. Joining civic organizations or participating in community events can create a visible presence that demonstrates to the community that you're not just a fire department champion, but also a community champion.

It provides many direct opportunities for a department, such as the ability to gather feedback and understand community perspective, an opening to engage in education and an opportunity to build valuable allies.

Unfortunately, it can also be a difficult solution in today's demanding environment. For example:

- Most personnel like many other of today's professionals, have less time to contribute to other areas of the community due to increasing demands at work and at home. Volunteer responders—already stretched between the demands of family, a paid career and the many needs of the department (calls, training, fundraising events, etc.)—can be particularly challenged to stretch their time even further.
- Fire-department personnel may live outside their jurisdictions. At the ends of the spectrum, where public perception often seems to settle, is the belief that responders either want to live somewhere "better" or can't afford to live in the jurisdiction. While either of these may reflect the situations of some, there are many other reasons for living outside the department boundaries, including employment opportunity, family relationships, personal preferences, etc. Regardless of the reason, the situation can create resentment and hostility that can strain the public-department relationship.

- The divisive political environment can lead fire service officials to avoid policymakers and other local leaders. Some may view this as a safe approach, but it will ultimately contribute to a perception of disinterest in the community's affairs.

## **Us vs. Them**

While many attacks on the service may be unfounded and severe cuts create a serious impact on operational capabilities and responder safety, there are many cases where the fire service must take responsibility for our resistance to professional progress and the ways we intentionally set ourselves apart from social change.

The traditional concept of the fire and emergency service family adds value to the close-knit and support-oriented profession. However, it can also create a fraternity-like atmosphere that divides responders and the community and fosters a lack of accountability and transparency.

Increased scrutiny has led to the public seeing behind the scenes of the fire and emergency service. A thin veil between us and the public had always provided a sense of mystery and awe, but once lifted, it demonstrates to an already weary public the economic, professional and sometimes even ethical divide between "us" and "them."

The fire and emergency service is being swept up into the larger changes to the social compact. In the past, running into a burning building was enough to earn what we received. Our job and the world around us have gotten significantly more complex and therefore so have the processes of earning respect, funding, benefits, etc.

## **A New Social Compact**

Inside the fire and emergency service, there has grown a sense of arrogance that needs to be addressed.

Under the old social compact, the public—and many of us—have overlooked or made excuses for arrogant and unprofessional behavior. The powder keg has been filling for years, waiting for the spark of a downturned economy to make it explode.

The fire service continues to demand more support, but often fails to work with the community to explain the unique circumstances behind the need or explore creative or nontraditional options for resolving the issues.

Similarly, more-modern practices may support a positive outcome for everyone, yet we dig in our heels to resist on the basis of ego and tradition. Look no further than the many responders who continue to fight residential sprinklers for an example.

Whether we like it or not, the public is creating a new social compact, one in which its support is earned, not just by the services we provide but also by the behavior we engage in.

Frequently, these issues play out in the areas of compensation, benefits, retirement packages and work schedules—sore points to a public that has all but lost any expectations surrounding job security, work hours and a comfortable retirement.

It's true that there are many valid reasons to ensure these benefits exist for our personnel, but resistance to cuts is often packaged by the fire and emergency service in a way that paints our personnel as more deserving than the general public.



Often, language centers on the danger and community-oriented nature of the job. These are both valid points, but not so much that we can lose sight of the contributions others make to our lives and how dangerous their jobs can be.

Annually, the U.S. Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) issues the National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries<sup>ii</sup>.

Routinely, occupations with highest death rates aren't public-safety workers, but those responsible for putting food on our table (farmers, fishermen), doing the manual labor to provide for our shelter (construction, fuel extraction, electrical workers) or moving us from place to place (taxi drivers). Often those with the highest death rates are those with low-paying, manual labor.

If we look at the BLS data, we see that we have much in common that could be used to build alliances between other industries in our community and perhaps even work together to find solutions to killers of us all, such as traffic-related incidents, struck-by incidents and diseases related to exposure to harmful substances and environments.

To be clear, the issue is not that firefighters and EMTs don't do an extraordinary job that requires them to willingly sacrifice themselves for others, face extreme pressures or deserve to be well compensated. They certainly do. Likewise, the special nature of their job demands a focus on supporting earlier retirement and dependable health care.

The reality is, however, that in many communities, the money is simply not available, and when first responders react with ignorance and arrogance—be it in a community meeting or by belittling people in online posts to media stories—they not only lose immediate public support, but also do significant damage to the long-term reputation of the service.

When the fire and emergency service educates the community about compensation and benefits in a way that is transparent, reflecting the professional nature of the need and brings forward proposals based on solid business

## **A New Social Compact: Not Just About the Money**

The word entitlement has become a loaded and politically divisive word in today's economic discussions, but in regard to our image problems, it's not just about the money.

Many fire departments continue to operate under outdated, even unsafe, management practices because, "that's the way it's always been done." There's an expectation that both community members and personnel will look the other way. Career, volunteer and combination fire departments must adhere to professional norms and business practices in order to earn and sustain the public's support.

Some key areas to consider are:

- Physical fitness appropriate to the job
- Equal opportunity and inclusiveness
- Training and education
- Prohibition of alcohol in the workplace or on duty
- Financial oversight
- Adherence to safety measures (both responders and public)
- Restrictions and oversight of minors
- Personal use of professional equipment
- Professional appearance and behavior
- Consequences for unprofessional or illegal behavior

Some argue that moving to a more professional atmosphere restricts or deters recruitment; but, it may, in fact, attract more serious and committed individuals. Recent studies conducted by state chiefs associations and the IAFC as part of the **Volunteer Workforce Solutions program** show that organizational leadership is a leading factor in the decision for responders to join and stay with a department.

approaches, it projects the professionalism that builds community support.

The perception of arrogance and ignorance that furthers the divide between responder and the public isn't just fueled by economic norms, but the perception that personnel also puts themselves above social norms as well.

Historically, firefighters have been portrayed as humble heroes, and we know that—for the most part—they are. But we also know that our tradition-based culture can be used as an excuse to brush aside or ignore changes in social norms and general professional expectations.

Practices no longer accepted (or at least not flaunted) in the private sector, such as nepotism, discrimination, harassment, abusing influence, hazing etc., are still alive and well in many community fire departments. The public is unwilling to continue to look the other way and is surely no longer willing to pay for such behavior.

The negative perceptions these actions generate—even if they're just the work of one or two misguided responders—are most dangerous to the long-term success of the department. For example, even the most supportive and indulgent taxpayer will stop to question further investment in the department when their tax-dollars are routinely being spent in court with little to no repercussions for those who got us there.

### **Cultural Change: The Problem and the Answer**

There is no question that cultural change is a major factor with regard to the fire service image. It's worthy to note that we're not alone in this regard, as many professions are feeling their way through sweeping change. Whether these changes are for better or for worse is not yet known, but appears to be somewhat up to us.

The task force identified five cultural changes that are currently contributing to our self-destruction, but if turned around and managed properly could propel the fire service back to the ranks of those most trusted by the public:

- Post-incident highs
- Generational differences
- Education
- Social media
- Increase in 9-1-1 medical and public-assistance calls

Each of these areas of cultural change has additional similarities:

- The public is far more adaptable to these changes than the fire service.
- The changes all create internal conflict: either in the fire and emergency service or even between responders.
- All carry an arrogance-related pitfall.

#### *Post-Incident Highs*

After September 11, 2001, the public put the American fire and emergency service on the fast track to celebrity status. People saw what we were capable of and they saw what price

we paid. After many years of being in the shadows, we suddenly had the spotlight and a voice.

In many ways, the collective voice was good. Local fire departments were getting the resources that were long overdue, safety issues were getting attention, the fire service finally received a seat at the policy table and communities were safer for all of it.

Unfortunately, the spotlight also had its drawbacks. The public had gotten a glimpse behind the scenes of what we do. It was just enough to stoke an untouchable self-image but keep the flaws well hidden, at least at first.

The same situation can be applied to other major national incidents (Hurricane Katrina added to our hero status) or even local events with a major impact.

Eventually the shine fades and, rightly or wrongly, the public moves on; they have new challenges and worries to focus on and in the case of the economy, many of the departments are perceived as part of the problem.

Some in the fire service would seek to go back to a quiet and somewhat isolated existence; others seek to stay out in front by using scare tactics and guilt. Neither is a viable option. Like any celebrity with staying power, we need to be constantly moving forward, marketing ourselves in a way that resonates with our fans and reinventing our product.

We still have a seat at the table and an important voice to contribute. As time passes away from major incidents, however, we must accept that we can't dominate the conversation if we want to continue to be a part of it. It's critical that we find ways to work collaboratively, think strategically and apply lessons learned in a way that looks toward the future. We must listen to others so our voice remains relevant. We need to balance the needs of responders with the needs of the larger public, for the needs of the department can't be met without the public perceiving that we understand their fears and are in a position to help.

Major incidents have a way of forever changing our perspectives of who the fire service is and what it does. This is true for fire department members, well as the public, so it provides us with opportunities to lead and embrace change. We can leverage our successes, and even our sacrifices, to gain much needed progress or reform, but we must remember the hallmarks of what we do and what the public expects are always compassion, sacrifice and community.

### *Generational Differences*

There are certainly benefits to four generations contributing to the job, but it can also create challenges for the fire and emergency service image.

### **Does Data Have an Expiration Date?**

*Gallup's annual Honesty and Ethics survey* is one of the most-often cited public opinion polls of professionals.

Fire and emergency service groups—the IAFC included—often boast 90% of the public ranked firefighters “very high/high”.

However, firefighters and members of the U.S. military appeared in the survey only once in seventeen years—in the immediate aftermath of 9/11—and have not been included since.

While the firefighters' ranking in the Gallup poll is still a record-high and is consistent with newer data from other sources, it only reflects a single year of data.

Generational challenges aren't necessarily new in any industry, but those born in the late 1980s and 1990s offer some specific challenges. Studies show that so-called, Millennials have very different expectations regarding everything from compensation to work habits to promotions<sup>iii</sup>. They've been raised to be publicly vocal, personally invested and very technologically adept. All this can raise serious challenges when trying to maintain command and control in the firehouse or in public discussion.

That's not to say the other generations haven't brought their own changes, but it feels different than previous generations, perhaps because of the broader social change. Young people coming into the fire service have more external influences (television, internet, global social networks, etc.) that influence their perceptions and therefore their behavior and expectations.

For example, forget reality-TV and YouTube for a minute and just consider scripted TV exposure, something that each generation on the job has grown up with. Consider how a young professional—influenced to join the force by an exciting, sexy and gritty portrayal of the fire department on *Rescue Me*—will likely be quite different from older generations who were influenced by *Emergency!* Aside from the difference in content, the experience is much different.

The most extensive interaction you had around *Emergency!* was watching it with a few friends or talking about it around the firehouse table the next day. Today you can rewatch your favorite scenes over and over, gain social proof from friends and strangers who claim to have done/witnessed whatever took place on the show and discuss your opinion on fan pages even before the televised hour is up.

This is just one example of how the difference in our experiences alters our shared perceptions and the work we need to do to make sure multiple generations all understand policies and procedures the same way.

With common understanding, the energy, adaptability and engaging nature of younger staff is a great opportunity for the fire service, but only if those assets are applied in a way that supports a realistic and professional environment.

Clearly worded policies, along with training and consistent application, are needed to support cross-generational success, but maintain command and control.

### *Education*

A similar situation exists with the cultural changes in education.

The fire service is looking to enhance its professional image by seeking higher education to support its work. Clearly, this is a good thing. However, like the generational changes, it can create a dangerous shift in the traditional trade or paramilitary structure of the fire service.

It's increasingly likely today that those entering the profession have some post-secondary education, and many in our ranks are seeking higher education either for their own enrichment or due to the growing number of departments requiring advance degrees for promotion.

The fire service is clearly benefiting from advanced education of its members both operationally and in regard to its image. So where's the harm?

There are a number of possible pitfalls:

- Failing to balance the values of classroom and experiential education. Mechanical and manual labor are still the necessary base skills for firefighters, and only experience can prepare you for high-pressure demands of the job.
- The break down (real or perceived) of command and control, particularly in administrative issues, when this balance is not achieved.
- Disenfranchising valuable and talented responders who don't have degrees.
- Failing to balance the desire to attract professionals with degrees with building professional opportunities for young people within the community.

Here again is another area where arrogance can be our undoing in a case of competing public perceptions. On the one hand, higher education is consistent with public expectations around the education levels of those who are perceived as professionals. On the other hand, we run the risk of being perceived as elitist or condescending when we assert our position over community members who are less educated or cut off traditional avenues for non-college-bound community members to professionally excel and thrive.

Care must be taken to demonstrate to the community the balance between education and experience, the value higher education provides to the entire community and the opportunity the department provides as a gateway to higher education and professional development for community members.

In this regard, fire department leaders should encourage higher education opportunities for its members. While financial benefits are not always available, other support may be. For example, fire departments which have hour requirements for volunteers may consider making some allowance for members pursuing a related degree.

### *Social Media*

Social media is the ultimate double-edged sword. It can effectively and inexpensively get your message out instantaneously to an exhaustive number of people. The question is, is it a positive message or is it firefighters behaving badly?

It's critical to remember that social media and the technology that enables it are only tools. The real power behind social media is the connections that are made. Content becomes powerful when it's read by many and then shared exponentially.

Many departments have successfully implemented a social-media strategy to educate and engage their communities. However, taking a larger view, the image of the fire service can be collectively damaged by the number of responders who engage in unprofessional, illegal or just downright stupid behavior.

In some cases, firefighter/EMT behavior, such as in the case of a New Jersey responder who posted photos of a fatal crash victim to his Facebook page<sup>iv</sup>, has led to new laws that reinforce the perception that the majority of public-safety personnel aren't using these tools responsibly.

As the public scrutinizes the fire service, they often learn the wrong things through social-media posts. Even if what the public sees is not reflective of its own department, it contributes to stereotypes that hurt the entire profession.

Stereotypes have long plagued the fire service, but now we see those images taking hold and being perpetuated via the internet. Even in areas where the fire service culture has made positive strides, a single online post can quickly undermine that work.

In a recent IAFC webinar on social media<sup>Y</sup>, Curt Varone, retired deputy chief of the Exeter and Providence (R.I.) Fire Departments, highlights a common denominator in many social-media cases, "These firefighters made no effort to disguise their identity," said Varone. "People didn't make an effort, which to me, says they don't realize they're doing anything wrong."

As the social-media world continues to evolve, we need to take an active role in developing policies, educating responders and articulating expectations. We should be taking the lead in developing responsible public-safety uses for social media.

#### *Increase in 9-1-1 Medical and Public-Assistance Calls*

Over the past decade, fires have continued to decrease in number, thanks to improvements in the building codes and fire-protection systems. Medical incidents now represent the greatest percentage of 9-1-1 calls and requests for service. Therefore, they represent our greatest opportunity to demonstrate the skill, professionalism and value we bring to any emergency, on a daily basis. Still, many in the fire service refuse to accept this reality.

Many of these calls can be attributed to the national health crisis and fewer individuals having health insurance. With no access to a physician or necessary medication, problems fester until someone calls 9-1-1.

This shift in firefighter duties is likely to prompt frustration and bitterness in those who, "joined the force to fight fire and not pick people up off the floor." In addition to causing tension within the department, this attitude may be reflected in customer service levels with the public.

### Assume Cultural Leadership

Fire chiefs bear ultimate responsibility for their departments, including the culture. In today's environment, operational and strategic leadership can only be truly successfully achieved if the chief is paying active attention to the myriad of cultural changes taking place in the fire service and the larger community beyond. We can't hide from change and we can't simply lay down the law and expect people to follow.

In order to improve the fire service image, the fire chief must demonstrate the behavior that he/she wants others to emulate:

- Improve transparency by opening lines of communication with members, the public and policy makers.
- Find ways to personally become engaged with community groups and activities.
- Deal in fact and data, not assumption and rumors.
- Demonstrate professional comportment and ethical behavior.
- Hold yourself and others accountable.
- Demonstrate respect of stakeholders, even when you disagree and even behind closed doors.
- Be trustworthy and fair.

### Discuss Your Image and Community Expectations

This resource is meant to help fire departments by providing a framework for discussion and action. The Image Task Force highly recommends you use this document to begin discussions about perception and image and sustaining the public trust with officers, firefighters/EMTs/paramedics and even recruits. Challenge them to look closely at what makes a success and where the department can improve and to develop ideas to move forward.

### Review Department Policies

In our profession, public image is everything. Our community members expect a higher standard of conduct and professionalism than they do from other occupations. How they perceive us in the media, in community meetings, on Facebook or when shopping in the grocery store all contribute to their confidence when we show up at an emergency to help them.

Successful departments have policies in place that speak to *intentional culture* (codes of conduct). These policies underscore desired behavior and encourage employees to look for threats in behavior that would impact a department's culture.

An annual review of department policies should be conducted to ensure they are up to date and relevant. A system to support department-wide training on new and updated policies



will ensure everyone is aware of both the expectations and the consequences for not meeting them.

Every department should have a social-media policy that discusses the department's expectations surrounding electronic communications. Because a firefighter is always a firefighter, the policy should include on- and off-duty expectations. The IAFC has a model policy available (see Appendix IX) but, given that this relatively new area of law is rapidly evolving, chiefs should seek the assistance of human resources staff and legal counsel as well.

### **Adopt Best Business Practices**

How these policies are *implemented* is another matter. Practices—what actually happens every day—need to be effective and efficient in order for policies to be truly successful; this is often the part of the equation the public scrutinizes.

Work within the department and with other jurisdiction resources to seek out ways to operate more efficiently, operate with greater consistency and improve accountability. While operational and administrative changes may be difficult for some, the long-term results for both your operations and your image will be positive.

Consider the following when looking to implement or create new business solutions:

- Data, data, data! Collect and analyze department data to both scan for trends and opportunities and lay a foundation for a potential change.
- Welcome ideas for improving operational and administrative practices from your entire staff. Those in the field and firehouse on a daily basis are in the best position to tell you what's working and what could be improved.
- Build relationships with local business leaders or other department agencies that have cut costs, increased productivity or implemented unique solutions. You may not be able to—or want to—do what they did, but a different perspective may get you thinking in new directions.
- Seek out what other chiefs are doing. Resources like [IAFC KnowledgeNet](#) allow you to connect with peers, ask questions, share SOP/SOGs and even work collaboratively on developing a new idea.
- Work with neighboring departments if you're all facing a common challenge.
- If implementing new practices, be sure to keep lines of communications with all stakeholders open from concept to implementation. The better everyone is informed, the less image pitfalls you'll face.
- Be sure to let people know when you've made an important change. Report new business practices to elected officials, the media and community members and report back periodically on the positive difference it's made.

### **Train and Listen to Future Leaders**

Younger leaders have a different way of looking at the world, which may provide both risks and benefits. By providing leadership development and mentoring opportunities and ways to solicit their feedback and perspective, you provide an opportunity to direct their energy and ideas within an existing framework.

Encourage emerging leaders to contribute to other aspects of the community. Not only do they become ambassadors of the department, but they may have opportunities to exercise their skills outside the department. This may lead to a broader perspective and new ideas, as well as offer a way to stem frustration that may come from working within a paramilitary context.

### **Develop Relationships with the Media**

Fire chiefs need to change the perspective that the media is their enemy.

Media can play a supportive role in community education and public relations. In fact, more often than not, being a trusted source of information for the media means you are seen as a trusted source of information for the public.

The media has been affected by cultural and economic changes too, and many have seen significant cutbacks in reporting staff. The fire service and media can have a symbiotic working relationship, sharing information, photos, video, etc., to make a story complete.

Some chiefs are concerned about overloading the media with routine or similar stories or general education messages, but they shouldn't be.

The fire service should make it a habit of being in front of the media at each and every opportunity. Don't wait for major incidents, and do invite them to the Thanksgiving Turkey Fryer demonstration for the fifth year in a row!

Developing a relationship with the media is a key step in demonstrating the value of the fire and emergency service to the community.

### **Proactively Demonstrate Value to the Community**

Negative images of the fire service take hold because there's no coordinated and proactive positive message to combat it. Enlisting the support of the media is critical, but so is a direct connection with the public and

## **Five Steps to Take Charge of Marketing Department Value**

Chief Kelvin Cochran of Atlanta, Ga., feels chiefs must take responsibility and take charge for marketing the value of their departments to its constituents.

**Predictable** – Establishing and balancing expectations of what services and programs the fire department provides in our all-hazards environment based on assessing community risks.

**Visible** – Being engaged in meaningful public interactions with neighborhood and community groups, business and civic organizations, festivals and other community events to take advantage of every opportunity to inform, educate and build relationships within the community.

**Accessible** – When citizens or business leaders need to get to the fire chief to have their needs met, the opportunity is available, and it doesn't take multiple emails or phone calls to make it happen.

**Approachable** – Demonstrating the personality and character (at all times) so stakeholders feel personally connected to the fire chief even if they have only seen them from a distance or on television. When approachability really works, citizens feel a true sense of ownership of their fire department and their fire chief.

**Accountable** – Establishing a reputation in the community that all questions—even scrutiny—are welcomed. It provides an opportunity for the fire chief to justify credible actions with data, science and stories, but also to take responsibility when operations aren't carried out to our standards and their expectations.

policymakers:

- Use public-attitude surveys to confirm the attributes of your department that are valued by your public. These can be completed via telephone polling, customer survey cards, online surveys, etc.
- Find low-cost ways to support public-education efforts like events, open houses, PSAs and online questions/discussions. Make restoring funds to public education a priority if your local budget outlook begins to improve.
- Develop relationships with policymakers based on facts, data and honest assessment. Invite policy makers to gain real-life perspective of the job by inviting them into stations or hosting hands-on training exercises.
- Make your department visible in the community by visiting schools, nursing homes, community events, etc. In a survey of IAFC members, one department reported that whenever they went grocery shopping, they left one staff member with the truck in the parking lot (or fire lane). The member was available to engage people, answer their questions or concerns and let kids check out the truck. Not only did it fill a public-education need, but it stopped questions and criticism about shopping on “taxpayer’s time.”
- Use social media to keep people informed of what the department is doing. Balance the information with substantive and practical/relevant information (“responding to an accident on \_\_\_\_ Road; right lane blocked”), real-time alerts and timely safety reminders. If more funding is available, consider developing a mobile app.
- Find ways to enlist community action and support. For example, the Fire Department CPR app<sup>vi</sup> links trained members of the public and cardiac victims by location to provide a critical bridge between the onset of a heart attack and the arrival of fire department personnel.
- Invite external constituents to participate in your strategic planning process. This gives you the opportunity to explain what the department does and how it operates, and it ensures the department plan reflects community feedback and priorities.

### **Develop a Social-Media Strategy**

It is not enough to *do* social media. As one marketing expert says, “The question is no longer if we should do social media; the question is: are we doing it right?” In most cases—even in the private sector—the answer is no.

Most organizations jump into the social-media world because everyone is doing it. They may or may not have the foresight to develop a policy surrounding it. But to be truly successful, they need to develop a strategy that puts them in a proactive position to drive the message rather than just react to what others are saying.

In addition to your communication needs, your social-media strategy should also take into account safety issues (such as ensuring the tools you use don’t interfere with response) and legal and regulatory issues (such as HIPAA).

Fire departments need to consider what their goals are, how they’ll engage, how they’ll monitor the environment and what content they’ll deliver. It can be overwhelming, but like most things, some time and effort spent on the front end will save you a lot of headaches later. It can also be a great way to engage tech-savvy staff and provide an opportunity for younger staff to reverse-mentor the veterans.

Facebook and other sites where people choose to join your discussion are great, but also look for opportunities to comment on what others are saying. For example, consider developing a strategy for commenting on newspaper articles that relate to your department. Think about when to comment and when not to, how you can use your comments to educate or praise others and who should be doing the commenting. Not only can this help get the story straight, but it may also help deter responders who feel the need to defend the department.

You should also strategize mobile apps. Apps are “cool” but fire departments need to stay focused on relevance and functionality—for both the department and the public.

If you feel you don’t have the expertise to develop your social-media presence in house, look for some local experts who can assist. Some departments have been successful partnering with local high schools, colleges and universities who find students to take on helping the department as an internship, class project or for a small stipend.

### **Focus on Labor-Management Relations**

Labor is the primary stakeholder in the discussion on image. Again, image is based on context and content, most of which is provided by the men and women on the streets. Buy-in by labor into any initiatives to repair, build or sustain a positive public image is critical.

The public doesn’t often make the distinction between labor and management. Unprofessionalism, arrogance and threats from one are surely an indictment on the whole department. There are some cases where the rift between labor and management is so great that the public understands the difference, but that may be an even worse scenario. Labor and management need to work as a team.

Chiefs need to ensure open, two-way communications. The images painted of leadership as politically motivated and tax-wasters often come from the union and the public’s misunderstanding of the issues.

Both labor and management need to be armed with real and valid data, solid budget information (both numbers and the explanations for them) and an understanding of where the other is coming from and how to get to the same place on the same page. Processes need to be put in place to take on and develop solutions to departmental challenges together.

### **Listen**

Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, listen.

It’s important to gather and analyze data and take on projects, like surveys, to solicit feedback. But facts and figures, and official complaints and compliments aren’t enough.

You must listen to and understand what is truly being said—by your members and the public—with your ears, your mind and your gut. In this way, you can better understand their needs, unearth their fears, empathize with their feelings and find allies to help you.

This can be a big task, but one where you don’t have to work alone. Company officers and chief officers should be looking out for potential problems in any event, but encourage positive or preventative feedback from others as well. What are personnel talking about at dinner? Does anyone seem truly excited about new technology or concept? What questions are your personnel getting while on calls that may indicate potential misunderstandings?

You can listen online as well. Work with PIOs or civilian staff members to monitor news, social-media sites and information related to the department through media-monitoring software or online products like [Google Alerts](#), [HootSuite](#) or [Kurrently](#). When reviewing media articles, be sure to also review comments left by readers; these can be frustrating but eye opening, in regard to what both the public and your personnel are feeling.

## **Appendix I:**

# **Primary Fire and Emergency Service Image Stakeholders**

### **Chief Officers**

Chief officers set the overall tone. They must determine and set the expectations as well as serve as role models for others. They need to be able to articulate the vision and chart the course for getting there.

### **Company Officers**

The frontline officers are the key to success. They provide a leadership model, encouragement and education. They can smooth the transition when new policies are enacted and ensure enforcement.

### **Public Information Officers (where they exist)**

PIOs offer a critical link between responders and the public and media. They can interpret fire-department policy and procedures into language others can both understand and appreciate. PIOs play a key role in how a department is perceived: Is it honest, responsive and engaging? Or is it secluded, argumentative and secretive?

### **Labor Unions**

Fire service locals play a critical role in protecting the rights and safety of firefighters. As leaders in the fire department, they're partners in determining how to move the department forward.

### **Elected Officials**

Elected officials need to be educated about both what we do and how we do it. Public safety is in their best interest, but so are the broader needs of the community. Provide them with data and keep them up to date on any image-related concerns or issues. Provide them with talking points so they know what to say if they get questions on these matters.

## **Appendix II:**

### **Preparing for Budget Discussions**

Budget discussions can often put fire service leaders on the defensive; preparation to ask and answer tough questions is critical.

Be prepared to offer data and discussion points that support your budget, offer best practices, ask questions about the larger public-safety or budget landscape and provide an opportunity for education for both the department and other community leaders.

#### **Response Times and Call Volume**

- Provide data and easy-to-understand analysis.
- Demonstrate complexity of how data changes during the time of day, season, a major incident, etc.
- Provide a translation, when you can, to financial impact (direct economic costs, property loss, costs if you need mutual aid, etc.).
- Be able to articulate how the data is collected.
- Explain how you use this data in your decision-making process.
- Provide examples from your community where a response time had a direct correlation on lives saved, injuries prevented and property saved.

#### **Operational Realities**

- Collect data and analyze community-risk assessments.
- Be prepared to explain how the assessment was prepared and how you use it in decision making.
- Provide facts rather than general scare-tactics; for example:
  - The size of a structure fire doubles every two minutes.
  - The average time for ignition to flashover in a home has been reduced to three minutes. A person inside a fire when the fire flashes over has no chance of surviving.
  - Irreversible brain damage occurs within six to eight minutes in a nonbreathing patient as a result of heart attack, stroke, asthma or drowning.
  - Data that demonstrates community losses in life, injury and economic value (property loss, job loss, etc.).
  - Specific tasks that need to be performed at common incidents and how staffing levels affect the ability to perform those tasks quickly and effectively.
- Ask elected officials what they consider an acceptable level of risk for the community and how they arrived at that calculation.



- Discuss how the fire-department mission and public expectations may be at odds with elected leaders' acceptable level of risk.
- Explain how investments in responder health and safety pay off in response capabilities and long-term cost savings.
- Discuss the physical demands for the job and the importance of health-care and retirement-related benefits.

### **Exploring Best Practices**

- Offer national standards and best practices that the department should be adhering too and how meeting those standards have a direct impact on your community.
- Explain how standards like NFPA and programs like CPSE's department accreditation work and how it contributes to continuous improvement.
- Educate city officials about the importance of comparing apples to apples when trading notes with their peers from other jurisdictions. Be prepared to offer comparisons to jurisdictions similar to your own size, capabilities, demographics and threat level.

### **Decision Accountability**

- Explain the importance of the community understanding the impact of cuts before they go into effect.
  - Discuss how cuts in service will be conveyed to the community and what role political leaders will take in explaining these cuts to the public.
- Ask what processes will be put in place for non-fire department personnel to be held accountable for human and financial losses that occur if their decisions knowingly increase response times and risks and decrease the fire department's intervention capability.
- Ask what kind of support you can expect from political leaders on programs and initiatives that have proven to improve safety, reduce costs and create revenue, but that are unpopular with voters or special interest groups; for example:
  - Residential fire-sprinkler ordinances
  - Building codes and construction changes
  - Inspection and business regulations
  - Cost-recovery programs

### **Learn more:**

[Engaging Your City Manager When Confronted with Public Safety Officer \(PSO\) and Budget Threats: Asking the Right Questions](#). This document contains questions, notes and teachable moments to help you make the most of your time with city officials. IAFC membership log-in required.

[ICMA's 20 Tough Questions to Ask Your Fire Chief—When Cutting Budgets](#)

## **Appendix III:**

# **Strategies for Working with Elected Officials**

The expectations of elected officials, in regard to the fire and emergency service, are often closely in line with community expectations. At the end of the day, you must make the right decision for the safety of the community and your team.

However, a better understanding of what elected officials are looking for can only help build a more positive relationship with them and provide a boost to public perception.

### **Community Success**

Public perception often puts all government officials—be they elected politicians, employees or volunteers—in the same boat. Constantly rowing in different directions only leads to frustration and anger on everyone’s part. The public wants to be reassured that the entire community team is working toward the same goal.

Elected officials want what you want: a safe and vibrant community. Unfortunately, we don’t always take the same path to get there. Talk to elected officials about what goals they want to see and then work on a way to get there that ensures the safety of the community and responders.

### **Accountability and Transparency**

Throughout this document, we’ve discussed these two concepts. Accountability and transparency are key words to describe the expectations of elected officials and citizens, so use these terms when you speak to the public and elected officials, and talk directly and frankly about how you can improve both.

Be sure to educate elected officials and others on matters that could create a perception of a lack of accountability or transparency. For example, explain how discipline matters are handled to ensure confidence in the process even if they don’t have the details.

No one like surprises or secrets, and the fire department is no exception. Take the lead on improving the department’s level of accountability and transparency, but also expect others to do the same.

### **Fiscal Responsibility**

Both elected officials and the public want to know that department funding is being put to good use. Demonstrating that the department is using money wisely, isn’t wasting resources and is actively seeking new ways to be more efficient is critical. Being a good steward of the budget helps elected officials help you, as it gives them both a business case and political cover in making the argument for more or stabilized department funding.

That isn’t to say that we must continuously do more with less (we can’t) or that everything we do can be done cheaper and faster (it also can’t). However, when we make an effort to find where we can be more efficient (and make it known that we did it!) we have more leverage to keep the resources we need.

## **Marketing**

Often times, we get arguments and criticism because elected officials and others don't know what our role in the community is. Many people don't understand the impact our work has unless they've been personally touched by the need for our services.

Again, we must bear a little of the responsibility here. Despite how vocal we can be when things go wrong, we much rather keep quiet when things go right. A little marketing of what we do and how we do it can go a long way. We must take every opportunity to educate elected officials and the public, not just about what we need but specifically why we need it.

When we're successful in securing benefits or resources that may raise some public concern—such as personnel raises when a local factory just laid off hundreds of workers—we should work with the jurisdiction to identify possible conflicts and create messaging that demonstrates the value to the entire community.

This isn't just an action item for officers and the PIO. Each responder should be trained on how to talk to the public about the positive work they do in a way that demonstrates confidence and pride, but not arrogance.

Remember that the fire department is a part of the broader community image. Elected officials want to see progressive, effective and efficient fire departments that contribute to the communities' draw as places to live and do business.

## **Look to the Future**

Just like us, many elected officials are trying to build a new normal. Also like us, they want more than just to get through the economic difficulties; they want to actually come out the other end stronger. Many are looking to technology and innovation as a means to do this as well as to attract (or retain) a solid tax base and build a positive reputation for the jurisdiction.

A good elected official will look to his or her department heads to help build the vision and make it a reality. This is an excellent opportunity for members of the fire and emergency service to exercise their skills as cool-under-pressure problem solvers.

## **Appendix IV:**

# **Benefits to Fire Departments of Researching Community Attitudes and Opinions**

*The following is provided by Campbell, DeLong Resources, Inc.*

Properly implemented, community research can help local fire departments:

- Ensure continued support by the community for the services and programs they provide.
- Ensure that specific programs have the desired impact.

### **Help ensure continued community support**

*Communities support their fire department when they believe it reflects the values of the community.* Not all communities have the same values. For example, while everyone is likely to rate rapid response to fire or medical emergencies as quite important, communities can have genuine differences in the degree to which they are likely to embrace personal responsibility for various prevention steps, changes in codes that can add to building costs but increase safety, or the cost/benefit tradeoffs associated with volunteer versus professional response, to name a few. Research can:

- Identify community values as they relate to the work of the fire department.
- Determine if there is alignment between what the fire department perceives as its mission and the benefits that the community wants the fire department to provide.
- Determine awareness by the community of the services provided by the fire department.
- Assess how well the community believes the fire department is performing on the fire-department characteristics they believe are important.

*Communities will support a money measure placed on the ballot by a fire department when they believe that:*

- The measure will fund an important community benefit.
- They can trust the department to use the funds wisely and efficiently.
- Their own financial outlook is sound enough to view the measure's cost as affordable.

Note that, while lack of trust in the efficiency of government and a weak economy can make passage of money measures more difficult, it is often a lack of the first item listed—belief in the community benefit—that causes voters to reject a ballot measure.

It's common for public agencies to have difficulty translating an agency's need into a community value. A simple example: Internally we may speak of the need for X additional firefighters. However, externally, to the public at large, the *number* of additional firefighters desired is not nearly as relevant as what the additions are expected to mean to the

community (such as shorter response time, expanded skill sets, higher preparedness, or other direct community benefits that the added firefighters should represent).

*Community research can help a fire department pass a money measure by:*

- Identifying the type of money measure the community will support.
- Assessing whether or not support for a specific measure is sufficient to warrant placing the measure on the ballot.
- Determining which benefits offered by the measure is most important to the community.
- Identifying how best to communicate the benefits of the measure to the community.
- Determining the reputation of the fire department for making wise use of tax dollars.
- Assessing how community members are feeling about the economy.

### **Help ensure the success of specific programs.**

Fire departments regularly implement programs desired to prevent fires and save lives when an emergency occurs. Ensuring these programs are as effective as possible can have a significant impact on the community. Community research can help by:

- Determining what the target community already knows, and doesn't know, about the area the program is designed to address.
- Assessing the perception of need for the program within the target community.
- Identifying what needs to happen in order for the target community to take action.
- Determining what words to use to ensure the target community understands what you are trying to tell them.
- Investigating the best means of communicating your message to the target community.
- After the program has been implemented, determining if the community is hearing the message.

Note that community research can both provide direct impact measurements and help inform and shape program approaches. Examples of the former would be measuring the change over time in the number of citizens who are aware of key steps for preventing an operational smoke alarm from sounding unintentionally or perhaps the incidence of citizens who are trained in CPR or have 72-hour kits in their homes. An example of the latter would be testing differently phrased descriptions for a new initiative or program to determine which ones spur the strongest intuitive beneficial understanding.

### **Implementing community research: Basic steps.**

With rare exception, it's best to contract with a public-opinion research firm when conducting community research. Skilled research firms will have a depth of experience in questionnaire design, know how to do true scientific sampling of population that is statistically projectable to the whole and have the analytical tools necessary to draw appropriate conclusions from the data collected. Popular shortcuts (such as sending a link to an intern-designed Survey Monkey questionnaire to any available email addresses the

department happens to have on file) don't provide data of scientific value and should not be relied on for important decision making. Key elements to keep in mind during this process:

- Before sending out an RFP, make a list of the *decisions* your organization wants to make based on what you learn from the research. Share this information, rather than a list of specific tasks you want a research firm to complete, with the firms you are considering.
- Talk with other fire departments that have conducted community research about their experience. Find out what firms they used and which firms they would recommend. If you are sending out an RFP, ask these firms to respond.
- Interview the firms you are considering. You should be looking for a firm your organization can establish a long-term relationship with because the more the firm learns about your organization, the greater value you should receive from the firm.
- There are typically several different approaches that can be taken to develop a research project that meets the needs of your organization. Talk to your consultant about your needs and listen to the advice of your consultant.
- Be prepared to spend a significant amount of time with your consultant at the beginning of the research process. Your input at this point in the process will ensure that the result meets your organization's and your community's needs. Remember that a good consulting relationship should be a partnership, with each party bringing a different set of expertise and each working to make sure the expertise of both are leveraged appropriately.
- Listen to what your community has to say and be prepared to adjust what you are doing to better meet their needs or to improve how you communicate with your community. Do not undertake a community research project unless you are willing to listen to the results and, when necessary, make changes.

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## **Appendix V:**

### **Community Meeting Do's and Don'ts**

**Do:** If possible, host periodic public meetings where the public can engage with just the fire department. These could be open to the public (like a fire department town hall), with small groups or community leaders, or getting on the agenda of a community organizations' regular meeting. Keeping people informed on an ongoing basis and allowing them to provide you feedback can build allies and stop problems before they begin.

**Don't:** Be reclusive, offer yourself up only when other agencies are also presenting, or wait until a budget battle or other problem is brewing.

**Do:** Do your homework on issues being discussed in the media, in online comments and at other meetings so you can welcome questions and have the answers ready. Anticipating questions also allows you to plan on how community concerns can be tied back to the message you want to send. If you don't know an answer, say so and make a note to get back to the person after the meeting (then do it.)

**Don't:** Prepare only your message and evade questions.

**Do:** Prepare your troops. Before a big meeting, work with union leaders to develop a set of talking points and expectations for behavior.

**Don't:** Throw your members to the wolves by firing them up and then not giving them the tools and resources to participate in a way that fosters a perception of professionalism.

**Do:** Take two or three people with you to large group or town hall-style meetings. Have one person take notes on questions and concerns raised. This person can also help with taking contact information for questions that need to be followed up and with answering questions before or after the meeting if you get bogged down. Have a second person (or two) mingle/sit with the public to be your ambassador, as well as eyes and ears to what's being said off the agenda.

**Don't:** Go alone and try to focus on discussion and note taking at the same time; you want to be able to give speakers your undivided attention. On the other hand, don't go in a large group and sit together. This feeds the perception of isolation and intimidation.

**Do:** Offer data from your community and demonstrate specific examples of your success and needs. Present data with objective analysis that demonstrates you've thought things through. Use plain language. While some will still argue with math and science, it's harder for reasonable people to be swayed by them if you present logical facts.



*Example: Last year, we responded to 560 cardiac-related EMS calls with an average response time of 4 minutes and a success rate of 92%. Our analysis shows that closing the Main Street station will increase EMS response times to 7 minutes in the Route 10 corridor and the Green Springs community, which includes the county's largest senior living facility. As irreversible brain damage in a nonbreathing person generally occurs in 6-8 minutes, we can only conclude that our ability to save lives will decrease.*

**Don't:** Use technical jargon that will confuse people or appear condescending. On the other end of the spectrum, don't use vague or accusatory terms.

*Example: We're doing the best we can with the resources you give us. If you close the Main Street station, you're condemning people to die!*

**Do:** Monitor the tone of discussion and adjust your voice and message accordingly to show strength, compassion and reason.

**Don't:** Shout at people, but don't be afraid to raise your voice in order to make a specific point or demonstrate passion. If people are shouting at you or you must shout to be heard, stay above the fray. Turn the tables by calmly asking for order to be restored before going on. Resist the urge to insult anyone.

## Appendix VI: Five Ways to Improve our Image

### Five Nongovernmental Community Groups to Reach Out To

- Chamber of Commerce
- Service Groups (Rotary, Kiwanis, Moose, etc.)
- Home Owner Association Boards (Local HOA management companies can help)
- Boys and Girls Clubs / YMCA leadership
- Parent-Teacher Associations

*Why PTA?* As the ultimate protectors of their children, parents have a lot in common with firefighters and EMTs. PTA organizations are a great way to talk with the 30-50 year-old demographic and typically host programs like school assemblies and career-fairs that can help with your safety education or marketing. There even may be a way to join forces on fundraising efforts, such as raffling off a family tour of a the fire station for them and a notice going out to all students about your monthly pancake breakfasts for you.

*Alternate:* A young-professionals' organization. As most of the list caters to either an older or younger demographic, it would benefit the department to find support with those in their 20s or early 30s. Do your homework first and make sure the organization is one geared toward networking and civic activities and not just a euphemism for a matchmaking organization.

### Five Phrases to Strike from Your Vocabulary

- "Just wait until your..." / "I hope your..." (house burns down, husband has a heart attack, kid is hit by a drunk driver, etc.)
- "Babies will die!"
- "Just doing my job."
- "We deserve..."
- "You will never understand..." / "You have no idea..."

*Why "You will never understand... / you have no idea..."?* First, it's true that most civilians will never understand our unique experiences, but we can never fully understand theirs either. Some, like those who served in the military and police, often do share an understanding of the danger and sacrifice we face. Others may have dangerous jobs or jobs where they hold lives in their hands, and they don't deserve the contempt that often goes with the phrase. Second, using this phrase allows us to shirk our responsibility to make people understand our situation as best we can.

### **Five Phrases to Add to Your Vocabulary**

- “Is there a way to do this...?” (cheaper, faster, safer, etc.)
- “The data / threat assessment shows...”
- “Thank you for... (recognizing how difficult this job is, your support, etc.) I love what I do.”
- “The community deserves...”
- “We do it that way because...”

### **Five Pieces of Data Never to Leave Home Without**

- Average response time
- Number of calls
- EMS success rates
- Average number of calls during the night
- Community property-loss figures

### **Five Cultural Changes to Work Toward**

- Prevention over traditional suppression
- Innovation
- Inclusiveness
- Improvements in diet and exercise
- Personal accountability

## **Appendix VII:**

### **Sample Questions to Help Educate Your Community**

- Why does the fire engine respond when a request is made for an ambulance for a person with a medical condition?
- Why does the fire department bring the fire engine or ambulance for just a simple inspection?
- When there is a small fire, why do so many fire engines respond?
- Why do you do grocery shopping while on duty? Why do you take the trucks?
- How often do I need to change the battery in my smoke detector?
- How expensive are residential sprinklers? Don't they ruin everything if they go off?
- Why do I have to dial 9-1-1? If I call the fire station directly, would it save time?
- Why do fire trucks and ambulances stop at stoplights? Why don't they just go through them? If they stop, why can't I go?
- What are the hours of the fire department? How do I contact them?
- What emergency services does the fire department provide?
- What assistance/education programs do you provide? How can I schedule an educational program?
- Why does the department hold fundraisers?
- What are the qualifications to become a firefighter?
- If I want to become a firefighter or EMT, what types of classes should I take in school?
- What do you do when not on a call? Why do firefighters get to sleep while they're getting paid to work?
- How do fee-for-service structures work?
- How do your shifts work? What are the benefits of working those hours?
- Do you offer ride-along programs? How can I learn more about the fire department?

## **Appendix XIII:**

### **Subscription Service Considerations**

Volunteer and combination departments that have subscription/fee-based services face unique challenges. While the structure is most often a community-wide decision, fire departments and responders pay the ultimate price for not responding to or assisting with structure fires if a particular property owner hasn't paid their annual subscription fee when they live in an area not paying taxes to support a local fire department.

An alternative public-relations nightmare results when the department does respond and subsequently sends the nonpaying property owner a bill for services after the event.

While not common, this type of situation grabs big headlines and creates big questions in the public's mind about all rural fire service providers, not just those in the effected community. As many communities try to stretch dollars further, there's a possibility that some elected officials may look to this model.

#### **Community Education**

Ongoing community education is vital in this environment. Post the information on your website or include in general public education materials. Make sure each member is educated in how the system works and can professionally discuss the issue. This should include basic information on how to pay the fees and other process points so department members are a positive resource for community members during the course of their routine business.

Make an effort to undertake, at least, an annual education campaign. Ideas may include a mailing to community members, a series of editorials in the newspaper, discussions on social media, a community webinar or podcast or local radio ads.

Make sure people are aware of the following:

- How much the fees are.
- Why the fees are what they are / what expenses the fire department has.
- What will happen if there's an incident where the fee hasn't been paid (be specific, but not threatening).
- Differences in response based on the incident, particularly the response protocols if a life is endangered.
- How billing works pre-incident and post-incident.
- Who to contact if they have questions or need to pay their fees.

It's easy to get caught up in the emergency-response view of this issue; broaden the discussion to other perspectives by including information, such as:

- Non-emergency services the fire department provides that is supported by the fee (e.g. school programs, CPR classes, inspections, etc.)

- An overview of local statutes or laws that established the system.
- Examples demonstrating how the personal decision not to pay can have a negative impact on neighboring or community assets and the broader community's emergency protection. Use real examples from your own or other communities; avoid creating worst-case scenarios or playing the devil's advocate.

### **Stay on the Offensive**

Too many departments end up on the defensive when things go bad and fingers start pointing. Take time to position yourself as a leader on ensuring the community understands the issues and shares the responsibility.

*Consider a community survey* about funding options that supports education of the issue and collects data on community expectations and values. This data can be used to enhance service to the community, defend budget decisions and protect the department during an incident. Conduct the survey every couple of years to keep up with community changes and support long-term data collection and analysis.

*Talk to politicians* about the pros and cons of subscription service individually to build relationships, keep an ongoing dialog with elected officials and position the department as a key stakeholder in this issue. Ideally, the fire chief should have a specifically identified and prepared individual(s) among community policymakers/elected leaders who will stand up and take ownership/responsibility for the system, both when it works and when it does not. Leverage your professional expertise to make it clear that you expect the fire department to be involved in any discussion relating to community fire protection.

*Make, at least, an annual public report* to governing boards, city councils, etc., about how the fire service functions in a fee-for-service environment. A regular report on the public record:

- Reinforces that the system is a community decision.
- Supports ongoing education of the public and elected officials.
- Gets elected officials' and possibly the public's comments on the public record.
- Provides an opportunity to demonstrate your success working within the system, thereby creating a public record of your successes.
- Supports shared accountability when the community-supported system has problems.

### **Explore Engaging Contractors to Help**

Responders should be focused on emergency prevention and response. Consider contracting with a third-party company to do billing and collections so firefighters and EMTs can focus on their job and not be equated with the image of bill collectors and collection officers. Third-party vendors also have the technological and human resources to ensure subscription information is kept up to date, which is critical to both emergency response and post-incident inquiries.

If the jurisdiction is hiring a third-party company for you, ensure that fire department personnel are involved in the process to ensure the company is capable of working within the emergency environment. Any selected vendor represents you and needs to be partners

in sustaining your positive, professional image. Look carefully at a vendor's customer service and collections operations to ensure they don't have a history of harassment complaints or an overabundance of lawsuits.

### **Review Policies and Procedures**

Make sure you have policies in place that ensure your team is positioned to react when life-safety is a concern, but mitigate the often-heard perception that responders are, "sitting around watching the house burn."

Review after-action reports or conduct post-incident hot-washes to make sure policies are effective in the field and learn if any adjustments can be made. For example, are there different ways to monitor property fires after initial response? Can you minimize the number of responders on site while keeping enough to ensure their safety if they need to take action? Can you work with law enforcement or other partners to keep the scene clear? Are there different models for staging vehicles close by but not overtly visible?

No matter what plans you make, always keep both responder and community safety at the forefront.

### **Not in a fee-for-service community? Leave comment to the experts.**

Again, when a public relations event unfolds in a fee-for-service community, often the whole fire and emergency service industry becomes suspect. The temptation for departments outside the community is to speak out quickly to either distance or defend ourselves. But we can do more harm than good for the service when speak to the media without the full facts about the event or how the system works.

Most disturbing are online posts to media stories, many identifying themselves as responders, which are quick to condemn victims who have lost everything or to throw their brothers and sisters under the bus.

If you don't have the first-hand knowledge of a situation, it's OK to tell the media you don't have the expertise on this particular service model to speak to the incident on the record. Stress the fact that each community must decide their own level of fire service protection and that each community varies. Use it as an opportunity to talk to the local press about how your community operates, and if you can, refer them to another resource who may know more about this service model.

## **Appendix IX:**

### **Additional Tools and Resources**

#### **IAFC KnowledgeNet: A Living, Peer-to-Peer Toolkit**

[IAFC KnowledgeNet](#) is a forum for information sharing and resource building between IAFC members. IAFC members can post questions, get advice from other members, search the resources library and share successful models and SOPs.

There are many resources applicable to the image issue throughout the site, but the IAFC Image Task Force has developed a [Positive Public Image Community](#) where you can post your own ideas and share resources that contribute to the further development of this toolkit.

#### **Topical Tools and Resources**

##### *Community Engagement and Programming*

- Sample editorial article: [How Your Fire Department Works](#)
- Sample publication: [Fairfax County \(Va.\) Fire and Rescue At Your Service](#)
- Sample program: [Fairfax City \(Va.\) Citizens Fire Academy](#)
- [Building Community, Building Resources](#), *IAFC On Scene*, October 2012
- VCOS Silver Ribbon Report: [Guidelines and Best Practices for a Successful Youth Fire Service Program](#) (pdf)

##### *Economy and Budget*

- [Managing Fire & EMS in Tough Economic Times](#) (pdf)
- [Engaging Your City Manager When Confronted with Public Safety Officer \(PSO\) and Budget Threats: Asking the Right Questions](#) (pdf) IAFC membership log-in required.
- [ICMA's 20 Tough Questions to Ask Your Fire Chief—When Cutting Budgets](#)

##### *IAFC Position Statements*

- [No Tolerance for Discriminatory Behavior in the Fire and Emergency Service](#) (pdf)
- [Human Relations and Inclusiveness](#) (pdf)
- [Drug and Alcohol-Free Awareness](#) (pdf)
- [Individuals' Rights to Serve Their Communities in Multiple Capacities](#) (pdf)
- [Labor-Management Initiative Guiding Principles](#) (pdf)
- IAFC [Code of Ethics For Fire Chiefs](#) (pdf)



- [National Code of Conduct for Firefighters](#)

#### *Labor Management Resources*

- [IAFC-IAFF Labor Management Initiative Program](#)

#### *National Statistics*

- [U.S. Fire Administration](#)

#### *Pensions*

- [Article: The Future of Public Pensions, \*Contingencies Magazine\*](#) (pdf)
- [The Field Poll: Plurality of Voters Sees Public Pensions As Too Generous, December 2011](#) (pdf)

#### *Reputation Management*

- Cumberland Valley Volunteer Firemen's Association [Fire Service Reputation Management White Paper](#)

#### *Sample Department and Personnel SOP*

- [Phoenix Fire Professional Standards](#) (pdf)
- [Oath of Office: Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue](#) (pdf)
- [Organizational Principles and Values: Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue](#) (pdf)
- [Employee Handbook: Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue SOG](#) (pdf)
- [Grooming Standards: Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue SOG](#) (pdf)
- [News Media: Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue SOG](#) (pdf)
- [Political Activities: Tualatin Valley Fire & Rescue SOG](#) (pdf)

#### *Social-Media Education*

- [Webinar: Social Media in the Fire Service](#)
- [Model Fire and EMS Department Social Media Policy](#) (pdf)
- [OpsNetlink Archive: Social Networking Dossier](#) (pdf)

#### *Volunteer Department Management*

- VCOS Blue Ribbon Report: [Preserving and Improving the Future of the Volunteer Fire Service](#) (pdf)

## **Additional IAFC Resources**

The [IAFC website](#) and IAFC components offer a wealth of information, tools and resources on addressing department challenges, managing the budget and establishing model practices. Below are a few starting points.

- [Administration Resources](#) cover a variety of topics surrounding department management, leadership and human resources.
- [Operations Resources](#) offers tools and information on a range of response capabilities, fire prevention and responder safety.
- [IAFC Divisions](#) and [IAFC Sections](#) offer a number of resources specific to their region or topical interest.

[VCOS Vision Project](#) The Volunteer and Combination Officers Section Vision Project is building a framework for the future of the volunteer fire and emergency service community in which departments and communities can thrive. In addition to operational aspects of the department, the project includes topical discussions on community engagement and reputation management.

[VCOS Ribbon Reports](#) While several specific Ribbon Reports are cited above due to their direct relevance to image discussion, the Ribbon Report series offers comprehensive guidance on best practices in volunteer and combination department resources:

- [Leading and Managing EMS in Volunteer and Combination Fire Departments](#) (pdf)
- [Leading the Transition in Volunteer and Combination Fire Departments](#) (pdf)
- [Keeping the Lights on, the Trucks Running and the Volunteers Responding](#) (pdf)

## **Appendix X:**

# **IAFC Fire and Emergency Image Task Force**

### **Mission Statement**

The mission of the task force is to develop a positive fire and emergency service image message, along with the necessary tools to assist local fire chiefs in preventing, responding to or repairing damage done by community anger directed at the purpose, value or character of the fire service in their communities.

### **Vision**

Fire service professionals at the local, state and national level will be able to articulate and act on a positive and constructive message about the value of services provided by the fire department. This message will be delivered through educational programming offered by the IAFC to fire chiefs.

### **Members**

Chief Steve Westermann, Chair  
Central Jackson County (Mo.) Fire Protection  
District

Mr. Mike Brooks  
CNN Headline News (Ga.)

Battalion Chief Ted Collas  
Colorado Springs (Colo.) Fire Dept

Chief Hugo Esparza, Ret.  
Plano (Tex.) Fire Dept

Karen Eubanks, PIO  
Tualatin Valley (Ore.) Fire & Rescue

Chief Joanne Hayes-White  
San Francisco (Calif.) Fire Dept

Chief Jon Holcombe, Ret.  
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Chief Bob Khan  
Phoenix (Ariz.) Fire Dept

Assistant Chief Kara Kalkbrenner  
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IAFC Volunteer and Combination Officers Section's and VCOS Reputation Management Working Group

# Endnotes

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<sup>i</sup> [GfK Custom Research](#)

<sup>ii</sup> [National Census of Fatal Occupational Injuries in 2011](#)

<sup>iii</sup> Ng, Schweitzer, Lyons. [New Generation, Great Expectations: A Field Study of the Millennial Generation](#), *Journal of Business and Psychology*, June 2010, Volume 25, Issue 2, pp 281-292; and Schawbe, [Millennials vs. Baby Boomers: Who Would You Rather Hire?](#) *Time Magazine*, March 29, 2012.

<sup>iv</sup> [Crash Photos on Facebook Inspire New Law](#), Ocean City Patch, August 8, 2012

<sup>v</sup> [IAFC Webinar: Social media in the fire service](#)

<sup>vi</sup> [Fire Department CPR app](#)