



DAVID GREENE

# Don't depress - "de" press

Shortly after shift change, as acting Battalion Chief on Thanksgiving morning of 2005, a local television station called inquiring about a house fire that had just occurred hours prior. The reporter asked excitedly, "Did you have a fire last night at

123 Main Street?" I replied, "Yes." The reporter immediately snapped off eagerly, "Did anyone die?" To which I responded in a monotone voice, just as quickly, "No." The reporter sighed while letting out a dejected, sad, "Oh," followed by a slightly

more cheery, "Well, have a good Thanksgiving."

Although we tend to stereotype media organizations, they all have a definitive role. That role is to distribute the news to members of society. This was first accomplished in an organized manner in print. From 59 BC in Rome, the Acta Diurna (Daily Events), which Julius Caesar ordered posted throughout the city, to the Boston News-Letter, the first continuously published newspaper in early America (1704), printed news has survived throughout the millennia and continues today with daily prints in every major city in the United States. Society's thirst for quicker information led to the world's first remote television news broadcast which occurred in Albany, NY in August 1928. Today, the Internet, instant messaging, smart phones, etc. step up the speed at which information can be available to consumers. Whether you love or hate the media, it plays a very real role in modern day hazardous materials incidents. The bigger the incident, the more media outlets will attend.

Understanding what the media desires, will help you and your department to build a better working relationship.

Keep in mind that the media is similar to our average customer, which is to say they know nothing about what we do tactically to solve the problem. Let's use an example in which our department is on scene of an unknown chemical release with an unaccounted worker. The media will be looking to answer six basic questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How?

Understand that it is neither wise nor productive to scream at the media, "No comment!" If they are at our incident scene, they are going to report something. So we have to answer a very simple question; would we prefer the public receive accurate information on our operations or would we prefer that the media create a story based on a lack of information from us?

If we have just screamed at them that they will get no information from us, what do you suppose they will report when they see the two firefighters who have just cleared pre-entry medical monitoring and are sitting down pre-hydrating while someone else picks out their suits and boots?

It's very possible that the video they take of those two firefighters will be the lead story at six o'clock. The heading or bullet may be that our fire department's lack of action during a chemical leak led to that missing person being injured or killed.

Remember, the media doesn't understand what we do tactically to solve the problem. Moreover, it is going to be difficult to recruit the media to distribute information on evacuations or areas to avoid if we just finished telling them to get lost with a "no comment."

Second, remember that while we are answering the media's six basic questions, it is acceptable to say, "I don't know." Let's face it, sometimes we don't. Keep in mind that the blood that media organizations require to survive is information. With that being the case, acknowledging that we don't know will always

be better than taking a guess or providing what may be inaccurate information.

Information is what they do, and they will make us pay later for any misinformation we give them today. Given our scenario above, we could prepare a media briefing that consists of the following: "At 3:00 p.m. (when), our fire department (who) responded to 123 Main Highway (where) which is the ABC Chemical Company (who) for a chemical release (what). Although we have not yet ascertained (we don't know) why the leak began (why), we are currently trying to identify the material involved and the source of the leak by sending hazardous materials technicians in chemical protective suits into the hazard area (how). We also are attempting to locate an employee who is missing."

We could expect to be questioned on the current status of the missing employee, the types of chemicals stored at the ABC Chemical Company, and any risks to the public. Although we may "not know" the status of the missing employee, we could probably provide some information regarding the on-site chemicals and risks to the public and then use the media to inform the public to avoid the immediate area as well as any additional public protective actions that need to occur, such as sheltering in place and/or evacuations.

After the briefing, we will likely tell the media that the next briefing will occur within a specified time. Insure that when that time arrives, that we have the public information officer (PIO) back in front of the media. Otherwise, they will be creating updates for the public without accurate information that could be provided by our department.

Third, when designating a public information officer, it is wise to have someone who is comfortable speaking in front of groups. Public education officers, training officers, and other personnel who have experience in dealing with the media are all good choices. As the incident progresses, there may be more than one individual briefing the media. We may provide information on haz-

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ardous materials mitigation, numbers of injured persons that have been treated and transported, and of course, fire suppression. However, a member of law enforcement will need to address questions or provide information regarding investigation of crimes that are suspected to have occurred.

Federal agencies such as the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) or National Transportation and Safety Board (NTSB) may also need to address questions or provide information on the investigation of the events leading up to the incident. In a briefing such as this, it is ideal that a representative from each agency inform the media on their specific role in the incident. This may also require the same or more coordination among all responding agencies and disciplines at the public information level, than what incident operations require at the task level. It is difficult to impossible for us to answer questions surrounding activities that are being coordinated by law enforcement. Furthermore, by not commenting on the sensitive law enforcement issues, we can avoid giving recommendations for improvement to anyone out there that wants to hurt or kill us, such as the cases surrounding the improved placement of secondary devices at explosive incidents in the mid-1990s.

When designating a PIO for our activities, public education officers are good choices because they are already well versed in taking complex issues and presenting them in a format that is understandable to large groups with a limited knowledge of those issues. Training officers also make good public information officers because they are good at preparing information and presenting it to those with limited or no knowledge of the subject. Specific questions about issues that are not directly related to our operations should be referred to the appropriate agency's public information officer or representative, who hopefully will also be available during media briefings.

Our case study comes from the United States Fire Administration Technical Report Series #163 and addresses the chemical fire that our brothers and sisters in Apex, North Carolina effectively handled in 2006. The industry addressed in the report conducted collection, pro-

cessing and repackaging of industrial waste for transport and disposal. The daily inventory of chemicals varied, so the company was not subject to the Tier II reporting

reported as a chlorine odor near the facility. On arrival of the first-in engine, a large vapor cloud was visible. The Apex Fire Department quickly initiated a second alarm

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requirements outlined by the Comprehensive Environmental Response, Compensation, and Liability Act (CERCLA – the original superfund) or Superfund Amendment and Reauthorization Act (SARA Title III). The incident was initially

and began public protective actions, which ultimately involved 17,000 people. Shortly into the incident, fire vented from the building's roof, State and Federal resources were

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## Building media relations

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requested and a joint information center (JIC) was established near the incident command post. According to the report, "Media briefings initially were held on the hour, and the media was credited with assisting in providing essential emergency public information regarding hazards, evacuation orders, and evacuation routes."

Apex Fire Department was credited as having a very well-defined plan that was practiced routinely. Additionally, the study team found that the fire chief, in a very proactive approach, required the shift commander to complete an I-204 NIMS form at the beginning of every shift. By completing the form before the incident even occurred, it saved time during the development of the incident action plan.

Apex was also praised for their interagency coordination, adaptation to frequently changing conditions, a well planned evacuation, effective training, excellent use of incident action plans, and efficient/effective tactical decisions. Above all, the study team found that as the incident progressed, Apex used a very effective public information function. The study states that, "...placing the media in an area near the Incident Command staff was essential in maintaining a good working relationship with the press. Additionally, holding hourly media updates and always reporting at least one new topic or item kept news resources busy and averted attempts at freelancing" (by the media). "Since the media were occupied with reporting the official updates, they were less inclined to seek out stories from unauthorized sources. This mechanism also provided citizens with current and accurate information and kept them from wandering into the incident area for personal curiosity." The only recommendation for improvement in this area was that state and federal agencies should have used the public information officer set up by the local agencies. Although the responsibility for this improvement ultimately lies with each state and federal agency, it is worth remembering for the future that we inform each outside agency (as they arrive) that the public information function is already filled and to coordinate information releases with the established public information officer.

Imagine for a moment if Apex would have initially told the press, "No comment!" Imagine also if they would have initially reported to the press that no one was at risk. This would have complicated and possibly even prevented the use of the media, as the incident progressed, to assist in the evacuation of the citizens in the area. Instead, Apex Fire Department utilized the media effectively to properly protect its citizens. They distributed accurate information, in a timely manner, and by way of action, controlled the information that their citizens received. This was cited several times in the report as having a positive effect on the outcome. In fact, the media was credited with the likely saving of many lives during the incident by the effective distribution of information. Apex, in fact, was the organization that likely saved many lives, by working efficiently with the media to distribute accurate and appropriate information to its citizens. We should strive to be as efficient during our interactions with the media.

Be safe and do good.

*David Greene has more than 15 years experience in the fire service industry and is currently assistant chief with Colleton County (S.C.) Fire-Rescue. He holds a bachelor's degree from the College of Charleston and an associates degree in Fire Science. He is also an adjunct instructor for the South Carolina Fire Academy. He frequently teaches auto extrication, hazardous materials technician, emergency vehicle driving, pump operations and basic firefighting courses. Greene is a nationally registered paramedic, a resident fire marshal and a certified fire and explosion investigator through the National Association of Fire Investigators. He is also a student of the Executive Fire Officer program at the National Fire Academy. He can be reached at dagreene@lowcountry.com.*