



OFF-CAMPUS

By Tim Knisely

May 2019

Have a Media Action Plan:

A news anchor once told my staff that we should send out every news story, no matter how minor or trivial. And, if it is a slow news day – it just might make the list for follow up. And, they were right! Doing so, we realized that the news media might need some introduction or education about what the fire service actually does. We have all heard news stories about using ‘cherry pickers’ to squirt water on the fire, that just make us cringe. So, a little effort goes a long way.

This also applies when we discuss what happens during a fire, and what didn’t happen. For example – while the FD was clearing an apartment fire that was held in check by a sprinkler, the news crew arrived and were told what happened. The producer said ‘this is a non-story, so we’re going to leave.’ So, we then explained in detail about how the sprinkler activated and controlled the fire, while the alarm system alerted the building’s occupants; added how much damage was prevented – even though the water from the sprinkler was present. And, that all tenants were permitted to stay in the building that day. The producer then changed his mind, as they realized this was a major fire event – even though damage was minimal.

You can also use the media to raise awareness to known hazards, vulnerabilities or risks that we face based on the occupancy types. At times, this can be used to also raise awareness of



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inaction by those that may oppose the enforcement of codes and standards, both with new and existing buildings.

Following the tragic fire at Chapel Hill's Phi Gamma Delta fraternity, Chief Dan Jones used the shock and heart break of losing five students as time to educate others. Chief Jones called this his 'Teachable Moment' as decision makers didn't listen to his warnings before. Chief Jones tried to get sprinklers installed in fraternities prior to the 1996 Mother's Day fire based on the risks these buildings pose. But, like many fire officials have heard, Jones was told 'he was over reacting' or that 'it would cost too much money'. So, he was prepared. He had a plan ready, knowing eventually he would need to utilize it.

The morning of the Chapel Hill fire, smoke was still rising from the shell of the fraternity house. The media was present. Decision makers were now interested in fire safety. National news markets had picked up the fire story and word was spreading quickly, even before social media was a factor. Parents would be demanding answers, both for current students and prospective students. Unfortunately, Chief Jones had his teachable moment – but was it too late?

Some teachable moments are used to point fingers and report what could have been prevented. However, better results often come from using the event as an opportunity to educate others, so future incidents can be prevented. You need to make the decision at the



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time of your event to determine what message you are trying to get to the public. Sometimes, we are forced to be political. Some choose to ignore politics and say – or do what is right. You may only know the right answer when the incident occurs.

So, how do you develop a plan for your media? Start with knowing who the media players are. Have a contact list of names, phone numbers, emails and even the fax numbers. Maybe host a Media Day at your office. Invite them to meet with you and your staff for coffee or lunch. Give them a tour of the fire station and see apparatus in action. Let them know what your office does as AHJ or inspections. And, how everyone can work together. Start with having news stories about fire prevention success stories or safety briefings before an incident during regular communications. Having news stories available at their fingertips for the slow day works exactly as I was told. And, someone needs to be available for the last minute interview. Many of these calls may come at 3:00 PM for the 5:00 PM broadcast.

Also be prepared for the events that occur in another community, even another state or country. The news media now has a resource to call and get some details. They already have a relationship and some trust built that they can rely on you or your staff to assist. More importantly, this relationship will pay off when a 'Teachable Moment' occurs in your community. Take advantage of the good moments, and hopefully avoid the others.



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