A Forward-Thinking Strategy

Want to regain political clout & the public’s support? Quit whining, stop worrying & focus on the customer.

BY OTTO HUBER

Many describe what the fire service is going through as everything from a haircut to a bath to a downright gutting. Well if it’s a haircut, then it’s certainly compatible with a boot camp Marine’s razor cut. If it’s a bath, it’s on par with the fire hose washdown’s used on the prisoners of Alcatraz. If it’s a gutting they were after, they should get a job at Seattle’s famous fish market. If things continue in this direction, when they finish with us, we could end up looking like something from a terrifying slasher movie.

All across the country, fire-service leaders and organizations have been picketing city hall, marching on the state capitol and telling Mrs. Smith how unsafe she and her baby will be in the very near future due to budget cuts. Ten years ago, these efforts would have inspired Mrs. Smith and her neighbors to storm city hall and stop this assault on their public-safety services. But in recent years, when our governments announced they were cutting back, laying off, browning out and going out of business, Mrs. Smith and her neighbors have been conspicuously missing in action. As we look around the room at the council chambers in Our Town, USA, it’s obvious the only folks present are our own members, their families and a few taxpayers shamed into showing up. Even then, most attendees are reluctant to step up to the microphone. After these council meetings, when you and your crew return to the firehouse, you may wonder, “What the hell just happened?” Some of your brethren might proclaim, “Mrs. Smith! How you could have forsaken us after all we have done for you? Don’t you know we are your heroes?”

I recently saw a sign endorsing a fire levy that read, “Vote Yes for Your Heroes! I had several neighbors ask me, “Don’t you think that is a little pompous?” If my own neighbors felt that way, I can assume a lot of other voters did, as well. Low and behold, the levy failed. Does this mean our citizens don’t appreciate us? Does this mean they don’t value our service? For the most part, the answer is no. But one thing I know about the electorate is that the best way to lose their support is to confuse them. I am not saying that calling ourselves heroes is confusing them. What I am saying is some of our “non-heroic” actions might be sending a mixed message.

This well-known Paul Combs illustration, circa 2005, still rings true today. 2012’s deeper budget cuts require that we stay out of the news for behaving badly.
First, The Bad News
You cannot read a blog, open a newspaper or listen to the evening news without hearing about outrageous behavior among our ranks. Fat retirements, overtime disproportionate to the private sector, pay scales well above the median, abuse of sick time and retirement buyouts are just part of the story. Although in many cases, these financial figures are staggering, it all pales in comparison to the unlawful and egregious actions of some of our own. This speaks to the heart of the problem—confusing Mrs. Smith. Today, she sees us as trusted champions who would risk our lives to save hers. Then tonight on the news she hears about us acting like greedy, oversexed, ill-behaved apes. (Before you get your panties in a bunch and send the fifth battalion to my house for overhaul, I realize there are two sides to every story and that some of these issues are extorted, exaggerated and often downright false.)

At a leadership retreat last year, a good friend of mine said, “I have seen the enemy, and it is us.” He made this statement right after a news flash popped up on my iPhone: “Local firefighters out of the community playing ball. Who is protecting the residents?” This story broke in the middle of the worst economy we have seen in decades, and some people (including our Mrs. Smith and all her friends, neighbors and family) are losing everything. I know these firefighters were staying fit as suggested in NFPA 1500; they had the rigs with them so they could respond quickly, and they were not that far from their first-due area. But the news does not report this information, nor does Mrs. Smith understand it or even want to hear it.

At the same retreat, another well-respected friend who lives in the mountains where animals eat people on a regular basis stated simply, “Don’t poke the bear.” When you see a grizzly, don’t look the bear in the eyes and slowly back away. Considering the actions of some of our members and how we react to the negative press, we are undoubtedly poking the bear.

Since our brothers and sisters lost their lives on Sept. 11, 2001, we have had a bright spotlight shined upon us. We have confused voters—voters focused on self-preservation above all else, voters focused on feeding their young and saving their homes. Perhaps they believe local government spending stands in the way of their success and worsens their blight. Much like the grizzly trying to protect its territory and its cubs, they, too, will strike back when poked. This is why, in my opinion, we can’t afford to have our service splashed on the front page with stories of our ill-advised actions, our ill-gotten gains & our feelings of entitlement.

Political Triage
So how do we get out of this mess? First, we stop the bleeding and stabilize. That might mean taking some cuts, reducing our numbers, rethinking our strategy and focusing on living to fight another day. This does not mean retreat. We should hold our ground where we can, but we must realize that sometimes you have to lose a lot before you can gain a lot. We cannot focus on tomorrow while we are fighting for our life today.

Just because we have taken a heavy blow does not mean our mission or our values have changed. Our next step is to regroup around those values and our mission and ensure they still illustrate the organization’s desires and focus.

Next, we must focus on the customer. Do our visions, values and mission...
statement align with Mrs. Smith’s expectations? For us to sell our wares to our customers, we must first determine if they have a need for those wares and what they are willing to spend to fulfill their expectations. In one of Paul Combs’ fire-service cartoons, shown on pg. 6, a chief is depicted with a mountain of responsibilities and tasks placed on his back—everything from RIT to suppression to EMS. We must stop the notion that we can be everything to everybody, especially if the community is not willing to fund it. We must educate our customers on what resources it takes to accomplish the necessary tasks, and we must stop selling our firefighters as jack-of-all-trades super heroes. We have done a yeoman’s job of handling these tasks in the past, but look at where it has gotten us. We should use tools such as performance measures, statistics and facts to illustrate what it takes to do our job. The days of selling our value simply by playing on peoples’ emotions is over.

We should explain our service in a way our customers understand. Mrs. Smith doesn’t want to know about NFPA or ISO standards. If we cannot get her attention and keep it, our message is lost. In today’s fast-paced world of iPhones, iPads and apps, it’s challenging to get an audience’s attention, let alone keep it long enough to make a sale. What the customer does understand is getting more for paying a bit more. Example: For $1, you can supersize your meal at almost any burger joint. How can we use that to our benefit? Educate our customers on “super sizing” the fire department. If you want EMS in 5 minutes, it will cost you a $1 million levy. If you want fire suppression in 6 minutes, it costs $2 million. If you want to supersize it and get us to your home in time to make a difference, then you need to add an additional $3 million. Results from customer feedback and eventually at the polls will be a clear indication of our customers’ expectations. After all, the burger joint doesn’t give you the supersize for free just because they can. You have to pay for it.

Our customers are busy managing their lives. They go full speed ahead from morning to night caring for their jobs, their children and their social lives. If we want their attention, we must bring our message to where they live: Starbucks, the gym, the school, the football field and the Internet. (Yes, the same Internet we discipline our folks for using while on duty.) Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn—these offer the best opportunity to get our message across.

Many businesses across this country have been down and have made incredible recoveries. They did it by changing strategies, refreshing their ideas and regaining their market share. The American fire service can do the same. The only thing holding us back is us. We have the best work force in the nation, selling the best service in the nation. Let’s stop whining, stop poking the bear and regain our market share.

Click this link! Tell Chief Huber what you think about this topic.

Chief Otto Huber has served his entire 32-year fire career with the Loveland-Symmes Fire Department, an ISO 2, CAAS accredited agency in southwest Ohio. Chief Huber as been chief of department for the past eight years and chief of operations for 17 years prior. He is a graduate of the Ohio Fire Executive Program Class 7 Instructed at the Ohio State University Fisher College of Business and is a member of the board of directors for the Clermont County Fire Chiefs.
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Good Luck

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