Notes From Social Media Panel at Baltimore Fire Expo

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On the last day of last month's Firehouse Expo in Baltimore, a panel discussion was conducted titled Social Media: An Opportunity, a Curse, or Both? This was one of the many conference sessions. The participants were:

- Bill Delaney, Program Manager, Community Safety Education, Division of Community Risk Reduction Services, Montgomery County Fire & Rescue (moderator)
- Curt Varone, Director, Public Fire Protection Division, NFPA. He's also an attorney and blogger at firelawblog.com.
- Pete Piringer, Chief Spokesperson and PIO, District of Columbia Fire and EMS Department .
- Dave Statter, Owner, STATter911 Communications, including the familiar and popular statter911.com.

The description of the discussion as advertised was:

> Join us for an interactive, round table discussion on a topic that is ever changing, evolving, and not without controversy and concern! We will discuss how social media can and is being used by fire departments to communicate with the public, the media, and internally while also highlighting potential pothole's and legal issues to avoid.

The session included a lengthy period of questions and answers. The audience was very interested. Here are some pictures. My notes are below, incomplete as they are. But there's plenty to think about, or get some good discussions going. **Disclaimer**: Most of these notes are paraphrased from direct quotes. My apologies for unintended misrepresentation. And failing to note exactly who was speaking when, at all times. All errors and inaccuracies should be attributed to Yours Truly.

> Piringer: DCFD uses Twitter to communicate public information. We have several thousand followers. Among the followers are members of the media. Using Twitter has reduced calls to our office [by media] to nearly nothing.

> Varone: Have to rewrite the rules [of using social media] every six months [because of changing technology and use].

> Statter: No longer do departments need [public safety-based] reporters like myself to tell their story. They can tell their own story. For years, you've complained about news and bias in the news. Now [with social media tools] you can do it [the reporting] yourself. The tools are there for you.

> Panel Speaker: Seems like individual firefighters are getting in trouble in the press more than individual departments [these days].

> Panel Speaker: One trend is the "look at me" generation, the younger, techno-saavy generation, and how they are constantly calling attention to themselves.

> Statter: Need not just social media policies, but also social media code of ethics.

> Statter: [The younger generation's propensity for] Telling all and showing all can cause conflicts with the mission and duties and responsibilities of emergency services.

> Panel Speaker: Biggest issue is cameras. Everyone has one. Departments are now having to learn and teach their members how to reach to cameras on scene.

> Panel Speaker: Social media can be used to send information and intelligence within an organization, such as from the field to the command post.

> Panel Speaker: Who should be training in social media [usage and ethics]? Recruits? Everyone in the department?

> Panel Speaker: When we shoot something [photo, video], should we post it? Should it be vetted first?

> Statter: If an member is injured or killed in the line of duty, should it be talked about on Facebook before an official release of the name? What happens when family members on Facebook read "prayers for _____" before they've been told officially that their mother/father/brother/sister/etc. was injured or killed.

Delany: [Tells story of how a college-aged member of his department was pursued by Sony Music, for illegal music file sharing.] Context of story is social media conduct, and behavior when you're younger might impact your future career prospects.

Piringer: [Just like on the fireground] Something you do in a split-second decision can affect you for years later.

Verone: How to avoid a lawsuit, don't say anything to anyone. If you don't want to read it in the Washington Post, don't say it, goes the old saying.

Panel Speaker: Silly things happening around the firehouse-- same things as decades ago-- are now being filmed and posted to YouTube.

Statter: Social media monitoring is important. Monitor social media channels during a major incident, so you can respond to issues raised, questions asked, etc.

Delaney: [Story told of a MCFRS member who built a blog as a platform to gripe about the department. He opened an account, and "friended" media members. This is the same behavior as decades past-- such as picket signs-- but much faster and farther reaching.]

Panel Speaker: [Story told of someone trying to get hired by a fire department. The person was undergoing the hiring process, but was also active in social media. And their representation of themselves was not as positive as might be desired. So the person's postings were shown to the recruiter, and influenced the hiring outcome.]

Panel Speaker: More and more recruiters are checking/sampling social media, much as criminal background checks have been traditionally done.

Varone: Two policies recommended. Digital imagery, and social media [usage]. Then have a code of ethics, which doesn't necessarily have to be a policy. But discusses and demonstrates the boundaries of right and wrong.

Legeros: [Asks question about regional policies and ethics, with regard to, say, Facebook discussions of duty deaths. When the firefighters in a particular area all know each other, and are quick to comment on Facebook, for example, "prayers for the _____ family." The answer, the panel notes, is perhaps regional training on ethics and usage.]

Varone: Talks about the liability of members taking photos at incidents, where those photos are used as evidence in court cases. Most people delete unwanted pictures. Those out of focus, or duplicates. But if those photos are brought to court, the missing files become evident, and juries can receive instructions that compel them to conclude that the department allowed evidence to be destroyed. The case could/will likely be lost.

Varone: Answers the question of just how far to go with preventive actions. He uses a speedometer as a model, with the top barrier representing national laws and rights.

Panel Speaker: Who owns the photos taken on scene? That's part of a digital imagery policy. If a person's on duty, the images are property of the department. Versus if they're on scene watching, but not on duty or part of a crew, etc.

Piringer: [He's asked about photos and videos that show incorrect practices.] There are so many pictures and videos of everything we do, "I stopped worrying about it."

Panel Speaker: Old days, stories (about emergency services) were local. Now, it's spreading locally. [Statter shares story of nude photos from a department, brought to press attention by someone in Africa, and three years after they were originally a news story.]

Statter: "I fear for the fire chiefs of the future" is a quote from a fire chief from a few years ago, about nominees of the future having confirmation hearings and their social media history is raised.

Statter: "If you don't tell your story, don't expect the press to get it right." [That is, most of the time getting it right. Even the press gets it wrong, from time to time, and even when they're told the full story.]

Panel Speaker: "Don't just sit and say 'no comment'."

Varone: [Answers questions about HIPAA.] Each state has laws of varying degrees about medical privacy. There's also the federal law. These laws typically apply to records and communication between healthcare providers. Most do not govern photo-taking. But, there is an expectation of patient privacy. Is the back of an ambulance private, asks one person. Probably, yes. But every state has different laws with regard to medical privacy and photo taking.

Panel Speaker: You cannot restrict public photos, or interfere with public photo-taking. But you can block access, you can set up scene tape, you can park apparatus in front of cameras, etc.

Statter: [Shows PGFD produced video showing the new fire chief taking a CPAT test. Notes that it's a great example of self-produced media, and a great public relations/information story.]

Panel Speaker: Traditional news/media outlets are shrinking, but digital outlets are growing. No longer is news just delivered at 6 and 11 at night. The radio stations are writing stories, and shooting video. "Social journalists are out there."

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What are the FIRST TWO LETTERS of the word 'fire'?

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Hide email: Yes, hide my email address.

Small print: All html tags except <b> and <i> will be removed from your comment. You can make links by just typing the url or mail-address.