

## Instant Technology

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Technology and social networking has become an amazing tool for emergency services. Events and information that used to take days, weeks and even months to reach us, is now almost instant. A friend of mine has said we now live in a “Burger King” society. We expect everything our way, right away and we don’t even want to get out of the car to get it. Our friends like Billy G and Gordon Graham keep us up to date with items such as *The Secret List* that email us when events are unfolding. I remember joking once that we knew some firefighters had been hurt 3,000 miles away before the ambulance even got to the hospital. Next *Firehouse.com* can post suggested training ideas before the firefighters have even seen a doctor, all in an effort to keep our brothers and sisters safe. Wow, technology is amazing and as shown in this example, can be used to make sure we do everything possible to ensure that others don’t get hurt the same way. Technology is in fact our friend.

This type of instant information transfer can only be good for us, right? WRONG! The difference between what *The Secret List* and other responsible websites try to do, and what is starting to happen on the local scene is very different. These services have highly trained and respected individuals screening the information and thinking about the consequences of what they are sending out. All too often now Joe or Jill firefighter or EMT is texting, twittering, face booking, my spacing, you tubing or blogging information about a call or a situation in our organization without thinking about what they are sending out. Even more importantly we are not thinking about where that message is going after we hit the send button. Technology is now moving faster than our brain, and that my friends, is very dangerous.

Let me share the following example of how a simple use of technology could end up going very bad. A fellow chief and I were returning on Wednesday from an out of town trip. We received a text message from one of our firefighters that a neighboring department had been called for a fully involved structure fire and it was likely that our department would be providing mutual aid very soon. We realized that we were only a few blocks from the scene and swung by to see if we could lend a hand. By the time we arrived our department had in fact been dispatched. If it had not been for the text we would have driven way past the scene only to have turned back around when we got the call. Score one for technology! As we were gearing up my colleague shot a quick picture with his phone of the impressive, fully blown structure fire and sent it to a member the station. Seeing the picture, they manned another truck ready to respond and knew

exactly what they might be headed for. Score another one for technology. In these cases technology saved a ton of time and effort.

Here is where things can start going bad however. Command realized it was purely a defensive operation at this point and decided to hold with the units already on scene. We now have a bored firefighter back at the station with a picture of a really cool fire. What if he decided to innocently forward the picture to another friend to show them the excitement? That friend now sends it to six more friends because this is really cool stuff, right? One of them posts it on facebook with a stupid comment like "ABC Fire Department loses yet another one". What if a relative of the homeowner sees the picture with the stupid caption on facebook and thinks the fire department somehow did not do enough to save the structure? What if there was someone hanging out an upstairs window that we hadn't seen in the first picture on the cell phone screen? At this point technology is moving way faster than the brain, or the facts for that matter, and we have a public relations train wreck. All this could have started from a simple innocent picture sent as a text message. Think about how easy it would be these days for a person to realize a relative of theirs had been killed by finding a picture of a car wreck that someone posted. Worse yet, a prosecuting attorney finds a picture of their now injured patient that was not properly strapped to the stretcher as it was being loaded in the ambulance.

Organizations must accept that this is becoming a serious issue and take steps to prevent it. Policies should be put in place that clearly state the department's stance on release of information by electronic means, because this is exactly what posting or forwarding this information is. Consider a policy where nothing department related may be posted or forwarded without an officer's permission. Training must be held that show your emergency responders just how easy it now is for what seems like the harmless release of information to become a major issue for the parties involved and the organization. Responders must also train on how text messages and instant messages are the start of many sexual harassment claims. What starts as simple flirting or joking can get misunderstood or out of hand in a hurry. Careers are being ruined because people do not understand just how serious this is. Take the time to talk about, understand and train on this topic.

The problem of confidentiality and release of private information is nothing new to emergency services. We have struggled with it for years. The fact that it has now moved from verbal, which was always "he said – she said", to an electronic release that is most likely stored somewhere forever should be of great concern to all involved.

Yes, in fact technology is now moving information faster than our brain and often times faster than the facts will allow. The truly scary part is the only thing that may move faster is the devastating public relations nightmare and possible lawsuits that it may create. We have every right to be proud of what we do and share it with others. Take the time to understand what you

are sharing, what your organizations policy is on sharing it and what it might mean to others before you hit the send button!

If you are looking for a sample policy or would like to discuss instant technology further, please contact me at [ddenniston@mcneilandcompany.com](mailto:ddenniston@mcneilandcompany.com).