

Does Technology Make You Safer?
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I have been called a technology geek. If it fits in a backpack and is designed to make our life easier, more organized or is just plain cool; I probably have one (or two). Each time I see a new gimmick, I convince myself that it is the answer to all my down falls and don't know how I lived without it. My backpack is stuffed with such items. I once quipped to a TSA agent when asked what was in my bag that "I probably have enough electronics in there to fly the plane." Warning, think twice before you speak to TSA unless you have an extra hour to kill and the desire to be strip searched.

When an associate sent me an article from Firehouse.com on the new sirens "you could feel" I got pretty excited. We all know that with the new "sound proof" vehicles and car stereo systems that could wake up four city blocks, drivers just don't hear us coming like they used to. The price was a little expensive but as a chief put it "that's peanuts compared to the price of just one intersection accident." Finally, someone had come up with an answer to the question of how to combat one of the most deadly and expensive accidents we have in emergency services, the intersection accident.

I began to look for a spot to place this amazing new product into my PowerPoint presentation on emergency vehicle driving. It seemed to fit best into the unit on intersection accidents and how to avoid them. That is where I started to question the role of this new device. Should I put it before or after the slide on NFPA 1500 chapter 6 that states "A driver of an emergency vehicle SHALL bring the unit to a complete stop at any of the following: 1) a red traffic light, 2) a stop sign 3) whenever they cannot account for all lanes of traffic etc, etc. So if the emergency vehicle driver is already coming to a complete stop and "making eye contact with other drivers", what is the role of the siren you can feel? Will it really make a difference or is it just another gimmick that will breed complacency?

Now I was curious and started looking at other recent technology tools that we have employed in and on our apparatus. Let's start with the backup camera. In 2004 alone we lost four firefighters when we backed over them. So when backup cameras started to show up on emergency vehicles I got pretty excited as well. Here was a tool to help us protect our own members. I have to wonder however why the spotter that is required per NFPA 1002 was unable to see things that the camera would pick up. Another view or angle could never hurt, but will the use of the cameras cause some to feel a spotter is no longer needed?

The 2009 edition of NFPA 1901 requires that new apparatus have a "system" on board to monitor seatbelt use and alert the driver if all passengers are not seated and belted. A couple of years ago I learned of a department that had their own "system". When the driver placed their hand on the shift lever they said "seatbelts?" before the transmission was moved out of park. Each passenger on board was required to acknowledge the question before the vehicle would move. The neat part about that

system was that it did not cost a dime, require parts that could wear out and not only let the driver know the belts were buckled but that each rider understood they were about ready to move.

It all comes back to risk management. Risk Management is defined as identifying potentially hazardous situations and then putting reasonable, cost effective measures in place to prevent the hazard from becoming an actual occurrence. Risk Management models tell us we must first identify the problem, figure out a solution and implement a plan to avoid the situation. Most of us are good at that. We see what is going wrong, find a way to correct it and then write a policy to communicate the solution. The last step of risk management is to evaluate the plan, make necessary adjustments and be sure the policy is being followed. Sometimes we fail at evaluating our current plan and just look for new gimmicks to fix a problem.

The beauty of all this is that we do not have to do it alone. NFPA standards are developed by a group of emergency responders just like you and me. They have researched the problem, explored the solutions and shared ideas on how to fix them. They meet on a regular basis to evaluate the effectiveness and make modifications to the standards as needed. The next step is up to your organization. You should take these standards and adapt them to your unique situations. This allows you to not only address the problems, but also to do it under the realm of a nationally excepted standard. If something does go wrong, you then have the defense that you were operating under these guidelines and not just something that seemed like a quick fix at the time.

In no way am I trying to discredit the advantage of new technological advances. There is definitely a place for new items, like “the siren you can feel”, and if it prevents just one accident then it is worth its weight in gold. I encourage you to research these items and use what makes sense for your organization. My only fear is that these are not the solution. They are only one more tool in our tool box and need to be viewed as such. No tool will fix a problem by itself. It needs to be part of a complete risk management plan and a complete “system” of safety.

I will argue that each item in my backpack has in some way made my life easier, helped me be better organized, made me a better presenter and yes maybe even helped me be a little more cool. None of those items have however replaced the need for me to constantly think about how to do a better job. I have to remember what I did before I had those tools and not lose sight of what was working before they were available. Embrace new technology that will help make our job safer, but never let it become the “answer” that it is not. Only the combination of proper management and new technology used together will help us reach the goal of the National Firefighters Foundation that “Everyone Goes Home”.