

## **The Fire SUV**

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When I first joined the fire service, I had no idea what I was getting myself in to. Unlike many people that join, my family was never in the fire service or in law enforcement. I was 29 years old, had decided to take an EMT class and I realized in that EMT class that what I was really interested in was rescue – technical rescue, extrication, etc; tasks that are considered Fire Department responsibilities. In our area, the fire department is dispatched to all emergency medical calls along with the ambulance service so it seemed logical for me to join. I walked into my local fire department and asked for an application. Over the next several years, and many training classes later, I fell in love with the fire service but I *still* remember how little I knew of what the fire department did on a daily basis until I walked through those doors. Honestly, I rarely ever saw a building on fire in our community – maybe a couple of times each year. I often wondered what they did with the remainder of their time. Now I wonder how many other people in our community also have absolutely no idea what our fire department does every day. Do they only see members of the fire department when they are raising money and fighting for additional funding or during a person's darkest hour? It should be part of every fire department and emergency service organization mission statement to disseminate information and education to the public in which they serve. To not include this as part of the organization's mission would be the greatest disservice both to the community *and* to the organization.

The other day, one of our seasoned loss control field reps with years of experience in the fire service sent me an email with a link to a comedic skit just to lighten my day. You may have seen it, too – it's titled the 'Fire SUV' and may be found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fnCGZhvSRj0> for those of you who have not had the pleasure of a good chuckle today ). After I stopped laughing to myself, I realized most people probably have the same perception! The only way to change public perception is to speak out and educate the people in your community about your department. Before you get nervous thinking that you do not have *time* to do any more than you are already doing, I will give you a few simple examples of little things that can be done to enhance your public image.

- 1) The media can be viewed as friend or foe but establishing a relationship with local media outlets can be an asset. Check with local newspapers and radio stations. Many of them offer free public service announcement (PSA) opportunities to community businesses. What a great way to pass along a fire safety message or a 'Did you know' tidbit about your department! Most PSA are short, often less than 50 words and can be aired or published on a regular basis.
- 2) Become involved with community events. A local seasonal festival is a great way for the public to meet and greet firefighters and shows the community that you are one of them. It is a great way to recruit new members, too!

3) Open House does not have to be reserved for once a year in October! Invite the public to monthly meetings or host a special event. Youth groups are often looking for places to visit within the community and the fire department is a great opportunity to introduce young people to the fire service and all it has to offer.

Ultimately, the fire department or emergency service organization is a public service entity. Involving the department in the community in non-emergency ways will show the spiritual rewards associated with volunteerism and the good feelings of doing for others. Budgets are tighter than ever before and everyone is being asked to do more with less. However, developing a positive rapport with the members of your community is priceless and should be viewed as an operational priority.