

FIREHOUSE®

Weekly Drill

DRILL #114: MEDIA AND THE PIO

Introduction

Depending on the day, and what is going on in your community, the media is always looking for a story. It may mean the story they are after that day is the event you are working on right now; are you ready to face their interview?

First, when we speak of the media we are talking about all entities; news print, radio and our friends at the television stations who bring their cameras with them! If your department is proactive, and has the staff, you may have a Public Information Officer (PIO) to address the media; however, in most instances it is going to be the incident commander who will be tasked with speaking to them. As a company officer you might happen to be the incident commander and will be the one answering the questions being asked. Will you be prepared and ready to handle the questions?

The first priority should be that of representing your department in a favorable manner. Some departments have policies in place that state: the only individual who will speak with the press will be the fire chief. This type policy has pros and cons attached to it. For one thing, the fire chief may not be available to speak with the media at this incident. In this case, the reporter will provide his or her take on the incident, which may not provide all the facts or have inaccuracies that a fire department spokesperson could have cleared up. The bottom line is to give the media good information so they in turn can report this good information.

Talking Points

The following are a few good points to keep in mind that will assist every incident commander should they have to face the media:

- The best thing is to have a good working relationship with the media ahead of time. This can be accomplished in several different ways. Have them come by the fire station for a lunch or invite them to training activities from time to time.
- Educate yourself on what it is the media is looking for in a story and the kind of information they seek. Media personnel are not technical people, nor are most of their readers and/or viewers, so try to stay away from using



the technical jargon we use amongst firefighters.

- Keep in mind that the media's job is to report the news. Often times, they will hold off reporting any news they feel may have negative effects on the fire department until they have spoken with someone in the department to get the fire department's side of the story. This could be a real godsend.
- Having good poise is a plus. In addition, especially when the interview is being recorded or going out over the air waves live, the PIO should refrain from wearing sunglasses (unless they are prescription lenses) and or chewing gum. It just makes for a better, more professional, interview and image.
- Finally, follow your department's policies for speaking to the media. If you are not familiar with these policies, it may be time to review them.

—Prepared by Russell Merrick