

SOCIAL MEDIA FOR THE FIRE SERVICE

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Why is Social Media an Important Tool for Fire Departments?



THE IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL MEDIA.

There are many ways firefighters can use social media to promote a positive image in the public's eye.

Most fire chiefs shutter at the words "Social Media". Almost every firefighter has heard of an incident when social media was used in the wrong manner. Unfortunately, these negative events scare many fire chiefs into abandoning the idea of utilizing these valuable tools.

Social media outlets can offer tremendous advantages to the educated user. Many progressive fire departments have taken full advantage of the benefits these outlets can create. Fire departments can use social media for several things including: Training, Public Education, Morale boosts and much more.

In our technology driven world information literally travels at the speed of light. It is extremely important that we provide information to the public before someone else provides this information for us. Through the use of social media you can keep your community informed with accurate information; this information can

be presented to create a very positive image for the fire department.

Firefighters have also used social media sites as training tools. Some of the different resources available include YouTube videos, Facebook pages, and website blogs. We must remember that the goal is not to create an "Internet Firefighter" but rather utilize these valuable resources as a tool to better our training.

We must all understand that this technology is now a part of our culture. We must embrace the technology or we will be left behind. In this article we will look at several social media sites that are available to you and how to use those sites to your advantage.



Matt Hinkle

Matt operates several Social Media resources for firefighters. What started out as a YouTube channel for firefighters has grown into a full scale training business and resource site.

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SOCIAL MEDIA



The Big Three

The most popular social media resources for firefighters are Facebook, YouTube and Twitter. These sites have been used by many different fire departments and can provide many benefits to the user.

Facebook

Facebook is the social media giant that really started it all. From Facebook you can create "Pages" which are used for many different businesses, organizations, agencies and departments. Some of the departments currently operating a Facebook Page include: FDNY, LACoFD, Atlanta Fire and Rescue, DC Fire and EMS, and many more. A Facebook Page is basically a miniature website for your department. You can share information with the people who choose to "like" your page. When a person "likes" your page they will now have the ability to see information you choose to release. This can be really convenient for doing public service announcements, public education, and to show citizens what you are actively doing in the community. Security settings on Facebook will allow you to choose whether or not you would like citizens to post comments, pictures, ask questions, etc. Recently my department has found that we can really improve morale by utilizing Facebook. We realized that we could proudly announce to the community accomplishments our members have made. For instance we recently had two firefighters make their first interior attack on a structure fire. We were able to post the engine companies picture with a caption congratulating the new members on their hard work. You can also use Facebook as a method to capture the history of your department. We can capture and post pictures of our members during promotions, awards ceremonies, trainings and much more. Then new members will be able to see a historical story of our department and what the past members, even retirees, once did.

Twitter

Twitter has become the go to social media outlet for Public Information Officers. The creator of Twitter literally came up with the site after learning how emergency crews were dispatched and how they communicated. Twitter allows you to create a profile which can be "Followed" by anyone, unless you choose to block them. Twitter limits you to post very short updates and announcements of less than 140 characters. It is basically a text message that is sent to anyone who chooses to receive your message. Many PIO's will post emergency warnings, working incidents, road closures,

training events, department success stories, and public meetings. Many departments have used twitter to help educate the public during major disasters such as Hurricane Sandy. Local news crews can also subscribe to your Twitter feed and without having to hold a press conference you can quickly announce a short message for the media to release. This can be a life saver during the early stages of an incident when the news outlets and public want information but you might not have the time to set up an official press conference.

YouTube

YouTube has become the dominating method for delivering public service announcements. You can link any video you create on your Facebook, Twitter, Website, etc. This way the public can see you discussing important topics such as fire safety. YouTube has also become an extremely popular training tool. Firefighters can subscribe to YouTube channels and share videos. When a user subscribes to a channel they can login to YouTube and the channels newest videos will be recommended to the user. This can be nice for users because they do not have to search for or remember the name of the channel to see the training videos. Instructors are beginning to use YouTube very heavily. An instructor can embed a video into their presentation to highlight a technique or an incident and generate discussion. If you haven't read our "Instructor's Guide to Using YouTube", check out our website and go to "Downloads". We discuss the legal concerns of using this material and how to effectively utilize YouTube as a training tool.

Summary

I highly recommend creating a Social Media Committee within your department. Find members who are educated in these resources, leaders who will use the resources, and create an official use policy so that all your members understand what they can and cannot do. If you have not used any of these social media outlets chances are someone in your department has. Many younger members can quickly show you how they operate and can even help you generate an official page or account. All of these resources are free and have no costs associated with them. Feel free to message us if you have any questions.