



9-1-1 in Cyberspace

The Value of an Online PSAP Presence

~ BY BOB SMITH

Today, it's getting difficult to find someone who does *not* use the Internet as their primary information source for the world around them. Everything from research to ordering pizza delivery can be accomplished with a computer and an Internet connection. Unfortunately, many comm centers have failed to take advantage of this new, low-cost method to connect with the citizens of their jurisdictions. There are advantages to creating and maintaining an online presence for any agency.

Education: Web sites are a perfect way to establish greater public outreach. This outreach can include basic public education, as well as provide the public with more general information about the agency. Pamphlets and other educational materials used during public education sessions and links to articles and other Web sites dedicated to educating the public on 9-1-1 and public safety communications can be added to a site and made available for download.

Customer service: A Web site can also assist your agency with enhancing its overall quality control program. An often overlooked part of an effective quality assurance/quality improvement (QA/QI) program is customer service. Aside from creating a place to provide the public with more information about your agency, such as what your agency does and does not do, a Web site can be a tool to gauge your current level of customer service by providing customers with questionnaires and feedback opportunities.

Web sites to solicit such information can be created using free survey services (e.g., www.freeonlinesurveys.com, www.surveygizmo.com, www.surveymonkey.com) or by simply creating a downloadable document that can be printed by a citizen and faxed or mailed back to the agency. These forms allow citizens who have called 9-1-1 or otherwise interacted

with the agency to provide valuable feedback regarding the level of service they received and their overall impression of the agency. Survey topics can include telecommunicator courtesy, responsiveness to need and overall satisfaction. The forms can also have a section for customers to provide comments or suggest improvements. Any results from this feedback process can be incorporated into QA/QI programs and agency training.

Agency info: Agency statistics and annual reports can also be posted on the Web site, allowing for outreach that shines the spotlight on the agency and the services it provides. News and information sections can be created to disseminate opportunities for training, announce staff awards or recognition, and allow vendors to download requests for proposals or other bid forms and information.

Web sites can also be used as a recruitment tool. Having a page that lists employment opportunities and information about the telecommunicator's role can increase an agency's applicant pool. A page with frequently asked questions and answers about the profession and the public safety communications industry will also increase interest.

Getting there: How does an agency create an online presence? There are many routes to take; some are more expensive than others, but all are fairly effective.

The science of Web design is taught at community and junior colleges across the country and has trickled down to the high school and junior high levels. These classes teach basic Web design techniques, such as hypertext markup language (HTML) and graphic design. Agencies may not need to look far to find someone with Web design knowledge or expertise. Someone currently on your staff may have this knowledge. Involve your employees in planning a Web site, and get their input on what would be

most effective for your agency. They may even be able to create what you're looking for with little to no cost.

Another avenue: Develop a partnership with other public safety or government agencies in your jurisdiction that already have a Web presence. Many fire, EMS and law enforcement agencies have online access as well. Contact these agencies in your jurisdiction, and investigate the possibility of sharing server space or hosting a page for your agency on their current Web site until your agency has the resources to create and maintain one independently.

Some Web services will allow clients to create and maintain a Web site for little to no cost. One example is Tripod (www.tripod.lycos.com), which provides free online services. Upgrades and enhancements often carry fees, but the basic service is often free.

Don't overlook social networking forums, such as MySpace, FaceBook or MyYearbook, as an online outreach resource. To see how an agency can enhance its public outreach and education by using a social networking site, visit APCO International's MySpace page at www.myspace.com/apcointernational. This site will give you an idea of how to use these forums to create an online presence.

The bottom line: An agency Web site can provide a multitude of ways to disseminate information to the general public and serve as a conduit between your agency and the communities you serve. Web sites can enhance public education and quality control, and even assist employee recruitment and retention, all of which—and more—can be accomplished at little to no cost. **||PSC||**



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