

THE RURAL FIREFIGHTER

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Nebraska Forest Service

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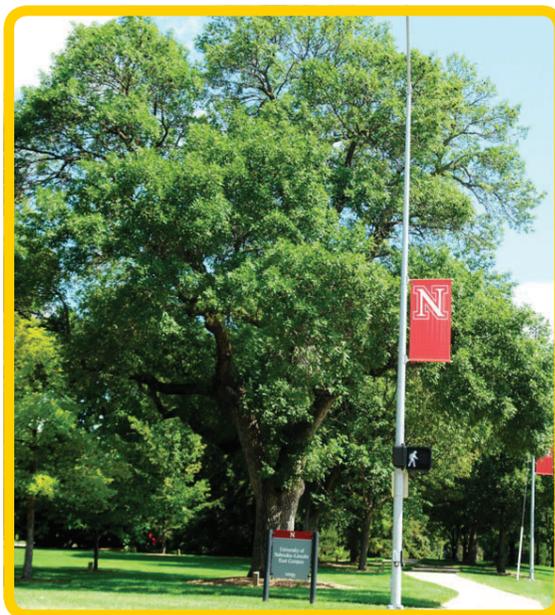
Social Media and the Fire Service

"I tweeted that yesterday."

"My page has 10 more likes this week."

This may sound like a new language, and in a way, it is. Terms like these are becoming more common as the latest method—social media—of electronic communication catches on. If you haven't heard the term "social media," you will. Social media is an Internet-based application that supports "user-generated" content. Anyone can create a page and tell the world what's on their mind *right now*.

Pardon the pun, but the use of social media is spreading like wildfire (see some of the stats on page 2). MySpace was the first to cover this ground. Facebook now has more than 500 million active users. Twitter, having started just four years ago, now has more than 100 million users. For the fire service, social media presents unique opportunities to connect with the public but it can also be the source of potential problems. For example, take Zach Bieghler. Zach is a paramedic in Kansas who has been involved in EMS since 2002. In 2007, Zach went on a run that involved a severely obese patient. Upon his return, he opened his MySpace page and posted, in his own words, some



"vulgar and offensive" comments related to the patient's level of obesity. He assumed only his friends would see his comments, but his privacy settings allowed everyone who found his page to view what he had written.

Several months passed without a second thought to the posting until the day he was called into his supervisor's office. The post had been reported to his employer and, to make a long story short, he was given an immediate 30-day suspension without pay and had his paramedic certificate revoked temporarily by the state board of EMS for professional misconduct. It led to his resignation and nearly cost him his career.

Zach has since been reinstated under the condition that he share his experience, which he has openly shared with anyone interested. A simple, seemingly harmless blog posting impacted his life as he probably never could have imagined.

The instant gratification and perceived anonymity of social media can lead to inappropriate, legally protected information being made public. As the Kansas example illustrated, simply being unsure of privacy settings can cause problems. Rather than

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being forced to deal with it, should your fire department face a similar issue, take a proactive approach. Consider developing a departmental policy on the use of social media. A quick search on the Internet will produce some good points to ponder as you develop the policy. But it isn't something you can bury your head in the sand and forget. The genie is out of the bottle and the question at this point shouldn't be whether you want to deal with it but how you will address it. At the very least, put it on the agenda for the next meeting and make sure your members know what information is off limits and that their actions can have consequences.

With all that said, social media is a valuable tool for emergency services or any other organization looking for ways to connect with customers. For example, go to Facebook and do a search for “Ansel Ash.” Ansel isn't a person. Ansel is a green ash tree here on UNL's East Campus. Ansel shares general tree care information and humor on his page, as well as information on the coming threat of emerald ash borer. Sound silly? Maybe. But hang on to your hat. Ansel Ash has more than 1,800 “friends” on Facebook from all over the United States and beyond. Every time

“Ansel” posts something, his message is delivered more broadly than email and more timely than hard copy publications. On top of this, should any of Ansel's friends post a response, that will show up on their pages, increasing Ansel's reach well beyond his list of friends. For Ansel, the only cost to share the information was a little time, but the value of this contact is much higher.

The moral of the story is that even though this new method of communication should be addressed, the potential benefit for the fire department can be significant. Not only does it allow the fire department to communicate with the folks in your fire district, it can also be a recruiting tool. Traditional recruiting tools like newspaper ads and posters may still work and shouldn't be forgotten, but the new generation of firefighters is connected. My very unscientific study (looking out my window here on East Campus) estimates that more than 75% of college-age people (and potential fire department recruits) use electronic communication regularly. If the department has no online presence, how are you going to connect with them?

Change can be uncomfortable and present new challenges, but it is sure to happen. Get out in front of it and make it work to your advantage!

Tips From Tex

Automatic Aid

A common concern across the state is the lack of manpower on any given call, be it a fire, auto accident or EMS call. Some areas are concerned that they are going to burn people out and eventually lose them. So what are some ways for us to overcome these issues? I have heard everything from recruiting more volunteers to buying newer equipment. Good ideas, but the issue is still available manpower. You can have all the people you want on your roster and all of the newest and shiniest equipment available; but if you don't have people to respond to a call and operate all that nice equipment effectively, efficiently and safely, you will still be short handed.

Over the years I have discussed updating your mutual aid agreements and getting them in order, so let's add a new twist to that and develop an automatic aid agreement. This is not new and is happening and working across the country for other volunteer and paid fire departments. What is automatic aid you ask? Well, I'll try to keep it short and simple.

I think we can all agree that a structure fire during the day can and will overwhelm us. With an automatic aid agreement, unlike a mutual aid agreement, dispatch will automatically dispatch neighboring fire departments to the call. By doing so, this will get resources rolling and on location faster than waiting for the local fire department to request mutual aid. Take it a step further and consider dispatching the nearest fire department to a call regardless of who's fire district it's in. When someone dials 911, they are having a bad day and will not worry about what name

is on the fire truck or ambulance that shows up on their doorstep.

For an automatic aid plan to be successful, you must have 3 things:



1. Cooperation – departments must train and operate together regularly.
2. Coordination – good coordination between automatic aid companies leads to incident stabilization and control. This results in scene safety, effective accountability and more efficient continuity of operations
3. Commitment – even if participating fire departments have cooperated and coordinated activities, if a commitment can't be reached, the agreement can still fail.

Just like trying to get your mutual aid directory updated, this is not something that will happen overnight. There are a lot of other factors to discuss when developing automatic aid policies and what I discussed here is just the tip of the iceberg. If you want more information give me a call or just Google “automatic aid.” An automatic aid agreement can also help with your ISO rating.

Until next time, stay safe.
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Don't Stop Now!

When the time came to write this article, I sat back in my chair to reminisce about everything that has been accomplished by firefighters, community leaders and industrial people who are actively involved in fire prevention programs in their communities and businesses.

Several manufacturing companies and corporate offices have now joined the fire prevention parade and are teaching and promoting fire prevention in the workplace.

Many fire departments (more than anticipated) started new year-round fire prevention programs in their communities. This indicates more people are seeing the need to prevent fires, save lives and reduce property loss.

Communities that have been actively involved in prevention programs in the past have expanded and/or stepped up their programming. Some of these folks are the same people who told me earlier they didn't have time to do a lot of extra work because of all the other training and activities within the department. This tells me they have definitely seen the need for prevention activities and they are enjoying the job. Fire prevention can be a very rewarding experience!

Keep in mind, fire prevention is a continuous process. It is a rewarding job, but it requires effort. It is a responsibility you accepted when you vowed as a firefighter to save lives and protect property. It doesn't happen overnight! But the results are worth the time and effort.



OK, so we have done something. Now, what are your plans for the remainder of this year and next year? You

can't quit or relax now. Why? Read the paper. Listen to the news.

We are still having fires and suffering losses! Our job isn't done!

You say you've run out of ideas right now? Well, try a few of these.

- 1) What about home furnace inspections? (inspect the furnace AND the chimney)
- 2) Don't forget electric and fuel-fired space heaters.
- 3) Supervision of small children when using space heaters.
- 4) How about a fire prevention program directed at the people who use wood-burning stoves?
 - a) Installation
 - b) Burning dry wood
 - c) Clean chimneys
 - d) Proper ash disposal
- 5) Don't forget a prevention program directed at hunters who visit your area.
- 6) Have you made plans for a Christmas fire prevention program?
- 7) What's stopping you from starting a fire prevention and home inspection program for the elderly?

This list of ideas is only a few of the many things you can be doing in your community. The possibilities are endless!

You have to continue to take the prevention message to the people. You cannot stop or ease up for even a little while. The threat of fire still lurks around every corner.

Remember what Smokey Bear said? ONLY YOU! YOU are the key to the solution. If the battle against fire is going to be won, YOU have to continue the war against this menace.

Now... if you still haven't done anything in your community in the past, or your program has faltered and you need help to get things moving forward, give me a call. Don't hesitate! Pick up the phone and dial 402.372.5665. Help is only a phone call away.

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Social Media Statistics

- Twitter adds more than 300,000 new users daily.
- If Facebook were a country, it would be the world's third largest.
- In the past year, social networking use among Internet users over 50 years old nearly doubled—from 25 percent to 47 percent.
- Years to reach 50 million users: radio 38 years, TV 13 years, Internet 4 years.
- Facebook added more than 200 million users in less than one year

Nebraska social media pages

Nebraska Wildland Fire Academy - www.facebook.com/NebraskaWildlandFireAcademy

Nebraska Forest Service - www.facebook.com/nebraskaforestservice

ReTree Nebraska - www.facebook.com/retreenebraska

Nebraska Statewide Arboretum - www.facebook.com/NeArb

Nebrasks Game and Parks Commission - www.facebook.com/NEGameandParks

State of Nebraska - www.facebook.com/nefanpage, twitter.com/nebraskagov

Sandy's Corner

After hours of searching, I give up. The article I wrote several weeks ago for *The Rural Firefighter* is gone. I believe, without a doubt, that losing a document is one of the most frustrating things that can happen in an office. You know it's there, but you just can't find it among all the files, folders, etc., that have taken over your computer. Putting my frustration aside, I'm going to write it again and hope I don't find it later since that will be even more frustrating.

October is nearly half over and that means, along with the changing of colors and the crispness in the air, we are nearing the end of the year. Those of you reporting online received an email reminder and those still using the yellow cards received a letter saying we had not heard from you during the 2010 year. If you have not reported, please take the time now to catch up. January is only a few short months away when we'll be compiling our yearly report for the Feds. We can't

emphasize enough the importance of rural fires being reporting and included in this report so make sure your department fires count!

Day by day—week by week—we continue to add fire departments to our reporting online list. We currently have 257 reporting online and 230 still using the cards. We have now cut our mailing cost by more than 50% and we thank you. More and more fire departments are online now and have access to computers as well as more fire chiefs have personal email accounts. If you are one of those departments/chiefs, and you currently do not report online, please consider this. Ask anyone who is reporting online now what they think of the program, and I'm sure they will recommend it. It saves you time and will save us money.

In the past, I have maintained only the fire chief's email address. I am now asking for rural board president and rural board treasurer's email address. There are times when it will be cost-effective and time saving to send statements via a Word attachment versus the cost of mailing statements, thus the need for email addresses. So if

you are a president and/or treasurer of a rural board, please email me at slineberry1@unl.edu and indicate your name, department, and email address and I'll get your file updated. Thanks in advance for your cooperation.

Next on my list of "to-do's" is the mailing of Agreement Contracts and Memorandums of Understanding. Contracts are updated every five years. If you are one of those departments that need updated (not everyone's come due at the same time), the letter and contracts will be going to the president of the rural board. It is very important these be signed and returned. Once received, State Forester Dr. Scott Josiah will sign them and copies will be mailed back for your files. Current contracts are required to be on file in our office to be eligible for excess property and cost-share.

I'm sure I've forgotten something in my earlier article, but if so, I'll add it next time. Until the new year, Happy Holidays and thanks again for your service to your community.

Calendar of Events

- Feb 11-13 Les Lukert Winter Conference, Kearney
- April 9-17 Nebraska Wildland Fire Academy, Crawford



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